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Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Project

Oral History

Joe Askew, Jr.

November 12, 2012

Interviewer: Mattie Abraham

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(Tape Side One, 000)

Ms. Abraham: The Echoes of Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Oral History Program. And today we're interviewing Joe Askew. Good morning.

Mr. Askew: Hi. How are you doing?

Ms. Abraham: Just fine. Thank you for coming, we really appreciate it. Can you tell us first of all what was your relationship to the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson Building, or is, is or was your relationship?

Mr. Askew: Well, when I was first hired Dr. Porter and Dr. Jim Anderson was in that building, they were the Director and Associate Director, and then Dr. Anderson moved to Michigan State. But... then Dr. Foil was promoted to the Director, and I've always worked under the Director and the Associate Director in various programs. But I was in the Animal Research Center working with Butch Withers at one time. But then when the Variety Testing Program began, and the Variety Testing Program was a necessity because of Congress passing the PVP, the Plan Variety Protection Act; and they put me in charge of the Variety Testing Program, so I was housed in Lloyd-Ricks and I was there for probably close to ten years.

Ms. Abraham: So the year when you first started being housed there was...

Mr. Askew: 1980.

Ms. Abraham: ...1980. And your position, or the title...

Mr. Askew: Was Manager of the Variety Testing Program.

Ms. Abraham: Okay, great. So you were in Lloyd-Ricks-Watson from 1980 to what year?

Mr. Askew: Probably, I'm not positive, but probably '90, '91; something like that. When Dr. Hurt became the Director he moved us to the Hay Seed Lab, and that's... we were housed there in Hay Seed Lab.

Ms. Abraham: Okay. And am I correct that you are now retired?

Mr. Askew: Yes.

Ms. Abraham: Okay, officially retired. Well, to get to the meat of the interview, what we're looking for are some interesting experiences that you've had, perhaps some of the personalities during your time there. So here's your time to just tell us what was interesting about your time there.

Mr. Askew: I was... I traveled so much I did not spend a lot of time in Lloyd-Ricks. I was on the road almost every day, but two stories I can remember. Dr. Foil, who was the Director of the Experiment Station, came around the corner one day and asked me was I doing anything, and you hate to tell your boss no I'm not doing anything, or I'm not real busy, but I wasn't and he knew it so I said, 'I'm not real busy.' He said, 'Well how about running to the airport in Jackson and see if you can find my car, I've lost it.' And he said, 'I think I'd loaned it to Sonny Montgomery to go to the airport and fly back to Washington, but I can't remember.' So I carried someone with me and we went to the airport parking lot. We rode around and around and finally found it. It took an arm and a leg to pay it out of hock, but we managed to scrape up enough money and get it; it had been down there almost a month; and we got it out and brought it back home. But then the other story; Dr. Porter, who was Associate Director, and I answered to him directly, called me into his office one day and asked me what I thought about Vance Watson, and when Porter asked you a question you never really knew what he was after. So I told him I thought I liked Vance a lot. I had been around him a lot; we had worked together quite a bit. He said, 'Well good, y'all are fixing to work together even

closer.' He said, 'We're bringing Vance over and making him Head of Forage Programs for the State,' and he said, 'You've got the travel budget in the Experiment Station, and we're not going to give him a travel budget, but he's going to travel with you.' So he said, 'Y'all enjoy it.' And so Vance and I traveled a lot together.

Ms. Abraham: So where in Lloyd-Ricks was your office?

Mr. Askew: I don't remember the office number, seems like it was 114, but it was in the second floor, very center; or first floor if you consider the first floor as basement.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. Okay. So you said you didn't spend a lot of time in that office, but do you remember anything about the building? Were there any things that, you know...

Mr. Askew: It was kind of an H-shaped building; that's the only thing I remember. Porter did call me in his office one day, and somebody had messed up on property control, and he said, 'You're going to be in charge of property control' because of... for the administration because the procurement office had threatened to cut MAFES off of funding because they had lost some property and I managed to find some of it, so I wound up with all the administration which was the Director, the Vice President, the Associate Directors, the Experimental Statistics, Computing, the airport; I had the airplane on my inventory, I had all the radios and the airplane on separate inventory, and they sold the airplane without telling me and the radios, so the airplane was taken off inventory but the radios in the airplane, the Omni, the LDS and all that was in Argentina not off of inventory, so we had to do a little extra paperwork to get all that off of inventory. Dr. Foil, when they were promoting the catfish industry in the State of Mississippi, they went to Washington and fed the White House staff a catfish dinner one day. The White House chef liked the cooker that Foil had had made, so he gave it to him, and that was on inventory. So then we had to work to get it off of inventory because it was at the White

House, but there was always... never a dull moment and always interesting over there.

Ms. Abraham: So you had inventory for the rest of your time there in Lloyd-Ricks?

Mr. Askew: In Lloyd-Ricks, yes.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. So you never know what you're going to be doing.

Mr. Askew: Working for the Director and Associate Director, no, you never knew what you were going to be doing.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm.

Mr. Askew: You might be sent somewhere to cover something up or (*laughs*)...

Ms. Abraham: (*laughs*)

Mr. Askew: ...or smooth something over, or whatever the situation might be. But then you had to do your job also.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm; hmm. The building was already renovated when you moved in, so it was not renovated while you were in there...

Mr. Askew: No.

Ms. Abraham: ...Right? So you had, I'd say a fairly smooth time maybe with that? Some people have reported, you know, the different things about the building that...

Mr. Askew: Well it still had the window units. It was not renovated like it is now, and I haven't even been in there since it's been renovated, but...

Ms. Abraham: It still had window air conditioning units and...

Mr. Askew: Right; and that was one of the big headaches because when they did some painting they would take those air conditioners out and leave the shell in the windows, and then they'd put different air conditioners back in different places, and that was one thing that was lost in the inventory in the property control.

Ms. Abraham: The air conditioners?

Mr. Askew: Yeah. They were in the wrong... in the wrong place.

Ms. Abraham: Oh.

Mr. Askew: They were there, but they were in the wrong place.

Ms. Abraham: So did you have an assistant who went around trying to...

Mr. Askew: No, I did it myself.

Ms. Abraham: You had to go around and try to figure out where all the air conditioners were and...

Mr. Askew: Yes.

Ms. Abraham: I have a feeling that wasn't the most fun part of your job.

Mr. Askew: I didn't mind it. I'm an early bird. I'd be there by seven o'clock in the morning. Dr. Porter would be there by seven, so if I needed to talk to him I could slip in and talk to him without being bugged by anybody else, and he did his paperwork and hit the road and we traveled together some. We flew to all the branch stations and different times, and then every now and then he would call me in his office, he'd say, 'You've been to these stations. What's going on?' So somewhat of a spy.

Ms. Abraham: So you had a good opportunity to influence policy and... or decision making.

Mr. Askew: Possibly without really knowing it, yes.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. You might not know what you were consulting on, you were just giving information?

Mr. Askew: Yes.

Ms. Abraham: (*laughs*) That sounds interesting. Well, one question I've asked almost everybody that I've interviewed is from the prospective of your work what would you consider the most important thing accomplished in Lloyd-Ricks-Watson?

Mr. Askew: Gosh, I don't know; for me?

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm.

Mr. Askew: It was just taking a brand new program and getting it off the ground and... I hate to say this, but I've heard it's one of the best in the Nation. The third manager is in control of it now, and he's... it's growing, it's being added to, and every farmer in the State looks forward to that day because that's a necessity for them to know what to plant to make the most out of their land.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm; hmm. Well that's great, and I think that's... as far as the interviews I've done I haven't heard that.

Mr. Askew: We've had several other states to copy our program, so that is a pat on the back as far as I'm concerned.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. That's great. Let's see... Well, you mentioned... one of our questions was; who were some colleagues of yours that we should interview concerning your experiences with the building and you mentioned Mary Jones, secretary to Dr. Drapala. Do you have any special memories of Mrs. Jones?

Mr. Askew: More as a neighbor than in the building. She was always quiet, and she would do a lot of statistical analysis for 'Drap', but that was her job so...

Ms. Abraham: Well, you did mention 'Drap.' Do you have anything you'd like to tell us about Dr. Drapala?

Mr. Askew: He was quite a character. I never went to a meeting with him. I was in a meeting with Dr. Hagen, she worked for him, and she was single. We carried her out one night in New Orleans, and carried her out on the town, and he called me in a couple of days later, and he said, 'I want you to... I really appreciate you taking

her out.' He said, 'Y'all really showed her a good time.' Dr. Hagen was just a real gruff person. She majored in Animal Science and then wound up teaching Agricultural Statistics.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. Well we do have a few names, some of which you've mentioned. Some of these people you may not know because of when you started. I don't think you would have known Ms. Dorthea Dickens.

Mr. Askew: No.

Ms. Abraham: Dr. William Giles?

Mr. Askew: Yeah, I knew Doctor... See, I was in school with his daughter, Ginger.

Ms. Abraham: Okay; any particular memories of Dr. Giles in connection with the building?

Mr. Abraham: Except well when... not in the building, no. I was never in the building with Dr. Giles but my wife and I had recently married and Allen Hall had just been opened and Homecoming when they were having a tour of Allen Hall and we went over and toured it and he was in there, and so we visited with him a little bit. Now the only time that I really had a personal experience with Dr. Giles, Dr. Harvey, who was the USDA Senior Soybean Grader housed in Stoneville, Mississippi, came over. He and I worked closely together. Harvey came over for a meeting. I think Zacharias had invited him over to make him an honorary professor or something... some honorarium lunch, dinner... and Harvey called me and asked me could he invite Giles over to my office where they could visit a little bit because he and Giles were real big friends. I said sure. So Harvey came over after lunch one day and sat in my office, and Dr. Giles came in, and they sat there for about two hours and talked, and I was in and out doing things, and every now and then Giles would say, 'Well I need to get up and leave where you can go to work,' and I said, 'No, you just take your time and enjoy yourself.'

Ms. Abraham: (laughs) How about Dr. Charles Lee?

Mr. Askew: I flew on a few trips with Lee, but I really didn't know him well. I think Lee went with... I was going to... Vance's father's funeral and Lee decided to go at the last minute, so I flew on the University plane to New Madrid, Missouri, for that funeral, but...

Ms. Abraham: What about Dr. Mark Keenum? Either when he was a student?

Mr. Askew: Well, I'm sure I ran into Mark when he was a student, but I never really knew him.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. Dr. Louis Wise?

Mr. Askew: I had a lot... a lot of work with Dr. Wise. We flew... when Dr. Harvey retired they had a retirement dinner for him, or an anniversary dinner for his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being employed with the USDA, and my wife and I were going to go to that dinner; it was in Greenville, and Dr. Wise called and said that he was going to go and wanted us to go with him so Dr. and Mrs. Wise, Dr. Foil and Rosalyn, Cheryl and I went to Greenville and about two weeks later Dr. Wise died. And then my wife had sat next to him and talked to him all the way over there, so that really was a shock when he died that suddenly.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. A lot of folks have told stories about him. Apparently he was quite colorful.

Mr. Askew: He... the only really thing that I really remember about him is going in and searching his office for inventory products, and that's...

Ms. Abraham: *(laughs)*

Mr. Askew: ...Now Billie Nowlin, his secretary, and my mother graduated from high school together. So it was almost a kinship there. If I needed anything I could go down there and get advice from Billie. And if I needed anything out of Wise she would get it for me.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm. Well, any particular memories of Billie?

Mr. Askew: Nothing, except she was solid as a rock. She was always there, and any legislator that Dr. Wise needed to talk to or needed to convince to try to help support some program, she could get that done as easily as he could.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. So... because of her years working there and maybe personal characteristics...

Mr. Askew: Right.

Ms. Abraham: ...She could...

Mr. Askew: She knew everybody over this whole campus, and she told me one time her father was called 'Sarg' because he was retired military. But he was in charge of the student housing before the student housing was built where it is now; it was on the bypass of Highway 12, and it was World War II barracks.

Ms. Abraham: Mm-hm.

Mr. Askew: That was student housing, and her father was in charge of that.

Ms. Abraham: Who was her father, I wonder?

Mr. Askew: I have no idea, 'Sarg' is all I know.

Ms. Abraham: I'll have to look and see. I'm assuming Nowlin was her married name probably.

Mr. Askew: Oh, you know? See, she wasn't married.

Ms. Abraham: She wasn't married, so 'Sarg' Nowlin.

Mr. Askew: Mm-hm.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm; interesting.

Mr. Askew: And she lived somewhere down below the Greensburg Center, I'm not sure exactly what house but she lived down there.

Ms. Abraham: You've already mentioned Dr. Foil, and I'm assuming that you didn't know Dr. Baker Andrews.

Mr. Askew: Yeah.

Ms. Abraham: You knew...

Mr. Askew: I knew him uptown, I didn't know him out here but I went to Starkville Café almost every morning and he was always up there drinking coffee and smoking his pipe.

Ms. Abraham: (*laughs*) So you were at the table at the Starkville Café...

Mr. Askew: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Ms. Abraham: The liar's table they called it (*laughs*).

Mr. Askew: Right, right.

Ms. Abraham: You think a lot of business from the Lloyd-Ricks-Watson went on at the liar's table, too?

Mr. Askew: No. No, it was...

Ms. Abraham: Sort of separate?

Mr. Askew: It was not that many people up there from Lloyd-Ricks that came up there.

Ms. Abraham: More local people?

Mr. Askew: Yeah, more local.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. How about Dr. Dean Bunch?

Mr. Askew: Oh yeah. I used to see Dean Bunch a lot uptown, but I enjoyed him. He was... I never did any work with him, and he was... every now and then... you know, but he was a super nice person. He was just a gentleman, that's all he was was a gentleman.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. Dr. Verner Hurt?

Mr. Askew: Well, I worked directly under Hurt when he was the Director, and see? Dr. Brian Baker was the Interim Director between Foil and Hurt, and I knew Dr. Baker, and he was quite a character. He used to sit behind us at the football games. He and his wife had season tickets right behind us, and this is his first year not to have season tickets since he's in the nursing home in Jackson. But, yeah, Dr. Hurt; surprisingly, I did not know he was in line to be the Director. We had been to Atlanta for a Southern Ag Workers' Conference and he was quizzing me on different things coming home about different projects and how things were working with the Variety Testing Program, and then about ten days later he was announced as the new Director so he knew everything that I knew at that point in time which was fine, and anything I needed to tell him which, you know, as long as I did my job in Variety Testing I wasn't bothered. Now, if I had a problem as long as I went and talked to either the Director or Associate Director, then, you know, that was fine. Dr. Helms, Tom Helms, was the next person in line after Porter retired. And so I answered to Helms, but then I answered directly to Hurt also.

Ms. Abraham: So Dr. Helms worked in Lloyd-Ricks, too?

Mr. Askew: Mm-hm.

Ms. Abraham: We didn't have him on our list. Is he still living?

Mr. Askew: Yeah, as far as I know.

Ms. Abraham: And here?

Mr. Askew: As far as I know... he was. Vance would know for sure, but Helms... he was the Head of Entomology, and then they moved him over as Associate Director. But he was a very smooth operator. He... everything ran just super smooth. There were no bumps in the road with him.

Ms. Abraham: Which I guess helped you do your job.

Mr. Askew: Yeah.

Ms. Abraham: You didn't have to do the job for everyone.

Mr. Askew: And there's a lot of personality difference. You know, like I said Helms was real smooth, but Porter was a snap decision maker. He'd make a million-dollar decision in two seconds.

Ms. Abraham: Now, let's see... we don't have him on our list. You're speaking of Dr. ...

Mr. Askew: Walter Porter.

Ms. Abraham: Okay.

Mr. Askew: He followed Dr. Giles at Stoneville as the Superintendent of the Delta Branch, and then Giles brought him over here as the Associate Director of the Experiment Station.

Ms. Abraham: Okay. So he was there your entire ten years?

Mr. Askew: Mm-hm. He was the one that was given the charge to get the Variety Testing Program off the ground.

Ms. Abraham: And you worked for him for part of those ten... well, all of those ten years.

Mr. Askew: Yeah. Directly... I answered directly to him, and when he retired that was when Hurt had taken control as the Director of the Experiment Station and then we were moved to Hay Seed Lab.

Ms. Abraham: Okay. Was Dr. Porter with you?

Mr. Askew: Yes. He's in Jackson and Madison. His wife died a couple of years ago. Cheryl and I went to the visitation, and he's the same old Porter, he hasn't changed a bit, strictly military.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm.

Mr. Askew: Ramrod straight and he gives you all the opportunity in the world to do your job, but if you mess up one time that's it; he's finished with you.

Ms. Abraham: So you don't even get the even one strike...

Mr. Askew: Mm-mm.

Ms. Abraham: ...Much less three.

Mr. Askew: Nope.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm; well that's interesting. And I'm not sure; is that military influence, or just personality?

Mr. Askew: Probably personality.

Ms. Abraham: Probably, or a little of both?

Mr. Askew: Now Porter was an interesting character, he really was.

Ms. Abraham: Hmm. What about Dr. William Bost?

Mr. Askew: Dr. Bost lives in my neighborhood. I know him better from the neighborhood than I did at work. I knew who he was. He was never in Lloyd-Ricks when I was there. Extension was somewhere else, and then when the Bost Building was built, then naturally he was housed there.

Ms. Abraham: Dr. Clarence Dorman?

Mr. Askew: I knew the name, and that's all.

Ms. Abraham: And Dr. C. Dale Hoover?

Mr. Askew: I knew the name; I knew him at church, and I...

Ms. Abraham: Okay.

Mr. Askew: ...And that was about all.

Ms. Abraham: Well that's great.

Mr. Askew: Dean Lindley was in Lloyd-Ricks, and I had a lot of interaction with Dean Lindley and John Thomas. But...

Ms. Abraham: Anything in particular you want to tell us about them?

Mr. Askew: The only thing I remember, Dean Lindley and I were invited to a meeting with Pioneer in Indianapolis, we were going to fly up there, and we were sitting at the airport in Indianapolis waiting to come home. I did not know what Dean Lindley was doing, but he was over there by one of the plate glass windows watching them load the airplanes and I thought he was just interested in airplanes; he was a pilot in World War II; and a few minutes later he came back over and he was sitting next to me and he said, 'I'm ready to go now.' He said, 'I saw my bag and it's going on the airplane.' So (*laughs*)...

Ms. Abraham: (*laughs*) That's funny. And did you say John Tomlinson?

Mr. Askew: No, John Thomas.

Ms. Abraham: John Thomas.

Mr. Askew: John Thomas. No, John Tomlinson, excuse me.

Ms. Abraham: John Tomlinson?

Mr. Askew: Yeah.

Ms. Abraham: We interviewed John Tomlinson.

Mr. Askew: Yeah; John Tomlinson.

Ms. Abraham: Any particular thing you remember about his work or working with him?

Mr. Askew: Nothing except John was always in Jackson and always busy going 90 miles an hour just like he is right now.

Ms. Abraham: (laughs) Yeah; when we interviewed him that came to the floor because he was getting calls that he needed to take. Well, anything that we need to cover that we didn't cover can you think of?

Mr. Askew: I can't think of anything right now.

Ms. Abraham: Well, if you should think of anybody else that we might need to interview or any other details, you can always let us know.

Mr. Askew: Okay.

Ms. Abraham: But we thank you very much.

Mr. Askew: Thank you.

Ms. Abraham: I'm glad you got to do the interview.

Mr. Askew: Oh, I'm glad that's over with.

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