

Mississippi State University Libraries

Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Project

Oral History

Dr. David Laughlin

April 18, 2012

Interviewer: Ryan Semmes

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**(Tape Side One, 000)**

Mr. Semmes: Lloyd-Ricks-Watson interview with Dr. David Laughlin. April 18, 2012; 9 a.m.; at the Mitchell Memorial Library. Well thank you for coming Dr. Laughlin.

Dr. Laughlin: You're welcome.

Mr. Semmes: We appreciate you coming in. And again, this is, you know, really just informal. I gave you the list of questions there...

Dr. Laughlin: Mm-hm.

Mr. Semmes: ...and some folks that we want to talk to you about. In particular, we want to talk about your time in the building...

Dr. Laughlin: Mm-hm.

Mr. Semmes: ...Some of the projects you worked on, people you interacted with, any stories you happen to have about things that went on in the building. So first why don't you just tell us your name and when you first got here to Mississippi State University.

Dr. Laughlin: My name is David Laughlin. I have a B.S. in Animal Science at Mississippi State, a Master's in Agriculture Economics at State, and a PhD at Texas A&M University. So, when I finished my PhD at Texas A&M, I was offered a job back here. I had lived in Starkville, left Starkville thinking I was going no telling where, but I came back and they offered me a job back in the Department of Ag Economics and I came back as faculty in 1980. So I've been... I was on the faculty from 1980 to 2006. Before that from 1969 through '77 I was basically a student... a BS and Master's degree. Then I went to Texas A&M in '77 and came back in '80.

Mr. Semmes: Okay. What's your relationship to the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson building?

Dr. Laughlin: Well, I've been in and out of it since 1969 as a student. As a student I had classes in that building primarily in Ag Economics, although I was not an Ag Economics major. I took some Ag Econ classes as an Animal Science major from '69 to '72. And in '72 I graduated with a BS and came back to school in '74 and got a Master's in '75, and I was a graduate student at that time, a Master's student, so I had an office in Lloyd-Ricks in '74 to '75, and then I was here one year as a research associate fulltime; had an office there. Then when I came back, of course, I had an office as a faculty member; I had several offices as a faculty member actually, where we went through renovations, had, I think it's at least two renovations of Lloyd-Ricks during my time as a faculty member, then now the latest one. So it's been a... I've had a lot of time... I spent a lot of time in that building.

Mr. Semmes: (*Laughs*) Did your offices improve from graduate school to professional?

Dr. Laughlin: Oh yeah; yeah.

Mr. Semmes: (*Laughs*)

Dr. Laughlin: Well, when I was in graduate school, of course, we shared offices with other graduate students and they were... the building was not in real good shape at that time. Right after I came back it was renovated, so... although... and when I was... when I was here both as an undergraduate student and as a graduate student, the building was more like it is now because they've taken it back to more of the original than it had been previously. The renovations that I went through as a faculty member sort of, they quote, 'modernized' it a little bit, or they put glass partitions in, glass doors, those kinds of things where the originals were... were not glass; they were wooden doors, that kind of thing so... The... you know, it certainly has changed. The locations of things in the buildings have changed. They had a... when I was an undergraduate there was a Soils Lab in the basement of Lloyd-Ricks. The Soils Lab is now in Bost that was in the basement of Lloyd-Ricks. So, you know, and they've taken that out; and there were some... called it the Home Economic Department back then had some labs and this kind of thing. So it's changed a good bit, you know, from my perspective anyway.

Mr. Semmes: Yeah. Can you tell us some interesting experiences you had in the building and, you know, some of the folks that you met in your time there?

Dr. Laughlin: Oh, I met a lot of people. I knew a lot of people that were there; as an undergraduate and an early graduate student, some of those, undergraduate primarily Dean Lindley. Dean Lindley was the Dean of Agriculture; he was the Academic Dean. He was, you know, he was a real interesting person himself; he was an Animal Science... he was the old Animal Science Department Head; and I was an Animal Science undergraduate major, and so he was particularly an interesting... he was an interesting character to say the least. You know, lots of memories

come back about that old building. I'm sure you don't remember we had... computers were, when I was in graduate school we were at the... really undergraduate and graduate school... we were at the ending phase of computers as a big bulky item. You know, the main computer on campus was over here in Allen Hall, and in our department in Ag Econ we had a remote terminal which was, you know, quite a feat back then; it was a card reader; I don't know whether you know... if you've ever seen those old punch cards that you used to... we had a card reader and, of course, everybody that dealt with a computer program, or computers, computer statistics or anything like that had stacks and stacks and stacks of computer cards and you had to have them all in a row; and we had a card reader in our departmental coffee room. Back then people went to coffee; we didn't have the communications that we do now, and in order for people to communicate with one another you had to go sit down face to face and talk to them; so we had a coffee room, and in that coffee room was the card reader; and it made a terrible sound when it read cards, you've probably never heard one, but it was like cogs and wheels running, and clackety-clackety-clackety clack, and all those cards were punching through and all the information was, of course, being sent over here to Allen and you'd wait until you'd get a... you'd have to come over here, you'd have to walk to Allen to get a print out of whatever it was you were doing. So you read the cards in, waited for an outcome, walked to Allen, got your outcome, walked back to the office, and did whatever you were going to do. So it was quite a... it was quite an undertaking. But the old coffee room was a particularly interesting place; you got a lot of conversation, particularly among graduate students and faculty; everybody was able to go in there and sit down and drink a cup of coffee, run your computer program, wait for 20, 30 minutes until it processed, get up and

walk over to pick up your results and go back; it was a different... this was just in the early '70s. So it was quite a different... we've come a long way in a short period of time as far as technology and computerization. But, you do miss, or I miss a lot of the old sit down in the coffee room face to face with somebody, have a discussion. A lot of lively discussions went on about economic issues particularly being in Ag Econ about, you know, the economic issues of the day or agricultural issues of the day. So a lot of things, you know, you miss about those kinds of interactions particularly. I don't know all of these folks, these people on here you talk about talk about... talk about Dean Lindley, I remember one of the... I don't know whether it was in a class, or a meeting, or something... this was back in my... back when Dean Lindley was still the Dean of Agriculture; I remember one saying he used to have about... I was always interested in land, and we were always talking about the value of land and how land has improved or not improved, and Mississippi has lots of different kind of land; it has good land and bad land and hillies, gullies; and Dean Lindley used to always say, 'Yeah, a lot of this old land in Mississippi is just good for nothing.' He said, 'All it does is keep you from spitting into hell.' (*laughs*) 'That's all the worth it has, it keeps you from spitting into hell.' So that stuck with me for a long time. That's not worth much. But anyway, a lot of these people obviously I've known since... I've been there since... well, I've been in that building since... off and on since the late '60s through now; I still have an office there as an emeritus professor, so I still go there.

Mr. Semmes: How often are you in the office?

Dr. Laughlin: Not very often, just go in and out; I do a little bit of service work for the Ag Economics Department and for the association, the Mississippi Ag Economics Association. So... but I'm not there a lot. But I do... they were

gracious enough to give me... let me have a space over there since there was a little bit of space available. I've known all of these people; I don't know how much you want me to talk about any of these people. Any particular...?

Mr. Semmes: As much as you want. We could just start down the list, if you could just tell us a little bit about your interaction with Dr. Giles.

Dr. Laughlin: Well, I'd known Dr. Giles for a long time. Actually Dr. Giles, I first knew Dr. Giles's son, Richard was my best friend in high school at Starkville High School, and they used to live where Allen Hall is now. That used to be the President's home in that circle. And they lived there and I visited my best friend there on several occasions and met Dr. Giles back when I was in high school. And then after he retired from the University; he retired way before I came back; but he was... he had a piece of property out north of town and I'd go visit Dr. Giles, and he used to gather tree seeds from everywhere he went, he went all over. And wherever he went and he'd find a tree that had seeds on it and bring back home and plant it, and he had a wide variety of trees from all the places that he'd been, you know, a lot of places that he'd been. So Dr. Giles was a real character, he was a real fine individual. I never worked with Dr. Giles. Dr. Lee, Charles Lee; of course, he was Vice President for Agriculture. I knew him, I worked for him; he was Vice President while I was... during my tenure; I worked off and on with Dr. Lee. Mark Keenum; Mark was my student, and I was a professor, a young professor in Ag Economics, an assistant professor coming from Texas A&M and Mark was a graduate student in the mid-80s; and I had him in a class, and I knew Mark from that time; and worked with him as an Extension Agent as well.

Mr. Semmes: Dr. Wise?

Dr. Laughlin: Dr. Wise... He was Vice President while I was... during my early tenure as assistant professor. I didn't work a lot with him but certainly knew of him, and knew of all the things he's done. Dr. Foil; I worked quite a bit more with Dr. Foil. Dr. Foil was the... he became the MAFES Director and then was the first MAFES Director; I worked a good bit with him.

Mr. Semmes: What are some projects y'all worked on?

Dr. Laughlin: Well, I guess the main project that I worked on for Dr. Foil was he asked me, I was in the livestock research at the time in Economics, and at that time they had a big problem with the Extension Service was charged with doing inventories of livestock on all the state-owned properties; okay, so... and there were lots... you might not think about it, but all the Experiment Stations, we had about eight Experiment Stations that had livestock of one sort or another on them, we had, of course, the main campus. Other entities had livestock; Ellisville State School; there were, you know, lots of places in the state that had livestock on them and somebody had to do an inventory and record them; they had to do an inventory of all those livestock and record them. Well if you do that quarter after quarter after quarter and livestock come and go it got to be a big chore. And from the Experiment Station standpoint, he basically gave me the charge of developing a computerized... this was in the early '80s now and we had... and computers as we know them, personal computers, were just coming out, ere just coming on board, were just being used, you know, for the first time, and so you could have a computer at a remote location. And so he gave me the charge of developing a computerized inventory system to... so that somebody would keep up with that on a machine, on a tabulating

machine, essentially a computer, and then just be able to run off at any point in time be able to come up with an inventory. So I did that, and that was one of the main charges that Dr. Foil gave me, and that's one of the main things. And I worked with them; with Dr. Foil, Dr. Wise; Dr. Seal was the Assistant Director under Dr. Wise, and then I think maybe even for Dr. Foil but I'm not real sure about that. But Dr. Seal, I worked with him, he was an Ag Economist as well; I don't guess Dr. Seal is on this list; he was an Associate Director during Dr. Wise's time. And we did lots of projects at their request, and obviously their request came from clients, came from the State, came from people out in the state to do a study on feed lots in South Mississippi for example. We did some studies on the feasibility of feeding cattle in South Mississippi on various regimes of diets; silage versus winter grazing, corn; all kinds of different things. So we would... again it was in a time when you didn't have the communications you have today so you travelled a lot more. So we'd go to these remote locations and, you know, develop, you know, what their resources were, you know, develop the feasibility study for example for a feed lot situation in South Mississippi. So we did a good bit of that kind of off the cuff work, a lot of work that lead to a lot of good research, you know, but they were just mainly questions that people had out in the state about economic feasibility, the value of particular enterprises. So we did a lot of that during those times. It's not nearly as... during those early years as an Experiment Station; and I was a teacher, I had a teaching-research appointment so I did about 75 percent research and 25 percent teaching so most of my activity was in a research area; but we were a lot, and well my opinion today, I guess it's my opinion, probably there would be some that disagree with that, but we were a lot more producer oriented in terms of service. We would go and analyze things that producers were directly interested in,

and we had a lot more interaction with producers; personal interaction where you'd go sit down and talk with producers and find out what their issues were and then develop research projects that would analyze and answer those questions that they were asking. So we did a lot of that production-producer oriented one-on-one type at least information gathering from their standpoint; so we did a lot of that. So as an Economist, we got to... there was no... we got to learn about a lot of things whether it was in beef cattle, whether it was in row crops, whether it was cotton, corn, soybeans, poultry, timber, whatever; every one of those commodities has got an economic component to it; and so as an Economist we got to work on, you know, wherever if there was a livestock... if there was a feed lot project, you'd have, you know the Animal Scientist got to go to that one, but they didn't do much with cotton and soybeans; but as an Economists we got in on every one of them; there was an economic component to everything, so... So we did a lot of work with a lot more at the request of the administration with the Directors, Vice Presidents, Presidents; those kinds of things. So I guess a lot of our experience I got to know a lot of these people through that experience.

Mr. Semmes: How much time would you say you spent out of the building in a regular week you know, out around the state?

Dr. Laughlin: It varied but you know, there was sometimes you know, you'd be out 25 percent of the time at least, I mean on the average; you know, one or two days, three days a week, you know some weeks. Obviously there were some that weren't like that. But I did a lot of travelling, we did a lot of work, you know we had cooperative projects, there was a lot more cooperative projects through the southeast at that time, so we did a lot of work with these other states. We did our feed lot project; obviously the

question was the cattle were going to get fed; is it more profitable to feed them here at home in South Mississippi or in the Texas feed lots; so we had to do both. So we went to a couple of feed lots and talked to those folks. And then we did projects where we'd send part of them to South Mississippi, part of the cattle to Texas and then compare them. So, you know, there was a lot of that kind of... a lot of that kind of thing. So we did a lot of... it took a lot more travelling because communications were not as highly developed as they are today. Today you can take a digital picture on your telephone of a plant disease and send it to somebody over the phone and they can diagnose it. Back then, 'Oh I've got this powdery mildew looking stuff on this plant, what is it?' Well, I don't know until I see it. Well they couldn't... I couldn't see it without going and seeing it. So it was a lot different... it was a lot different doing research then than... you know, or even advice, then as it is today. So, you know, it was a... it was certainly different. Another name on here is Dr. Hurt, you got him as a Director of MAFES. Well first Dr. Hurt was a faculty member, and then later Dr. Hurt became the Head of the Department of Ag Economics, and Dr. Hurt actually hired me; he was the Department Head when he hired me; he hired me when I got out of Graduate School at Texas A&M. And then later he became... then several years later he became Director of the Experiment Station, of MAFES so... Of course, I've obviously known Dr. Hurt. He became Department Head while I was an undergraduate. When I came back as a Master's student he was the Head of the Department by then. So I've known him from... since all of that time as well. Dr. Bost; I knew him as the Director of the Extension Service. Again, we did a lot more cross work with Extension and the Experiment Station; a lot of things that would be called Extension today were in the realm of the Experiment Station back then. We did a lot more producer-oriented stuff, but we

worked, you know, off and on with Dr. Bost as the Head of the Extension Service. So I guess those are the main people that I... off of this list that I've known through the years, and got to know in and out of Lloyd-Ricks; and I don't know, I can't remember how many times I've moved; I think I moved... I think maybe this last move was the fifth different office I've had in Lloyd-Ricks (*laughs*).

Mr. Semmes: Did you change floors every time?

Dr. Laughlin: I changed floors sometimes, not every time; but I had... I guess I had an office, or shared an office with somebody as a Master's student; I didn't have one as an undergraduate, obviously; and then I got my own office when I became a research associate for the Department of Ag Economics; and then I left and then I came back and I had an office as a starting assistant professor; I don't know whether it was renovations or what it was that made us change; I had another one, that's four; and then a senior faculty member left and left a better office and I was in line to put my name in that one, so that was the fifth one and I guess I stayed there until we moved over. They began the renovation, this latest renovation and moved us all over to the old Ag Engineering Building, and now I've come back and I've got a sixth one. So, I guess six offices in Lloyd-Ricks over, over the years. So I've seen a lot of Lloyd-Ricks in my lifetime.

Mr. Semmes: I'm curious you're talking about the coffee room.

Dr. Laughlin: Yeah.

Mr. Semmes: How much... how many research projects kind of developed over just conversations that y'all were having in the coffee room?

Dr. Laughlin: Oh, lots of them. Lots of research projects, lots of... I mean I can't give you specifics, but there's a lot... there was a lot of conversation about different aspects of agriculture, obviously a lot of disagreement about economic matters, a lot of information sharing. John Waldrop was a driving force early on in the catfish industry. Actually I think John was Mark Keenum's major professor, and Mark did his research work in catfish; he did work on catfish production, and John was his major professor. When John Waldrop was; he was a senior faculty member when I came back; and John was... he liked to share information about this new and budding catfish industry. You've got to remember in the 1970s, late 70s and early 80s catfish production was new. It was... we didn't... you know, it was just a developing industry in the 70s and early 80; and John was on the forefront of developing the economic parameters and issues, and analyzing those issues; so John was really good about explaining information, or transferring information about research in this new and upcoming catfish industry, and he was obviously excited about it. And so those kind of things... and there were a lot of research projects that may not have... people may not have known they came from there, or came out of those discussions, but obviously you know it doesn't take much sometimes to trigger an idea or trigger a thought about something that needs to be done and then develop that over, you know, weeks and months or even years sometimes and then come back and develop a research project developed around that. So, a lot of those kind of things went on during those... during those time periods. And it's difficult to reproduce that today. It's just not... communications are just... it's totally different.

Mr. Semmes: Is there a coffee room in there today?

Dr. Laughlin: There is one, but it houses the coffee pot and people go there and leave.

Mr. Semmes: Yeah. (*laughs*)

Dr. Laughlin: (*laughs*) They don't go sit around and discuss the issues of the day. And, of course, the coffee room back then, you know, was the issues of the day. You know, political issues, or economic issues, or research, or teaching issues, issues with students; it didn't matter, you know. There was no telling what you could hear when you went into the coffee room, or what kind of conversations you could get into. But it was a gathering place, and at that time it was really good to spread information and to foster communications.

Mr. Semmes: Is there anything else about the building or, you know, the new version of the building that you'd like to talk about?

Dr. Laughlin: Well, the new version is... I think they did an excellent job. I hope... I know there were some small problems at the end with some water infiltrations and this kind of thing that I hope they've gotten solved, they seem to have. They really did a good job on it. I think it's... I think going back to the original floor plans and trying to work with the old building was a really smart thing to do; it's a good building. You know, they don't build them like that anymore, you know, basically. So it was a... I think they did a real good job and it's a real enjoyable building to be in. It has a lot of history to it.

Mr. Semmes: Well is there anything else, any of your colleagues that you think maybe we should interview for this project?

Dr. Laughlin: Oh, I'm going to leave that to somebody else. I wouldn't presume to ask anybody else to do that. But there are lots of people that spent a lot of

time in that building in and out of that building working over the years. So, like I say, I've been there... I was in it as a student, and in a classroom in 1969 I guess, and since then. So that's been a part of my life I guess.

Mr. Semmes: I think that's it then.

Dr. Laughlin: Alright.

Mr. Semmes: Well thank you very much for coming down. We appreciate you talking to us.

Dr. Laughlin: Thank you.

Mr. Semmes: Thank you.

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