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Jerry Stone

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Oral History Interview with Jerry Stone
Bloomington, Illinois, January 23, 2012

Meg Miner: Good afternoon. My name is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University, and today is January 23rd. I'm in the home of Dr. Jerry Stone, right near Wesleyan's campus, and Dr. Stone, if you could start out by telling us your full name and your affiliation with Illinois Wesleyan, we'll get started.

Jerry Stone: My name is Jerry H. Stone and I was at Illinois Wesleyan University for many years, from 1964 until I retired in 1992. I started out as Assistant Professor of Religion and within about three years became full Professor of Religion, and then I became Director of Liberal Studies. Four or five years before I retired I returned to just teaching.

Miner: Back in the Religion Department?

Stone: I'll explain that as we go along.

Miner: Okay.

Stone: I crossed over into different departments, for example I taught Medieval History in the History Department and then later I taught interdisciplinary courses. I'll explain that as we go along.

Miner: Sounds interesting. Okay.

Stone: So I might tell you something about my personal background, what drew me to Wesleyan in the first place.

Miner: Perfect.

Stone: I was never interested in the academic world when I was in high school so in 1944 I joined the Navy in the Second World War and was sent to the South Pacific. After the war I returned home to Oklahoma and decided to attend the University of Oklahoma under the GI Bill and ended up getting a law degree. I practiced law in Okmulgee, Oklahoma where my dad was in the insurance and real estate business. After about four years of practicing law I looked out of my office window one day at the people walking around the downtown square and thought, you know, that's what I'm going to be doing forty years from now. And so I decided -- I won't tell the whole story -- but I decided to go to seminary and study theology. And so I went to Garrett Theological Seminary on the Northwestern Campus in Evanston, Illinois. And there I met my wife -- Judy was enrolled there too -- and we were married at the end of that summer, 1955. At Garrett we met Sam Laeuchli, a marvelous man who taught there, who came from Switzerland. And he came from Basel, Switzerland and he was teaching History of Christianity there. But he was also an artist and an accomplished piano player and he knew a lot about Western art. It was through him that I became interested in art and culture and its relationship to religion. And during those years -- by this time I had decided to get a doctorate -- Judy and I had three children. I learned some Greek and I grew closer to Sam Laeuchli who wanted me to go to Basel, Switzerland to write my dissertation. And Judy, as adventuresome as I, wanted to go too despite the fact that our children were one, three and five years old. So we went to Switzerland where we became enthralled with learning another language, German, and we became even more interested

in art and in the history of art. We bought a car and traveled to a lot of places including around the Mediterranean seeing the great art of antiquity.

Miner: Yes.

Stone: And with that I decided I would like to teach, to communicate the relationships between all sides of culture including art, history and the history of Christianity. I wanted to look at culture and religion in a more inclusive sort of way. So we came back to the United States after two years and I served a church in Oklahoma because I belonged to that conference but I knew what I really wanted was a teaching position. At that time, Jim Whitehurst was still at Illinois Wesleyan and so was Bill White, the chaplain.

Miner: Yes.

Stone: Wesleyan had an opening in the Religion Department at that time. Jim and Bill had known me at Garrett and they wanted me for that position. So I came to Wesleyan from Oklahoma for an interview and by the end of the day Lloyd Bertholf had hired me and given me a contract –

Miner: Oh.

Stone: all in one day.

Miner: Oh my.

Stone: So that's how I got to Wesleyan. And now I would like to interpolate something here –

Miner: Of course.

Stone: in terms of the Religion Department and the changes in it in the years I was here. I do not mean any of what I'm going to say as a judgment for or against what a Religion Department ought to be, and what kinds of people ought to comprise a Religion Department. But we all four of us in the department had our PhDs through Northwestern University and Garrett Theological Seminary. We were all four ordained Methodist ministers. Some of the faculty thought this was not good, that the department needed more diversity --.

(Miner chuckles)

Stone: -- which it did. But nevertheless, I think we had a good and high quality Department of Religion. I think about that though when I look at what's happened in the department since that time. The first replacement was Carole Myscofski, a very broadly-based academically-centered person and the first woman in the department. Brian Hatcher, who recently left Wesleyan, replaced me. His undergraduate degree was in chemistry then he went to Yale, I think it was, for his theological degree and then he decided he was really interested in Eastern religions. He spent two years in India and developed a reading knowledge of Sanskrit, which is the language in which the Bhagavad Gita and other Asian texts were written.

Miner: Hm

Stone: And on and on –

(Miner chuckles)

Stone: -- so the Religion Department has become a very cosmopolitan place, and I don't mean that in a negative sense, but it was a big change.

Miner: So for the curriculum, when there were four Methodist ministers delivering the curriculum, were there Eastern studies, courses on that as well? Is that what you see as the change, the sort of, the geographic and academic approach to these texts or...?

Stone: Yes, and a much more technical, efficient treatment of the subjects because the only way we can understand and teach Asian religions is through reading some of the basic texts ourselves. Since none of us had the language skills or the technical background we used books such as the one Huston Smith wrote on world religions. So it's just been a big change.

Miner: Right.

Stone: So that's how I first got involved at Wesleyan. As I became very much interested in Literature, I taught courses on Albert Camus in adult education courses around town.

Miner: So not necessarily affiliated with Wesleyan but through other –

Stone: Yeah.

Miner: -- institutions.

Stone: Right, right, right.

Miner: Well let me ask you, if I could, about your interest in art and history and religion and how these relate.

(Stone coughs)

Miner: Were you able then to bring those elements into your classes when you came to Wesleyan? It seems to me that that would be a perfect fit for a liberal arts institution.

Stone: Yes.

Miner: Were you able to realize that dream and develop that interest further in your students as it was, I take it, developed in you –

Stone: Yeah, yeah.

Miner: -- by a teacher?

Stone: Right, right, was I ever –

(Miner laughs)

Stone: -- able to do that. One of the ways I did that is that -- sometime in the early 70's I guess it was (I'd have to get out my datebook on that) I became Director of Liberal Studies which replaced the old Humanities Division. I had pretty much the same responsibilities as the Chair of the Humanities Division had but I had a different title.

Miner: I would like to hear more about it, please.

Stone: The old Division of Humanities which included the English Department, the Religion Department, the Foreign Languages Department and the Philosophy Department. There was a Division of Natural Sciences which would be history, business, political science and sociology and the Division of Social Science which was chemistry, mathematics, biology. I may not have all that quite right.

Miner: That's okay.

Stone: Yeah. And I became Director of Liberal Studies. We began developing team-taught courses in which we looked at different periods of history from the perspective of say music, religion, philosophy, literature – all of those areas -- to try to understand, let's say, the Renaissance period from all those perspectives. That's where my background in Europe was so important because I really knew quite a bit about these areas from my study and from my travels in Europe. I used my slides of Romanesque, Gothic and Greek art that I'd taken. In these team-taught courses we came together for lectures on different areas of the humanities once a week then split into four or five smaller groups each with its own teacher.

Miner: And were those classes, then, still small sized, so you had four teachers, maybe, working with one particular period of time? But how many students were attending or working with this team?

Stone: I would say we would probably average maybe fifteen or twenty students in each section then we all came together once a week.

Miner: Right. Sounds perfect.

Stone: Yeah, so that was a big part of my life at Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: That type of teaching or working through the division structure? Or are you referring to the team teaching being a big part?

Stone: Yeah, and working in the division structure.

Miner: That's what I thought. Okay.

Stone: I was, we were in a position there to attract and ask other faculty members to participate. Another thing that I was very much involved in along these very same lines of art and religion was the introduction sometime in the 70's of a Fine Arts Course. Every student had to take one; it was part of the basic curriculum course requirements to take one course of the fine arts. I don't know if that's still the case anymore.

Miner: It is.

Stone: Okay.

Miner: There's some discussion about whether that should be applied fine arts -- so having students make art of something –

Stone: Yeah, yeah, which would be ideal if it—

Miner: Is that what you were referring to?

Stone: No, the way we did it was we -- a person could enroll in a fine arts course –

Miner: Okay.

Stone: -- or they could take a special fine arts course I developed at Wesleyan. It was organized around a television series called "Civilization." I don't know if you've heard of that -- we've got it at Wesleyan.

Miner: I have not.

Stone: "Civilization" by Kenneth Clark was the history of art from the end of the Middle Ages until modern times. We met two hours a week, I think it was or sometimes longer, and the students had to attend a designated number of fine arts events on campus -- a drama at McPherson Theater maybe see an art exhibit, or listen to a concert and keep a journal on what they had learned from the event and what the event meant to them. During class the students watched an hour-long segment of the "Civilization," we discussed it, then the students took a machine-graded test on the film. So that's the way it was. And there were about 90 students in the class. With the addition of that class I was servicing more students than any other faculty member at Wesleyan. It was pass-fail because it was too hard to grade much beyond that.

Miner: You saw where my thoughts were going.

Stone: Yeah, right.

(Miner laughs)

Stone: In the 70's, I think it was, the Student Senate initiated a Fine Arts Festival and asked me to be the faculty advisor. One of the students who had incredible connections managed to bring Frank Capra here one year and Larry McMurtry another. I remember that McMurtry told some funny stories about the problems of making movies from his books. A well-know poet -- oh, his name escapes me -- was here another year. As I recall these Fine Arts Festivals lasted about three years. You know, different students in the Senate, different interests.

Miner: Yeah, of course, that's natural.

Stone: Another thing I was involved in was the short term. And what was interesting to me was how many people were opposed to the short term. I think Lloyd Bertholf finally just made the announcement, "We're going to do it."

Miner: Why do you think there was opposition to that?

Stone: I think one of the main reasons was that it's short, the time. There were some people who felt that, you know, you couldn't teach a course in that short time that would be a full course. But short term made travel trips possible; students could spend hours in the labs or practicing music or working on art projects. It opened new opportunities for students. When I was on the Curriculum Committee we moved from the course credit system to a module system.

Miner: Please explain that.

Stone: In the old course credit system a student could earn one to three credits for each course. Each module was three hours long so all courses carried the same weight.

Miner: Yeah.

Stone: And oh, was there resentment to that idea. Some of these two-hour and one-hour courses taught material faculty thought students needed but what finally happened was that professors found ways to merge those subjects into other courses, you know, that they were teaching. So it all worked out. And I never hear anybody complain about the course module system any more.

Miner: Change is never easy.

Stone: No, no –

Miner: But sometimes on the other side of it, it doesn't look too bad.

Stone: No, no, that's right. And then another thing that was significant about that whole period was the development of the January short term system that so people didn't like -- well, we were talking about that a minute –

Miner: Right—

Stone: -- ago, I think.

Miner: Yeah.

Stone: But I wanted to come back to that system because for me personally it opened many opportunities. In January 1969 I was the exchange professor with St John's College, a Benedictine college in Minnesota, and Illinois Wesleyan. But of even more significance it meant I could take groups of students to Europe for a whole month, spend a week each in Paris and London, visiting museums and studying Medieval, Renaissance, and Impressionist art. The course was an interdisciplinary one in which students could get credit in art, history or religion. And we would go to the French Impressionist Museum in Paris and see how whole cultural attitudes were changing from religious-based to secular based ones which you can see, just so clearly, and you can see how much the Impressionist period has affected us as human beings today. And it was always to me, teaching wasn't just to learn about one field but to see how these fields fit together.

Miner: Yes, those connections are the fascinating things.

Stone: Yeah, right, right.

Miner: And it's so interesting that you could do that in the environment where it's just so present, I mean you're smelling and seeing and --

Stone Yes!

Miner: -- and hearing all these things.

Stone: Yes. And also, for the course I wrote a monograph, 'The World of the 12th Century as Expressed in its Art Forms," using slides I'd taken from trips and also for some courses I taught in Medieval History.

Miner: Was short term the beginning of our study abroad opportunities do you think?

Stone: I, I think, I don't, I –

Miner: Was it something before?

Stone: I don't think so.

Miner: We do that sort of thing today in May. So that's –

Stone: Yes, I --

Miner: From January to May.

Stone: I'm very much aware of that.

Miner: Did that transformation take place under your time as well?

Stone: No, no it didn't.

Miner: Oh, okay. (Chuckles)

Stone: One of the reasons I might have objected to it, making the change, and I don't know what the reasons were for making it, but one of the minuses insofar as I'm concerned is the fact that it is so much more crowded in Europe in May than in January.

Miner: Well, that's true.

Stone: And in January we usually had pretty good weather. It wasn't that bad, but we had the -- it was so much easier to get in say, to Notre Dame or Chartres, or other places that time of year.

Miner: That's an interesting point.

Stone: Yeah.

Miner: I'm going to pause this for a moment and we'll come right back in a minute. [Brief break in interview]

* * * * * * * * * *

Stone: Another thing I would like to comment on is the changes in Wesleyan, the progress at Wesleyan, over the years that I was involved, and during the last twenty years since I've been retired. I've been retired since 1992. But I always had the feeling that Wesleyan was a highly productive university with -- an increasing growth in its faculty quality and -- level of student ability. I feel that very strongly, and I felt that a key reason was the leadership we had, especially under Bob Eckley. Bob Eckley came while I was here, in '68, I think.

Miner: That's right.

Stone: And I have really, really appreciated his presence here and the basic stability that he brought. Maybe he didn't have as much -- I don't know how to say it -- I think some people thought he needed to have more flair and more imagination in terms of creative programs. But I think he understood himself very well and didn't see his role -- that's what the faculty is there to do, and an academic dean is there to do. I'm not saying that he couldn't have done them.

(Miner chuckles)

Stone: I'm saying that what he brought was probably essential to us in terms of his stability and his knowledge of the outside world and how to go about raising money and all those sorts of things. And he had good judgment, he had very good judgment. I've personally felt very close to Bob -- he was an important person in my life -- and so was Wendell Hess. Wendell was the academic dean under Eckley and then became acting president after Eckey retired. He was also a significant part of the university in the way he held things together and kept us on a forward course. In my judgment Wendell would have made a good permanent president. I felt very close to Wendell and he is still a close friend. I recently read Nell Eckley's comments in her oral history about doing things to beautify the campus. I happened to be on the committee that was involved with that and she was a very important resource. The committee's plan to reconfigure the sidewalks set the groundwork for the development of the trees and everything else, and I thought that was really something. Nell and Bob's interest in beautifying the Quad probably led to its being called the Eckley Quad.

Miner: Well, as a person who enjoys walking on the Quad and feeling like you're in a park, I thank you for your work.

Stone: Yeah, yeah. (Laughs)

Miner: It's a beautiful space.

Stone: It is.

Miner: Yes.

Stone: In the warm weather -- I still, when I can get out, I still love to go over and stroll through that park.

Miner: It's a wonderful feeling of open space and then the campus that allows your brain to perhaps go away a little bit from the academic rigors and search for the art and the beauty –

Stone: Yeah.

Miner: -- in the world that we all live in.

Stone: Yeah, yeah.

Miner: That's wonderful, that's a great memory.

Stone: Yeah, it is. And I really like the new buildings that have gone up since 1968, the science building, the social science building, Shirk, the renovation of the Hansen Center. I really like their architecture. And I also have -- I don't know him well, but I have very strong and positive feelings about our new president.

Miner: Well, so you had experiences as Director of Liberal Studies then, for almost your entire time here?

Stone: Some big part of it.

Miner: Some big part of it. And then you also said you developed a summer program for seniors in our community so that was a way that
Illinois Wesleyan was touching the community during your time as well. So –

Stone: The adult seminars were open to people of any age, not just seniors. Participants ranged in age from mid-twenty to the early seventies.

Miner: You want to talk a little bit about the adult seminars and what topics they were about -- those seminars?

Stone: They were week-long and each had 30 to 40 participants led by 4-5 faculty. The theme for the first one was The Crisis in Contemporary Values and the second year Death and Dying. Death and Dying began very dramatically. Mid-way through the dinner that opened the seminar, Ed Noll, a professor of sociology dropped dead.

Miner: How awful!

Stone: It was awful. Ed left the table in the Arnold Cabana, walked around the front of Memorial Center and fell to the sidewalk. As it happened our son, Jeff, had just pulled to the front of the building to pick up my wife when he saw Ed fall. He ran into the building for help just about the time my wife came around the building to meet our son, saw Ed and summoned his wife, Kay. Judy went to the hospital with Kay but Ed was dead on arrival.

Miner: What a shock to everyone -- what a way to begin a seminar on Death and Dying.

Stone: I'll say. But to continue -- I can't remember the topic for the third seminar. Shortly before it began I went to Mayos for emergency surgery so was not able to coordinate it. But I did arrive home in time to participate in its last days. That was the last year we did it.

Miner: Is there any other way you were involved with the community you want to talk about, or...

Stone: The first several years I was at Wesleyan I pastored the Union Church in Cooksville. It involved preaching every Sunday and visiting people in the hospital. Happily almost all who

went to a hospital chose one in Bloomington/Normal. I visited parishioners now and then, but not very much.

Miner: How long were you there?

Stone: Four years. The church was a union of the Church of Christ and -- I forget the other denomination. Many members of the congregation had relatives in the small Methodist church in town so it made sense to some of us to merge the two congregations. As a Methodist pastor I was able to facilitate that move.

Miner: Which put you out of a job.

Stone: Right. Then some years later I was interim pastor at -- oh my, I've forgotten the name of the church -- it was the small Christian church on the corner of, I think, East St and Market -- I'm not even sure if I've got that right. The little church is still there.

Miner: How long were you there?

Stone: About six months as I remember. They found a permanent minister.

Miner: So you were out of a job again.

Stone: That's right.

Miner: Any other ways you were involved in the community?

Stone: For several years I taught courses on Albert Camus at different venues -- Adult Education and some women's group at ISU -- I've forgotten the name of the group. Every now and then someone will remind me that they first met me when I taught a class on Camus.

Miner: I bet that's interesting to you.

Stone: It sure is -- I have no memory all these years later -- who was in those classes.

Miner: So you were involved in a variety of things in the community.

Stone: Yeah.

Miner: Anything else?

Stone: Well, there was a YMCA survey on Bloomington's west side that I was involved in when I first came. As I remember I recruited students to go door to door with some kind of survey -- uh -- I can't remember the purpose of the survey -- too many years ago. I do remember that my family and I distributed Mid-Central Community Action's newsletter. As I became more and more involved in the University -- I was on just about every committee at one time or another -- my focus turned away from the community. Oh, I did teach adult Sunday school classes at our church and I preached there now and then.

Miner: What church do you attend?

Stone: 1st Presbyterian, Normal. But since my illness has advanced and I'm no longer mobile, we no longer go to church.

Miner: Do you miss it?

Stone: Oh my yes, especially a Thursday morning book group. But what's interesting -- six of the people who visit me regularly are part of that class. So although Judy and I no longer attend the class, people in the class come to us.

Miner: They must be good friends.

Stone: They sure are. Then after I retired from Wesleyan I taught one semester at Heartland College -- I taught comparative religions there. You know, I'm getting a little bit tired right now.

Miner: Okay. And thank you for spending so much time with us today, and sharing your stories. It's been fascinating.

Stone: Okay.

Miner: Thank you.

Stone: I hope so. I wish my voice had been better.

Miner: Oh you did great.

Stone: Well, I hesitated on things and I've forgotten a lot but that's -- I'm just getting to be an old, sick man.

Miner: Uh huh. Well, I think it was really great, thank you so much.

Stone: Oh, you bet.