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Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Project

Oral History

Dr. Bob Williams

May 17, 2012

Interviewer: Mr. Ryan Semmes

(Tape Side One, 000)

Mr. Semmes: This is the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Oral History with Dr. Bob Williams. Thursday, May 17th, 2012; 10 a.m.; in the Stennis-Montgomery room. Interviewer, Ryan Semmes with Jim Chow. Well, first we just want to say thank you for helping us out and participating in the project. And why don't you just start by telling us your name and your affiliation with Mississippi State and when you first got here.

Dr. Williams: [Edited (changed by Dr. Williams on 10/02/2012)] Yeah. My name is Bob Williams. I came to Mississippi State as a student in fall of 1959 and graduated in May of 1961 with a B.S. degree. My first association and interaction with people in the Lloyd-Ricks Building and being located in the Lloyd-Ricks Building was in June of 1961. I received an assistantship in the Ag Econ Department in June of 1961 and moved into the building at that point in time. I began work on a Master's Degree in Ag Economics at that and moved into the west side of Lloyd-Ricks building on the third floor into an office occupied by Dr. Verner Hurt. Dr. Hurt had received his PhD from Oklahoma State probably a year prior to that and came back to Mississippi State, and so he was my major professor. But, I guess the interesting situation there was Dr. Hurt and A. L. McLaughlin and I were located in one office; three desks, one office; and those offices were not real large. The person probably at the most (of a) disadvantage there was Dr. Hurt because as a young Assistant Professor coming back from Oklahoma State he had two graduate students in the office with him, and so it was a little bit crowded,

and not a whole lot of privacy for particularly Dr. Hurt as he began the process of doing the work to be promoted from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor and, of course, he wound up as Director of Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Station. But it was an interesting situation with three folks located in one office on that west side there. It was a good situation for me as a youngster just having received a B.S. degree in '61. Dr. Hurt and Mr. McLaughlin gave me a lot of guidance and direction, and I've often said if it hadn't been for Dr. Hurt I never would have received my Master's Degree because having that close association with him was certainly really beneficial to me; probably not beneficial to Dr. Hurt, or maybe Mac; but again, I count those two folks as mentors, and certainly even longtime friends. So that was the first move that I made into the Lloyd-Ricks Building was then and, of course, now Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building. But (that was) a good time in my life and, as I said, a good experience there. I did receive a Master's Degree in May of '63, and I worked for a couple of months in the department just as a research assistant, and then in August of '63 I went on six months active duty with the Mississippi Army National Guard; I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana, and then to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I was getting out of six months active duty in February of '64. I did not have a job, but heard that the Extension Service was looking for an Ag Economist. So while we had ten days leave in December of '63 from Fort Sill I came back to campus and interviewed with Dr. Rupert Johnston who was leader in the Extension Ag Econ Department, and Dr. Johnston offered me that job in December of '63 over the Christmas holidays, so I accepted the job. Then when I was discharged from the Army in February of '64 I came back to campus in the middle of February of '64, and began about a 32-year career with the Extension Service being housed here on campus. When I came back in '64, I had an office on the east side of Lloyd-Ricks Building. The Extension Service occupied the east side essentially, and MAFES; and the Vice President's office was housed on the west side. I had an office on the third floor and shared that office with Curtis Brummet who was a TVA field man at that point in time serving Mississippi. At that time TVA had field men located throughout the

seven-state area, and a little later they moved those field men back into Muscle Shoals, Alabama. I enjoyed having that association with the TVA people. The Extension Service stayed in the Lloyd-Ricks Building until May of 1976, so that was from '64 to '76. As I said, Mr. Brummet was moved back into TVA headquarters in Muscle Shoals and, at that point, A.L. McLaughlin, who I shared an office with on the west side of Lloyd-Ricks when I was working on a Master's Degree shared an office there, and I shared an office there. A little later Mac received a promotion and was moved to another location in the building and Doss Broadnax and I shared an office there on the third floor (on the) east side of the Lloyd-Ricks Building. Mac moved to Texas a little later where his daughters were working and he passed away several years ago. Mr. Brummet, who was with TVA, passed away several years ago. But Doss Broadnax still lives in the Starkville area. Doss and I shared that office for a number of years. And then in May of '76 we moved to the Bost Extension Center. We stayed in the Bost Building from '76 to about the end of '89 and then moved back into the Lloyd-Ricks Building again on the west side, third floor. I don't think I've ever occupied an office anywhere other than the third floor of the Lloyd-Ricks Building. I was there from '90 to about December of '93. In December of '93 I was asked to serve as interim State Program Leader for Agriculture for the Extension Service and moved back to the Bost Building for about a year-and-a-half and then retired in 1995. So I've had at least three locations in the Lloyd-Ricks Building, all on the third floor. And my time there was certainly good, and there are a number of things about the building that I remember and probably will always remember. Certainly I was involved pretty heavily in the renovation of the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building in 2009/2010. There had been a number of renovations throughout the years, but the 2009/2010 renovation, about a \$13 million renovation, and was the first major renovation that, that I can recall essentially 50-year time period or so from about '60, '61 through 2010. Lloyd-Ricks Building was built so that the east side and the west side were connected on the basement and the first floor. The second floor and third floors were not connected. The

renovation in 2009 and 2010 connected both the second floor and the third floor, and currently (the) Ag Econ Department occupies the third floor, the School of Human Sciences occupies the second floor, and then first floor-basement are sort of jointly occupied by administration. That was a major renovation, and the dedication and the renaming of that building occurred in October of 2010 during one of the football games here on campus. I think it may have been homecoming day...

Mr. Semmes: I think so.

Dr. Williams: ...That day, October 23, I think of 2010, we had a dedication and renaming of the building. I think probably in 2009 the legislature passed a bill to rename the building from Lloyd-Ricks Building to the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building, and that occurred, as I said, in October of 2010. They had a party and that ceremony of that dedication. I was pretty heavily involved in that process; it was a major, major renovation. And, of course, it put the building back into essentially the state that it was in when it was originally built. The building, and you may have seen these dates already, but I think the west side was probably 1929, the east side was completed probably in 1939; so it's an old, historic building and has been utilized by many, many folks over the years.

Mr. Semmes: So other than the two top floors needing to be connected from one side to the other, what are some of the other issues that needed to be addressed with the renovation?

Dr. Williams: Well, they tore out some walls, and then, of course, the electrical, heating, plumbing, and those kinds of things, were old, and so they tore those out, and the new air conditioning units and heating units, and all kinds of stuff like that. If you look at some of the earlier pictures of the Lloyd-Ricks building, if you go back to the '50s and '60s, most pictures that were taken of the building the windows were up because it didn't have any air conditioning, and certainly not central air conditioning or heating; so the windows would be up with the folks in the building

having small portable fans and as you can imagine, July and August afternoons got pretty hot in the building.

Mr. Semmes: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Williams: But then pictures a little later, probably '70s, and '80s and even '90s if you have a picture of the building the outside it's always window units outside of the building. And now currently with the 2009/2010 renovation those units have been placed inside so that the windows are completely down and you don't see those units at all. So the utilities, and of course, new flooring, carpets, and redoing all plaster walls and all kinds of stuff like that; and putting in lights that were originally in the building. Over time they had ceilings that were the artificial ceilings that were put in that were much lower than the original structure, so those were removed; and the new lights put in and all kinds of stuff like that. So it was a really, really major renovation. I guess from an energy standpoint one thing we were pleased to be able to do is replace the windows, so the wooden windows were replaced with double-paned windows for energy efficiency. On a historic building like that sometimes you have problems making those changes, but the Department of Archives and History realized that the energy conservation being the importance and priority that they're placing on it now, that it was somewhat necessary to do that.

Mr. Semmes: How much approval do you have to get from the Department of Archives and History when you renovate one of these historic buildings?

Dr. Williams: Well, it's a major process there. They do come and inspect, and you just have to go through the process of filling out the appropriate forms and getting their approval, because they want to maintain these old historic buildings in as close to the original building as possible. So it is a major process, and remembering history and maintaining that history is certainly important to us as, again as I've been on campus since, since the late '50s. We were able to renovate that building with their permission to do some things that really helped us from the conservation of energy standpoint.

Mr. Semmes: What can you tell us about some of the classroom space and how its changed since you were a student to now past the renovation?

Dr. Williams: Well, I never did have a lot of classes in the Lloyd-Ricks building. It never has been a building that had a lot of classrooms in it. Some, certainly on the third floor of the west side when I was working on my Master's Degree in Ag Economics, and later on when I was working on my PhD here in Ag Economics, we had a number of classrooms probably three or four smaller classrooms; classrooms that would seat 30 to 35 folks, something like that because most of our classes as a Master's student or a PhD student would be 12 to 15, or sometimes a maximum of 20 so the classrooms were smaller. We had a number of classes over in Dorman Hall after it was built, and I think Dorman Hall probably opened up in about '64, so probably when I was working on my PhD I had classes there in some larger classrooms and things of that nature. Of course, with the current renovation of the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson building, they now have two larger classrooms on the basement floor. There was a lab on the north end of that east side that is now a classroom that probably will seat 60 to 65 folks; and there's a large classroom on the south side, east wing, that will seat 60 to 65; they're mirror images of one another. But those classrooms were not there during the '60s and '70s when we were in the building. There was a lab on the north side and office space, and Ag Communications was in the south side. There are at least two large conference rooms; one on second floor that Human Science uses now, and one on third floor that Ag Econ uses; but they're large conference rooms, and are really nice. They were endowed by a couple of folks as that renovation took place. As I said, even working on a master's degree back in the early 60s I had more of my classes in Montgomery Hall than probably the Lloyd-Ricks Building. I did have some classes there. There's more office space housed; the Extension staff, the research staff, and the Vice President's office. Dr. Giles was the first VP of the Ag Division here at Mississippi State in the early 60s and he had an office on the second floor of the Lloyd-Ricks Building; so more office space versus classrooms.

Mr. Semmes: Well, that's a good transition point to maybe talk about some of the folks you interacted with at your time in Lloyd-Ricks. Can you tell us a little more about your relationship with Dr. Giles?

Dr. Williams: Well, I did not have a real close working relationship with Dr. Giles because I came on the staff there in February of '64. Dr. Giles was the Vice President for Agriculture. He became President probably I'm going to say in maybe '66-'67. Dr. Colvard was President then, so my time in the building while Dr. Giles was there was not an extended period of time. Dr. Giles had been earlier Superintendent of the Delta Branch Experiment Station at Stoneville and then came in to the main campus as VP. But Dr. Giles was certainly well-respected, well-recognized, and well-loved by the Mississippi State people. (He was) Certainly a real positive part of Mississippi agriculture in the '60s and '70s while he served as VP and then served as President of Mississippi State University. But my interaction with him was very limited since it was about a two, two-and-a-half-year time period while he was still in the building and I was in the building. I was just a youngster just coming out of the Ag Econ Department with a Master's Degree. He certainly was well-respected and did an outstanding job for Mississippi State University and certainly took us through some turbulent times during the '60s and early '70s as the country was involved in some that could have been disruptive, and were disruptive on many campuses, but Dr. Giles certainly handled those in a really appropriate manner.

Mr. Semmes: How about Dr. Charles Lee? You said you had some interactions with him.

Dr. Williams: I did have some interactions with Dr. Lee. Dr. Lee became Vice President for the Division in 1999 and I was in the VP office just as Project Coordinator working part time. I had retired but was still working part time just on special projects. So I did have interaction with him there for about three years and then he moved from the VP office to the President's office. He certainly did an outstanding job for us. He was on campus earlier as Department Head in Forestry and went to Texas A&M and served there for a number of years and then came back when

Dr. Foil retired in I'll say '99. Dr. Lee came back as VP for Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine. I had the opportunity to work with him a little bit as he moved to the President's office, but I did not know him earlier in the '70s and '80s when he was on campus in the Forestry area. Certainly my interaction with Dr. Lee was good, positive, and he did an outstanding job for Mississippi State.

Mr. Semmes: How about Dr. Keenum, what is your relationship like with Dr. Keenum?

Dr. Williams: Oh, I consider it a good relationship and consider really Mark a friend. Dr. Keenum got his Master's Degree here at Mississippi State in... I want to say probably the early '80s, and his first job after receiving his Master's Degree was with the Extension Service, and I was with the Extension Service. His office was on the third floor of the Bost Building and my office was on the fourth floor of the Bost Building, so I had the opportunity to work some with Dr. Keenum over about a two-year time period. The thing that happened with Dr. Keenum is we had a reduction in force in June of 1986 and Dr. Keenum had been on the staff maybe a year and a half, maybe two years, working in the catfish area and was doing an outstanding job, but with the reduction in force and being one of the younger faculty members he decided to go back to school and work on his PhD and went back into the Ag Econ Department and moved back to the Lloyd-Ricks Building and completed a PhD and then went on staff as an Assistant Professor when he completed his PhD. Maybe a year or two later Senator Cochran was looking for an Agricultural Aide, and I think probably Dr. Verner Hurt made the major recommendation to Senator Cochran that Dr. Keenum would be an outstanding person to fill that role on the Senator's staff. And so he left Mississippi State and moved to D.C. and, of course, had about a 20, 22-year career there before he came back as President, and while he's been back as President I have had the opportunity to work some with him. There are some things in the agricultural area that sometimes he or some of his assistants will call our office for data, information and things of that nature. So I'm pleased to have the opportunity to be of assistance there. Dr. Keenum has been, for me, a friend, and someone

who has done an outstanding job for Mississippi State University. He did an outstanding job for agriculture in Mississippi while he was on the senator's staff in D.C. Really, when Dr. Keenum came back to Mississippi State I thought agriculture will not prosper as much because Dr. Keenum did such a good job there, particularly in the area of ag policy, (and) that we were going to probably struggle maybe two, three, or four years or whatever. Certainly his contributions to Mississippi State have been substantial, and again the, I guess, almost three years that he's been back Mississippi State has grown and prospered and we've just advanced tremendously. So his time as President has been really, really super, and I think the people on campus and people throughout the State recognize that. So he has made, as I said, a major, major contribution certainly to Mississippi agriculture, during which I worked with over a 32-year time period while he was in D.C. with the Senator; and there's just many, many things that he did that were beneficial to Mississippi State University. Now one thing that I do need to mention about Dr. Keenum that was instrumental in the renovation of the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building. We had \$10 million in state funds (state bond money). And we had about \$3 million in HUD funding; there was a \$1 million HUD appropriations and that was probably in '03 or '04, and then the next year we had about 2 million, so that total HUD money was about \$3 million; and Dr. Keenum was highly instrumental in getting those HUD funds directed to Mississippi State University, and to the renovation of the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building. We could tell the state legislature that look, we've got this almost \$3 million in HUD funds to help us renovate the Lloyd-Ricks Building, and we need about another 8 to 10 million dollars to do the kind of renovation that we really want to do. So Mark was extremely instrumental in helping us get some of that state money. The HUD money that was available was directed through Dr. Keenum and Senator Cochran. I don't know the details on that, but I know those two people were really highly instrumental in helping us get those dollars. I often think that someday there will be a book written about Mark's life because, for me, it has certainly been an amazing story!

Mr. Semmes: Interesting. Can you tell us a little bit about Dr. Louis Wise?

Dr. Williams: Dr. Wise served as VP for Agriculture for a number of years and was highly respected. Dr. Wise's background was Agronomy. He had an outstanding career in Agronomy. He was a native of Louisiana and came to Mississippi State. He was on staff when Dr. Giles moved from the VP office to the President's office and Dr. Wise became VP at that point in time. Dr. Wise had the ability to relate to people really, really well. He was a great storyteller. He was in demand throughout the state for all kinds of functions because he was such a good speaker and storyteller. I mean, he had just many, many stories and he could tell them so well. He could tell funny stories, and the people just really, really related to Dr. Wise extremely well and he certainly did an outstanding job for us. We got the Bost Building funding while he was VP; we got the funding for the College of Veterinary Medicine while he was VP; we got funding for the Enology Lab on the North Farm while he was VP. They named the College of Veterinary Medicine The Wise Center, and that was one of his major, major accomplishments. But I'll remember Dr. Wise for the funny stories that he always told. He could certainly be serious and stern as an administrator, but he just related really well to people and, as I said, was well-known throughout the State; throughout the region, really. We had him at some recent meetings that we had jointly with TVA as our featured speaker and people just knew him and loved him there. He passed away many years ago but was well-respected and well-loved by Mississippi State people, and those particularly in the Ag Division.

Mr. Semmes: How about Dr. Rodney Foil? Can you tell us about some of the work you did together?

Dr. Williams: Yeah, I knew Dr. Foil mainly after I retired in '95 Dr. Foil was VP for, I'm sure, 10 or 12 years. I don't remember the exact year that Dr. Foil became VP, but he retired in the late 90s. When I retired in June of '95 I was looking for part time work and in October of '95, Dr. Foil asked me to come to his office, his office was housed in the Wise Center at that point in time, and he asked me to work on a

special project. It was a tribute to Commissioner Jim Buck Ross who was a Mississippi State graduate and was retiring as Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Mississippi. Of course, again, folks throughout the state loved and respected Jim Buck. Jim Buck was a little bit like Dr. Wise in that he could tell stories and people loved those. I worked on that special project, it was a major event that we had on campus. The Governor came and served as part of that program, Jerry Clower served as emcee, and we honored Jim Buck; and in that process we netted over a hundred thousand dollars to set up scholarships in honor of Commissioner Ross; and those scholarships are endowed and continue through today and will continue for a long, long time. I worked with Dr. Foil there from October of '95 until he retired in the late '90s and that's where I knew him best. Previously I had some contacts with him, but not like those four or five years while I worked in his office on these special projects and things of that nature. But really grew to respect and to know him really, really well. He served probably at least 10 to 12 years, maybe longer than that, as VP of the Division and did an outstanding job; a time when there was a lot of transition in the division, and he handled it well.

Mr. Semmes: Between Jim Buck Ross and Jerry Clower, that must have been quite the event.

Dr. Williams: Oh, it really was, and of course, we had the Governor there.

Mr. Semmes: Right.

Dr. Williams: Jerry liked to make statements as sort of dig at the Governor; and Jerry could do that, and he'd do it in such a way that the Governor was not offended by it. But with Jim Buck, and Jerry Clower, and the Governor it was quite an event for us. And as I said, we did it to honor Jim Buck. Over \$100,000 was raised to endow those scholarships in honor of Jim Buck, and that was a lasting tribute to the Commissioner. Jim Buck served as Commissioner of Agriculture for, I believe, 28 years. He was a Senator prior to that and was, of course, Mayor of Pelahatchie, and has a lot of stories to tell about being mayor of Pelahatchie and he ended up winning as Senator there in Jackson. So it was quite an event, one that we

worked on for about five or six months. The lasting thing about that function was the dollars that were raised to provide the scholarships for students in the College of Ag and Life Sciences here at Mississippi State University.

Mr. Semmes: I guess finally, do you have anything to tell us about Dr. Bost.

Dr. Williams: Well, Dr. Bost was Director of the Extension Service when I started to work in February of '64. Dr. Bost had not been director very long, probably a couple of years. Mr. Clay Simmons was Associate Director, and certainly folks in Extension and folks in the Starkville area remember Mr. Simmons fondly and the outstanding person that he was. Then Dr. Jamie Carpenter was Assistant Director in charge of all the agricultural programs. With those three individuals, we had an outstanding administration: Dr. Bost, Mr. Simmons, and Dr. Carpenter. Then I worked for Dr. Rupert Johnston. Dr. Rupert Johnston was leader in the Extension Ag Econ group, and Dr. Johnston hired me, and certainly was an outstanding administrator and I thank him every day. I think my interview with Dr. Johnston was probably 30 to 45 minutes or something like that. I went around and met the other folks in the department; that was during Christmas break when I was on leave from Fort Sill in late '63; but the process then was not quite as complicated as it is now. Nowadays you have to come in and give the seminar and two-day interview process, and meet everybody on campus and stuff like that. But back then it wasn't quite that complicated. I often think that if it had been that complicated then, I probably would not have gotten the job at Mississippi State. But anyway, it was probably about a 30-minute interview with interaction over an hour or so with the people in the department. Dr. Bost served as Director of Extension, I'm going to say, for about 20 years. He was a long-standing director and certainly did an outstanding job. And one of his major accomplishments was helping obtain the funds for the Bost Extension Center. I think the total funding there was somewhere between \$4 and \$5 million back at that time, and construction was probably started on the Bost Extension Building in about 1974, and we started moving in sometime around January or February of '76; our

department moved in around May of '76. He was an outstanding administrator. And Extension in that time period was really strong; and it was really strong partly because of, and maybe mainly because of Dr. Bost, Mr. Simmons, and Dr. Jamie Carpenter.

Mr. Semmes: Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about, because I think we're about at the end; if there's anything else you feel like sharing with us...

Dr. Williams: Just a couple of quick comments...

Mr. Semmes: Sure.

Dr. Williams: As an Extension Specialist we did radio programs. We didn't do TV programs. We started doing TV when we moved into the Bost Building in '76; we had a nice TV studio, we didn't have a TV studio prior to that time; but the radio studio was a somewhat unusual situation. It was on the basement floor, middle of the connection there between the west side and the east side on the south side of the building. Tommy Wilkerson was our radio person at that point in time, and Tommy did a really good job, and folks throughout the State said he had a good speaking voice, and he was fairly familiar with Mississippi agriculture. The place we did the recording Tommy just had some burlap material and some rails around the top of the room, and he'd just pull that burlap material around and it sort of formed the booth. It wasn't really a recording booth, or recording room or anything; it was just a regular room with some burlap material there (*laughs*) and was really unique.

Mr. Semmes: (*laughs*)

Dr. Williams: And we'd sit down at the table (with) Tommy on one side and the interviewee on the other side, and as Specialists, we did probably programs at least once a month, maybe even twice a month; it was called Better Farming Program. But I'll always remember that rustic recording booth that we had in the Lloyd-Ricks Building. When we moved to the Bost Building we had a nice radio recording room and a nice TV studio, and we started doing TV at that point in time; that

being in '76. But again, I always remember that rather rustic recording studio that we did the Better Farming Programs in from '64 until '76 when we left the Bost Building. There is one other quick story if we've got enough time...

Mr. Semmes: Oh, sure.

Dr. Williams: Dr. George Mullendore was a Cotton Specialist with the Extension Service, and Dr. Wayne Jordan was a Soybean Specialist, and they shared an office on the third floor; and both were among the best in the region, among the best in the country. But Dr. Mullendore had been with the Extension Service longer than Dr. Jordan, and Dr. Mullendore knew every County Agent in the state, and he knew probably almost every cotton farmer's Cotton Specialist. Their desks were sort of back to back, and they were facing one another. George had a phone on his desk, and Wayne had a phone on his desk. Well Wayne, being a fairly young Specialist, didn't know quite as many folks as George did, and sometimes George would get a call on his phone, and George had given the cotton producers and the County Agents Wayne's phone number also. So then sometimes he'd get a call on Wayne's phone, and I've seen him sitting at his desk propped up with his feet on his desk, and he'd have this phone on this side and Wayne's phone on this side... *(laughs)*

Mr. Semmes: *(laughs)*

Dr. Williams: ...And then he would say, he'd be talking to Rob Lewis at Clarksdale, and tell Rob something and be talking to Hayes Farrish up at Tunica County on this phone, and he'd say something, 'aw Hayes, I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to Rob,' and then say, 'Rob, I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to Hayes.' So he had both of them going, and so George was really a master communicator before we got all this new technology that we have today...

Mr. Semmes: *(laughs)*

Dr. Williams: ...But I'll always remember Wayne and George as they shared those offices and the times George occupied both phones in the office. Dr. Kelton Anderson was

leader, so he had to make some changes there because Wayne was sort of getting left out and some of the growers were getting left out but those were two folks, certainly, that I remember quite fondly. Wayne went on and left Mississippi State in the '80s and went over to the University of Georgia and wound up as Extension Director at the University of Georgia. Of course, George retired as Cotton Specialist here at Mississippi State a number of years later. But both were really outstanding people, and they had some interesting times as they shared that office jointly.

Mr. Semmes: Well all right. Well, thank you very much for coming in. We do appreciate it. That was a great story.

Dr. Williams: You're quite welcome. I enjoyed it.

Mr. Semmes: Thank you.

Dr. Williams: Yeah.

(Tape Side One Ends, 675)