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Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Project

Oral History

Mr. James Simpson

May 2, 2012

Interviewer: Mr. Ryan Semmes

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(Tape Side One, 000)

Mr. Semmes: This is the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Oral History Interview with James Simpson, conducted by Ryan Semmes with Jim Chow videoing on May 2nd, 2012; in the Stennis-Montgomery Room. Alright, so thank you for coming in and helping us with our oral history project. We appreciate you being here. And usually we start out by just having you state your name and how it is you came here to Mississippi State University.

Mr. Simpson: James H. Simpson. I first came to Mississippi State on and off during my high school career at Caledonia over in Lowndes County through the 4-H Club and the FFA, and I entered here as a freshman in 1949. And the reason I came to Mississippi State, or was able to come to Mississippi State, I won the state 4-H Club Scholarship which was \$200, and that came close to paying for my first year of college. But I came here in '49 as a freshman and started off in General Ag and switched to Ag Administration and, of course, I had very few classes in Lloyd-Ricks, I think the only one I had was probably in the fall of '52 Dr. Roscoe Saville was Department Head, and he taught an Ag Policy course on the third floor, top floor of Lloyd-Ricks in the east wing, there used to be a classroom up there, a small classroom, and that was a course everybody dreaded, but after we got in there and got started it was really interesting because Dr. Saville had a real

history and many experiences throughout the nation, and particularly in Washington; he was well-respected and knew what he was talking about. But I graduated in spring of '53 with a B.S. and since the Korean War was in full swing and I had been through ROTC and got commissioned, I went on active duty in July of '53 and spent 22 months. I came back and didn't really know what I wanted to do in the spring of '55 when I got off active duty, and came over here and kind of circulated around and really planned to start a Master's program that fall, but the administration and the governor's office and the legislature were at odds about funding the university, or state college as it was at that time, and people were going to other places getting out from under it, and the person I wanted to work with was Dr. Tom Tramel, Bo Tramel, and he left and went to Virginia Tech. And I worked that summer taking schedules for Mr. Davis. His office was down in the first floor, the bottom floor of Lloyd-Ricks there in the middle. We took a vegetable production survey at Crystal Springs, Covich County, and that was an education in itself.

Mr. Semmes: Hmm.

Mr. Simpson: But...

Mr. Semmes: How so?

Mr. Simpson: (*chuckles*) I had really planned to start a Master's that fall, but after Bo left he was communicating back and forth with Dr. Parvin who was Department Head at that time, and he essentially told Dr. Parvin to tell me to come on up to VTI and he'd find a slot for me and I could do my Master's there, so that's what we did. I had no idea where VTI was or anything like that, but we got to Blacksburg and as it turned out Dr. Tramel didn't stay but six months. He had everything set up for me to do a study on broiler production in the... around Rockingham in the Shenandoah Valley, and we went up there to collect schedules, to collect data during the Christmas holidays and, of course, he was in charge. We had two or three other graduate students helping collect it, and we were staying in a motel up there close to Rockingham, and every morning when we got up we hoped that

one of the cars would start. If we could get one started then we could jump off the rest of them. It was down, it seemed like the coldest I'd ever been, and Dr. Tramel had had a real bad experience in the second World War, he was in a tank outfit involved in the Battle of the Bulge and just almost froze to death and he couldn't take cold weather, so when he came back down to visit that Christmas after we got through collecting data he evidently came over here and got lined up with Dr. Parvin and came back to Mississippi State and left me up there; but it worked out okay. I did my Master's, stayed there two years as an Extension Specialist, Farm Management Specialist, and then I'd been in contact with Bo and Dr. Parvin and they convinced me to come back down here on the staff in '58. So I was a brand-new staff member teaching several different courses. We had a bunch of fine people, and I had a chance to work with Dr. Tramel quite a bit, and he's to me one of the most able people I've ever met. He had a real knack for getting to the heart of the problem and seeing what needed to be done and solving it. I guess the computing center's still named the Thomas E. Tramel Computing Center?

Mr. Semmes: Yeah.

Mr. Simpson: He was really responsible for getting the computer systems set up, and those first few years they had just gotten the IBM 650 installed over in the first floor of the Engineering Building and it was a real hassle trying to get very much done so far as analysis. If you had any kind of a big problem to work on you had to schedule a time after 10 o'clock at night between 10 o'clock at night and six the next morning. But we did quite a bit of analytical work. We had a keypunch lab set up over in Lloyd-Ricks and had several young ladies sitting there all day long punching cards; hard to believe; and a hand-held computer now can do more than the whole system could do at that time.

Mr. Semmes: Right.

Mr. Simpson: But I guess the most significant thing that I was involved in at that early stage was the regional research project, S-42, with Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana

working on developing production crop budgets for the Mississippi Delta; the shared effort with those three states in the Delta region. And Mississippi, since it had the Stoneville station over there at Greenville, or Leland, was sort of the lead investigator on that, and we did quite a bit of sort of ground breaking work on developing crop budgets and, of course, we're still doing a lot of that. As part of that project I got a chance to meet Jim Plexico, who was the Head of the Department at Oklahoma State. And Verner Hurt had gone to Oklahoma State to get his Doctorate about a year after I came back from Virginia, and sort of working with those connections that convinced me to go to Oklahoma State on a... I got a sabbatical from here to go to Oklahoma State to work on a Doctorate in '61 and stayed out there until I came back here in '65. I made a mistake by leaving out there before I finished my dissertation; I had all my exams and orals and everything approved, but I didn't have a finished copy of my dissertation and I got back to Starkville and it was after classes, probably June or July, something like that and one of our faculty members, Paul Blair, who handled the cooperative instruction and working with cooperatives in the state, went to summer camp with the military reserves, I think over in Alabama, and during that summer camp they found him one morning dead in his officers' quarters and that left a big hole in our staff in teaching. And I did what I could to help pick that up, and that was at the same time that Dr. Tramel was having more and more health problems, and we had to fill in and try to keep things going with him, and then on top of that Jim Hamill, who was also in the Farm Management area, had an automobile accident downtown and got whiplash, and he couldn't teach his Farm Management classes so I wound up, I think I was teaching Farm Management, Ag Statistics, the Introduction to Cooperative Marketing, and trying to keep my head above water, and also find a house to buy or a place to settle down. And we were living out in Bulldog Drive Apartments out here next to 82, and that was also an experience; but I used that as an excuse for not going ahead and completing my dissertation; so don't call me doctor, I don't deserve it. But it was a really frustrating time there for a while 'til things sort of settled down. And I think the stress involved in that

contributed to Dr. Parvin's decline; his, I guess we'd call it Alzheimer's now; we didn't know what that was then. But we worked through it. I spent most of my time teaching and working with the budgeting project until oh, it was in the late '70s we had quite a bit of... quite a few problems with ad valorem taxation of agricultural lands and Dr. Wise worked with the UA rep and the Farm Bureau people on trying to, I guess you might say, stand up for agriculture's interest in taxation of farm land. There was a lot of variation state-wide; some counties had very low tax rates, other counties very high tax rates; and it was not uniform as the law required. So Dr. Wise volunteered the Ag Econ Department in general, and me in particular, to work with the Farm Bureau in trying to set up a system for uniform appraisal and taxation of farmland. So that was my big project, and it... thankfully it's still going and we're still cooperating with the tax commission on doing that, and if I had to pick any one particular area that I'm most proud of in my career that would be it; that with the help of other people and people from other states, well the guys at Virginia helped a lot; but we developed a system that has stood the test of time and anytime landowners have felt like they were not being treated fairly we, of course, invited them to come in and we'd walk them through the system and how it worked, and they might have come in the office threatening lawsuits and that sort of thing, but by the time they left they agreed that it was the best way to do it. I had one guy one time from over the other side of Greenwood came into my office and, you know, these soil sample boxes, the little white boxes with the blue lettering on them that you get to take soil samples in... he had one of those in each hand, and he fully intended to dump the contents of those boxes on my desk to show me just what sorry land it was and he, of course, contended that he was being taxed too much for that sorry, sandy land. I think a sand blow was what it really was. I did manage to talk him out of dumping it on my desk.

Mr. Semmes: (*chuckles*) This was in the Lloyd-Ricks building?

Mr. Simpson: Yeah, that's the only place I ever had an office was the Lloyd-Ricks. During that first summer of '55 all the students working on the survey stayed in the offices in the basement in the center connecting wing of the basement with Dr. Davis and...

Mr. Semmes: What was that like?

Mr. Simpson: Well, it was summertime in Mississippi and no air conditioning, and they had big fans, about four feet by four feet, at each end of the hall that stirred the air, but that was about it. Of course, since we were taking the survey information at Crystal Springs we didn't stay in the office but just maybe come in Monday morning before we headed out and Friday afternoon on the way back; that was about it. The...

Mr. Semmes: Where were your other offices located?

Mr. Simpson: After I came back from Virginia, I shared an office with Jim Hamill on the top floor sort of in the middle on the north side in the middle. And then after I came back from Oklahoma my office was on the south side of the hall there in the middle wing on the top floor until I got saddled with the undergraduate responsibilities, sort of the undergraduate coordinator, and I moved around to southwest wing, the office overlooking the steps, I guess that's the easiest way to describe it because I had to be there next to the main office with all the undergraduates coming through; and I had a wonderful secretary, Miss Betty Roke; she did a bang up job of handling what she was perfectly able to handle and letting me worry about the things that needed to be worried about. But at one time we had over 200 undergraduates so her job was pretty detailed. The Lloyd-Ricks to start with was, I guess you might say kind of a dreary place; it had plaster walls that attracted moisture, and they'd paint the walls and the paint would start flaking off within six months. And I guess it must have been in the late '60s or early '70s they did a major renovation and put in dark paneling, and that was a lot better than peeling paint on the walls, but it was still a... some of the offices were pretty dark. As part of that we did get a classroom up there on the top floor; the seminar room, I guess we called it; for small classes and seminars, so it was handy to have that.

And then I'm not sure when all this took place, but the State Soils Lab was in the basement; Ed Gholston and his crew, and then Freddie Rasberry. And after... I guess it was after the Bost Building was built and they moved the Soils Lab over there, that freed up that space in the basement and we got that classroom down there which helped out tremendously.

Mr. Semmes: Where was your final office in the building?

Mr. Simpson: That one there looking over the front steps.

Mr. Semmes: So you stayed in that until...

Mr. Simpson: Yeah.

Mr. Semmes: When did you retire from Mississippi State?

Mr. Simpson: '88, but I taught half-time and did a lot of work for the Tax Commission sort of on a consulting basis up through the mid-'90s. Yeah. I've had the dubious pleasure of being the Interim Department Head there after Dr. Hurt moved downstairs to the Director's office, and that was a real eye-opener; I didn't know Department Heads had that much hassle. It got to where I hated for somebody to come say, 'Are you busy?' And I'd say, 'Not really bad,' and they'd come in and pull the door shut behind them. And I knew I was in for it then. And it's amazing what some people will say behind closed doors.

Mr. Semmes: Hmm.

Mr. Simpson: But after Dr. Stennis was selected as Department Head, I was ready to hang it up.

Mr. Semmes: For a while y'all were producing a journal... what was the name of the journal that y'all produced?

Mr. Simpson: Oh, I was never involved in that, and I was trying to think who edited it... It might have been Travis Phillips, I'm not sure; but I really didn't get involved in that.

Mr. Semmes: Well, I was just going to ask you to just kind of comment on some folks that you worked with over time. You mentioned that you sort of know Dorothy Dickens in passing.

Mr. Simpson: Yeah, she was one of a kind; evidently so well-respected in her profession in Home Ec. But her claim to fame was the fact that she had a parking space out there on the street north of the Lloyd-Ricks building, and I think she must have had rheumatism, arthritis or something; she had difficulty turning her head because she was advanced age anyway. But when she got in her car and started to leave, she backed out regardless. And people coming up and down the street knew that, and when they saw that car starting to move they gave it the right of way; and I don't think she ever got run into, but that was her claim to fame, I guess you might say.

Mr. Semmes: (*chuckles*) That she had the right of way.

Mr. Simpson: Yep. She was a sweet lady, and very capable. Yep.

Mr. Semmes: What can you tell us about Dr. William Giles?

Mr. Simpson: Mostly that he was a real approachable professional, very professional in anything and everything that he did. Of course, as the Director of the Experiment Station and top man, you might say, and at that time I was a very low, low level staff member, I had very little interaction with him; but he was tremendously well-respected all the way through.

Mr. Semmes: Could you tell us some of your interactions that you had with Dr. Charles Lee?

Mr. Simpson: Well, his early days with the Forestry Department were probably when we had more interaction back to the tax project. We discovered fairly early that timber land had to be approached differently than crop land in valuing it for tax purposes. And Dr. Lee worked closely with the people in the Forestry Department and with us in identifying some of the problems and coming up with reasonable ways to handle them. And then, of course, when he came back as the top administrator

again, he was interacting with the upper crust, so to speak, of course. But he was always really supportive and easy to talk to; a good administrator. Yeah.

Mr. Semmes: Tell us how you met and interacted with Dr. Mark Keenum.

Mr. Simpson: Well, he was a good student; he sat through several of my classes and, of course, he wound up working on his Doctorate at about the time that I was Interim Head and I didn't serve on his committee, but we had pretty well talked it over among ourselves; John Waldrop, and Verner Hurt, and some of the rest of them; that as soon as he finished his Doctorate we wanted to keep him. And so I had the pleasure of interviewing him, so to speak, but not much of an interview since we had our minds made up that we wanted him, but it was mostly asking him if he was willing to come on this staff full-time; and thankfully he was, and made a real contribution until the Senator hired him away from us and he went on to bigger and better things. But I'm glad he's back where he belongs.

Mr. Semmes: Did you interact with him when he was working with the Senator's office?

Mr. Simpson: Not to a great deal, but certainly he was here every chance he got and took part in a lot of our activities, that the Mississippi Ag Econ Association Convention, I guess you might call it, we have one each year. One thing I remember about that, we have this golf scramble and I was in the bunch with he and Marty Fuller, and I forget now which hole it is out there on the university course, but it's the one that goes from east to west, down the line of trees...

Mr. Semmes: Mm-hm.

Mr. Simpson: ...Where we always have the long drive...

Mr. Semmes: Mm-hm.

Mr. Simpson: And, of course, Marty could knock the ball a mile, and Mark the same way; and they teed off and just knocked it out of sight. But both of them dribbled off to one side or the other of the fairway in the rough and, of course, to count for the long drive you had to be in the fairway; and I got hold of my drive just right and it went

right down the middle, not nearly as long as theirs, but it wound up being the longest drive.

Mr. Semmes: *(laughs)*

Mr. Simpson: So I have not let Mark forget that, or Marty.

Mr. Semmes: *(laughs)* How about Dr. Louis Wise?

Mr. Simpson: One of the world's characters. He's never met a stranger, I don't think anybody could possibly stay mad at him, and he was very persuasive, he could talk you into doing almost anything...

Mr. Semmes: Hmm.

Mr. Simpson: ...And he had such a wide range of interests; of course agriculture in general, and he loved sort of the fringe things like the Enology Lab, the wine making, the big muscadines and, of course, he was the mover and shaker that wound up getting the Vet School under way. And I'm sure he would think that that's his crowning achievement, you might say; certainly he really worked and sweated and persuaded people to get that started.

Mr. Semmes: How about Dr. Rodney Foil?

Mr. Simpson: A good administrator even though he was a Forester.

Mr. Semmes: *(laughs)*

Mr. Simpson: *(laughs)* He, again could... knew when to push and when to back off and got a lot of good things done, and he didn't have any hesitation in putting the pressure on you to do a better job of what you were supposed to be doing. He didn't accept any backing off; keep the pedal to the metal.

Mr. Semmes: Did you say whether or not you had any interactions with Dr. Baker Andrews?

Mr. Simpson: Very little. I think, if I'm not mistaken, I took a course under him as an undergraduate; Fertilizers and Manures; and I think that classroom in Montgomery Hall with the windows all around; but that was about it.

Mr. Semmes: Did you know Dean Bunch well?

Mr. Simpson: Not well. As a Sociologist he travelled in different circles. But he was real nice, a real pleasant person; very much so.

Mr. Semmes: Okay, you've already mentioned Dr. Hurt and how he convinced you to go to Oklahoma State...

Mr. Simpson: Yeah.

Mr. Semmes: ...Could you tell us a little bit more about your relationship with Dr. Hurt?

Mr. Simpson: Well, he's again, about as capable a person as you'll ever meet. A lot of Tom Tramel rubbed off on him, you might say. And he sort of blazed the trail for a lot of people in working with the agricultural industry in general out in the state. I think he was probably one of the first administrators here that saw this real need for making sure that you're your instruction and research fit the needs of the people in the state. And the farm organizations; the Farm Bureau, Cattlemen, and people like that; they recognize that and really supported him in what he tried to do. And he had a real knack for identifying people's abilities and directing them where they needed to go. And he was a good teacher; he had a very good reputation as a teacher.

Mr. Semmes: Well how about Dr. Bost, the Director of the Extension Service?

Mr. Simpson: Well, of course, as the Extension Director I didn't have a lot of direct professional interaction with him, but he had a real ability to get people on the same page, you might say; keep them going in the right direction. And as it turned out, I had more interaction with him after I retired than I did before because as soon as I retired the local County Director of the Soil and Water Conservation Service, Tony Thompson, was one of our former students and he approached me about serving

on the County Board of Directors for the soil conservation. He said, 'Now that you're retired you don't have anything else to do.'

Mr. Semmes: Hmm.

Mr. Simpson: And I joined the Board of Directors and Dr. Bost was at that time the President of the Board, and I served with him for probably ten years or so; and just a fine person. Everybody admired him.

Mr. Semmes: Was there anything else about the building or about your time in the building that you'd like to talk about... like to mention?

Mr. Simpson: Well, it was a good place to work. I always had a couple of undergraduates that were on one type of program or another for student workers, and I tried to use them as much as I could to do some of the busy work on papers and term papers and that sort of thing. But it was a good place to work; the only problem was the elevator, it got stuck regularly, and if you weren't in all that big of a hurry it was better to take the stairs than depend on the elevator. And of course the Extension side, the east side, had that elevator with the cage around it, open grillwork, you could watch the floors go by. At least we had a closed elevator on our end.

Mr. Semmes: Did you get stuck in it once or twice?

Mr. Simpson: Oh yeah. I think everybody wound up stuck in the elevator at one time or another.

Mr. Semmes: (*chuckles*)

Mr. Simpson: And after the first main renovation they put that telephone in there, in the elevator; but it never worked.

Mr. Semmes: (*chuckles*)

Mr. Simpson: It was about as reliable as the elevator itself. Yeah, I'll probably think of a dozen things that I could... should have talked about, but I don't see any of them right now. (*chuckles*)

Mr. Semmes: Well if you do, let us know and we can have you come back and talk some more.
Well thank you for coming in today, we really appreciate it.

Mr. Simpson: Well, I enjoyed it; it's good to reminisce and particularly think of the... some of the people that you've worked with. One that I should have mentioned, talking about the tax project, is Dr. Lin; he was from Taiwan, on the faculty; but he was a computer nerd that could make it do anything that needed doing, and he was the one that took all the raw data and massaged it to the point where we could use it in the project; we couldn't have done it without him. Yeah.

Mr. Semmes: Well, if that's all then we thank you for coming in. We appreciate it.

Mr. Simpson: Alright.

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