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Bill Wright

William Wright '53
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Westminster Village, Bloomington

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner and I'm the Archivist at Illinois Wesleyan and today is June the 10th, 2010 and we are in Westminster Village and I'm here with Bill Wright and Mr. Wright if you could just introduce yourself, tell us your full name and your association with Wesleyan.

Bill Wright: William Wright, originally from Maywood, Illinois, came to Wesleyan in 1949, intending to stay for two years and then go to the University of Illinois and major in something, had so much fun at Wesleyan, stayed for the four years, and graduated in '53.

Miner: Is that right? Wow. And what was your major?

Wright: Business Administration.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: In fact, my degree is a PhB.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: And they don't give those anymore…[laughs].

Miner: They don't. Do you want to explain to us what the difference is?

Wright: That was a BA without a language—

Miner: Okay.

Wright: —is the difference in it. You did not have to have a foreign language—

Miner: With that—

Wright: —to get a Bachelor of Philosophy.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: To get a BA you had to have a foreign language also, so…

Miner: Why did you think you would come to Wesleyan rather than just going on, just starting at the U of I.

Wright: I came late to the chance to come to college. I was already working at the American Can Company in Maywood and in late July got the information that I would receive a state of Illinois rehabilitation scholarship, which then enabled me to go to school and I had no idea where to go. I never even looked at going to college but my sister who graduated here before I did had considered going to college and had looked at

Wesleyan, so in late July I found out I could go to school so I said I'll go to Wesleyan. It's the only one I knew.

Miner: Hmm.

Wright: I wanted to leave the Chicago area somewhere and so I came to Wesleyan literally thinking that I would then transfer later on.

Miner: Was your sister here or she went somewhere?

Wright: No, no.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: She had considered coming because of some boyfriends [clears throat] and that ended up not happening and she never did go to college.

Miner: Well what—you said you had such a great time, tell me about some of the things that changed your mind, why you stayed after two years.

Wright: Oh…[coughs]…Excuse me. The—1949, the…fraternities at Wesleyan decided to have an experiment. I don't know if you're familiar with that experiment at all.

Miner: I don't know.

Wright: But they had a rush week for 90 days. Instead of one week rush they had it for 90 days.

Miner: Wow…[laughs]

Wright: Wow is right.

[Both laugh]

Wright: It darn near killed 'em.

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Wright: The pledges paid for it later during the year—

Miner: Ohhh.

Wright: Because the actives were all very worn out when that occurred.

Miner: Oh my.

Wright: But with four fraternities, anyone who went through rush went to dinner at the fraternity houses on a regular basis for 90 days instead of one week.

Miner: Wow.

Wright: Which was just delightful because at that time we had no meal program and that gave a lot of free meals.

Miner: Wow.

Wright: Which was very necessary, so that started it then. I will mention someone, as I said, I was able to come on a scholarship and my parents were not able to pay anything at the time so…I could put up I think it was two dollars to go into rush but when it came to pledging a fraternity, it was a five dollar fee and I could not pay it and a classmate of mine by the name of Russ Popejoy, unbeknownst to me, paid it for me, so I was accepted into a fraternity based on his paying for me.

Miner: Well—and your associating with them prior to.

Wright: Eventually I was the President of that fraternity twice.

Miner: Which one?

Wright: Theta Chi.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: And, so—and prior to that had other jobs with them as the Assistant Treasurer and so on which helped me stay in school. I had something—I figured it out one time—I had something like 32 different jobs during the time I was at Wesleyan because I would stay here during the holidays so that—and I'd take other people's meal jobs and things like that so that they went home but I could keep their job going for them, so that was really what happened. I got so many different opportunities to be involved in a lot of different things that by the time the two years went by I stayed for the next two.

Miner: Hmm. That makes a lot of sense.

Wright: Mhmm.

Miner: Why do you think they did that experiment?

Wright: I have no idea. It was just a pleasure for us, a pain for them.

[Both laugh]
Miner: Was that the only year they did that?

Wright: Yes.

Miner: Timing is everything.

Wright: [laughs]…It was the one year they did it.

Miner: That's amazing.

Wright: And never again that I'm aware of. It just was—it didn't work. It was too long, it was too expensive, and it was unnecessary. I guess they wanted to do it so they'd know you better but it was a real pain for them.

Miner: Yeah, sounds like it would be. What else stands out for you about your experience?

Wright: The interesting things that you were able to do at that stage that, as I said, I had various and sundry jobs all over town. If it was legal, I was glad to do it.

[Both laugh]

Wright: And get paid for it or get a meal for it, and I'm not sure that in today's society that's available to someone who doesn't have the money to go to school. This worked out.

Miner: Sure. Were you living in Theta Chi house?

Wright: Yes.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: In fact, the year I got here, 1949, was the opening of Magill Hall, the residence hall for males, and that was the first year it was open and I lived there that first year and then in the Theta Chi house the last three years, so…

Miner: Are you still connected with any of your former fraternity brothers?

Wright: Actually, no. I haven't seen many of them in years and years and years. Russ, the one I mentioned, has passed on.

Miner: Oh, sorry.

Wright: But no. I think we scattered.

Miner: What do you think—what kind of difference did it make for you to go to Wesleyan when you think about it now, I mean, how do you think it would've been different for you if you'd gone to the U of I? What did staying in a liberal arts environment do for you?

Wright: In—at the University of Illinois, I would've been one among thousands. Here I was one among not very many because as small as Wesleyan was when I started—and I'm not sure, it was about a thousand or something like that maybe—but in 1951 was the Korean War and the World War II soldiers and so on and military folks that were in college were pretty well gone by '49, '50 was about the last stage, maybe '51, but then the Korean War hit and Wesleyan dipped down somewhere between 6 and700 people.

Miner: Oh my.

Wright: And when you get that small you have tremendous opportunities to be involved in all kinds of things. Even in spite of all the different jobs that I was running around town, I still had plenty of time to do everything else—

Miner: What'd you do?

Wright: On campus.

Miner: What'd you do?

Wright: Oh, I was the Sports Publicity Director for Wesleyan, which amounted to keeping score at the basketball games. I got paid once.

[Miner laughs]

Wright: Wesleyan paid. It was 50 cents an hour.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Wright: Which was great.

Miner: That is great.

[Both laugh]

Wright: I was the Sport Editor of *The Argus* at the same time but the year that Wesleyan went undefeated in football, our last game was against ISNU and we won and I got a call from the—someone in the Sports Department at the *Chicago Tribune* called and said, "If Wesleyan wins, call us and give us the story." I did. After we won I called the number, told them about it, and a week or so later I got a check in the mail for three dollars.

Miner: Oh my goodness—and a byline in their paper?

[Both laugh]

Wright: No byline

Miner: Oh, okay.

[Both laugh]

Wright: No byline.

Miner: Oh well—

Wright: But it appeared on the second page—

Miner: —three dollars.

Wright: —on the sports page of the *Tribune* on a Sunday morning.

Miner: Wow.

Wright: So that was kind of fun.

Miner: That would be.

Wright: But those are the kind of things that—what were my chances of that happening at the U of I?

Miner: That's the truth, yeah.

Wright: So that, again, was the opportunity to get involved in a number of different things. I did that and one of my friends handled the ushering chores for Wesleyan for all of the plays, things like that, and naturally he would hire me to help as being one of the ushers, so I would hire him to help on sports things, he'd hire me to help on that, once again, things that you wouldn't have an opportunity to do at a big school.

Miner: So you saw some plays too then and…?

Wright: Oh yeah.

Miner: Yeah.

Wright: Wesleyan was—their Music School was as superb at that time as it is today. They put on an opera every year. I remember in particular the year they put on "Carmen", which was extremely good.
Miner: Were they well-attended events?

Wright: Yes.

Miner: So even though it was a smaller community people went to—

Wright: Mhmm.

Miner: Was it all campus people or do you think—

Wright: No.

Miner: —people came from the community?

Wright: The town people came to those also very much so.

Miner: So there was a good feeling between the town and Wesleyan—

Wright: At that time.

Miner: —you think at that time?

Wright: Yeah, I think so.

Miner: —sometimes that's an issue with—

Wright: Mhmm, but as far as I know there was very little animosity. There was more animosity between Wesleyan and Normal.

Miner: [laughs]…which is normal—

Wright: Mhmm.

Miner: —for rivals. Are there other things that stand out you think we should know about?

Wright: I think one of the major things was the fact that they didn't have a meal program at the time. You were on your own to take care of that, so joining fraternities and sororities and so on enabled you to have a place to eat on a regular basis. I had a—I was a house boy at the Alpha Gamma sorority for a number of years. That was one of the jobs but…so it worked out well to be here and be involved.

Miner: That's great. And people on campus got along together? Some campuses there are divisions between groups or—

Wright: No.

Miner: No.

Wright: I don't think I ever had any time to worry about that.

[Miner laughs]

Wright: Seriously, it—I don't remember anything along that line at all. Oh sure, the fraternities in sports and things against each other—that was fun—

Miner: Friendly, friendly rivalry.

Wright: —but there was nothing vicious that I recall. We—and we did get an opportunity here, as you said a liberal arts college, to get subjects that you might not have taken somewhere else, which maybe there wasn't the concentration in your own field but you got plenty of exposure to all kinds of things.

Miner: Does something stand out for you as different from your major that you might not have considered taking if it hadn't been—

Wright: Oh sure.

Miner: Like what?

Wright: Music Appreciation.

Miner: Yeah? Alright…[laughs].

Wright: Which was fun.

Miner: Good.

Wright: And I still enjoy Classical music.

Miner: Oh, and you trace it to that class?

Wright: Oh yeah.

Miner: Yeah.

Wright: Which I had never really paid any attention to.

Miner: Mhmm.

Wright: I am not musically inclined to say the least. They pay me not to sing in church.

[Miner laughs]

Wright: That type of a background in music, so—no but I've always enjoyed the music.

Miner: That's great.

Wright: Yeah, that's probably where I really first heard a great deal of it other than pop music, so—I was trying to think of something else. I wrote some things down. I don't know if I got—if I mentioned them.

Miner: Oh sure.

Wright: Oh the—no I think I got it all.

Miner: That's great, you're prepared.

Wright: But it was interesting, the—some of the things that occurred then that might not occur now—Murry Stamper Funeral Home.

Miner: The what?

Wright: Murry Stamper Funeral Home.

Miner: Okay.

Wright: It was directly across the street from the Theta Chi house on Main Street and late, anytime after nine 'o clock or so on—they had the ambulance service also out of the funeral home and if they would get a call [requiring mortuary assistance] and there were—there was one person working there or at most two—an accident out on the highway or something like that, they would call over to the fraternity house and whoever took the call usually ran over and took the job and it was $3 if there was no blood, $5 if there was blood for the ambulance call.

Miner: What did you have to do?

Wright: You were the second one—the ambulance driver and then if you had to carry somebody out, you'd be the other end of the stretcher pair and so on and so forth.

Miner: Oh my.

Wright: And the most interesting thing was if the person who took the phone call didn't want to do it, didn't need the money or didn't care to do that or wasn't able to, you would just holler out, "Ambulance call!" and then duck because here come everybody running for the door to be the first one out to get over there to get the money.

Miner: [laughs]…Everybody wanted the job.

Wright: Mhhm—not everybody, but those who needed the money.

[Both laugh]

Wright: It was a way to get some extra. That's, as I said, when most of the G.I.'s were there—

Miner: Sure.

Wright: —and they were waiting for the monthly check to come and there was a lot of folks in college at that stage that were very short—

Miner: Sure.

Wright: —short of money. That's one of the things that happened at Wesleyan…[laughs]…that you wouldn't think would happen many places.

Miner: Oh my goodness, yeah.

Wright: And I'm sure it isn't happening today but—because we have ambulance services in town but there were none then. They were run by the funeral home.

Miner: It's an interesting juxtaposition of ideas—a funeral home and an ambulance service…[laughs]…Wow, that's amazing.

Wright: That's one you might not have heard of before…[laughs].

Miner: I have never heard that before, thank you so much.

[Both laugh]

Wright: That one just popped into my head but—

Miner: Oh my. Well, if that's—does that bring us to about a close for you?

Wright: I think so, sure.

Miner: Alright, well thank you so much for sharing your stories. It's been wonderful talking with you.

Wright: Okay.

Miner: Thanks a lot.