



2017

## Dennie Bridges

Dennie Bridges '61

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Bridges '61, Dennie, "Dennie Bridges" (2017). *All oral histories*. 70.  
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## Oral History by Dennie Bridges

(written December 1, 2016; recorded January 3, 2017)

I have been connected to Illinois Wesleyan almost without a break for the past 60 years. I was recruited to Illinois Wesleyan as a student athlete by Coach Jack Horenberger in the spring of 1956 and enrolled at the school in the fall of 1957.

The Tuition at Illinois Wesleyan in 1957 was \$490 a year and Coach Horenberger offered me a \$250 athletic scholarship with the understanding that I would attempt to play three varsity sports – football, basketball and baseball. The school would raise tuition \$100 a year for my next three years and Coach Horenberger then gave me a \$100. raise each year. This was a 22.2% tuition raise – now our school has some “angst” each year as we announce raises of 3.9%.

I chose Illinois Wesleyan pretty much because of athletics, it was either here or Illinois State Normal University who was also recruiting me. I entered school as a math major with the thought that I could be a math teacher and a coach. It seems as if as I became a successful high school athlete everyone said “Dennie is going to be a coach” and I just bought into that idea. I was woefully unprepared for college math, my high school math grades had been really good, but my high school math teacher was my coach and he just allowed me to “skate” to good grades. Back then Illinois Wesleyan had a P.E. major, so after one semester, with the help of a compassionate and caring math teacher Dr Homer Maxey, I escaped math for P.E.

My first three semesters at school academically were essentially an escape act. As a freshman I somehow got enrolled in 5 hour Botany class taught by Dr. Dorthea Franzen. Dr Franzen was a truly outstanding professor and a strict taskmaster. At one point she saw me on campus and told me that if I missed one more lab that I would flunk. I told her that our baseball team was playing at the University of Illinois the next week and that I was going to miss lab to play in the game. She

said “Dennis, you need to decide which is more important baseball or botany” I told her that “ I already knew”--- I played in the Illinois games and I told my roommate that Dr. Franzen really like me and that she wouldn’t flunk me – I do think she liked me, but she flunked me and 5 hours of F was really tough on my Grade point average.

I was the first from my family to attend college . I grew up in a tiny farm town, so I was thrust into a totally different social world. I knew nothing at all about fraternities, but the Greek system was really strong at that time and I was recruited heavily to join. As I look back, pledge hazing at that time was over the top to the point of being bullying. It probably was a good thing for me, being the “star athlete” having to deal with being humbled and sometimes worse by the active members. The fraternity experience taught me some much needed social graces. Fraternities back then and later when I was a coach at Illinois Wesleyan were a big recruiting tool for the university. Almost the entire social calendar at the school was built around the Greek system.

My impression is that the Greek system today is much less dominant and the hazing system has been pretty much eliminated or positively reformed.

As a freshman football player I had my first interaction with African Americans. Ray Morgan and Luther Bedford were Black athletes on the football team from Rockford Illinois. I don’t recall having a personal conversation with a black person until I met Luther and Ray. There were no black athletes on the basketball or baseball teams. A Sociology prof tried to talk Ray Morgan into going out for the baseball team to challenge our baseball team’s ability to take an annual spring trip through Mississippi and Alabama and on to New Orleans. The southern colleges at that time would not have scheduled us if we had a Black player on the team. Ray would not go along with this plan.

I lived in Magill Hall as a freshman where I met two Jewish students. One asked me point blank what I thought of Jews. I answered that I had not thought at all about it. I said that the only thing I had ever heard back in Anchor Illinois was the phrase, “don’t let him Jew you down.” I had no idea this was a slur on Jewish people.

It turns out that I was successful in all three sports, winning 11 varsity letters, missing my sophomore year in football with an injury. Sports was my dominant extra curricular activity along with my fraternity membership. I’m certain I missed out on lots of “on campus “ activities ---but on the positive side, in the fall I had close friendships with football teammates, in the winter close friendships with basketball teammates and in the spring close friendships with baseball players.

These teammate friends were from all different fraternities so I spent lots of time at all of the fraternity houses.

Dr. Ann Meirhoffer was the Dean of Students back then. She was a strong Dean and was feared a bit, but was well liked. I, and other students often seemed close to being “broke” financially. The Deans office would loan students \$5 with the understanding that if they would pay it back in a week all was good. If you kept it an extra week the re-payment would be \$10, a 3<sup>rd</sup> week \$15 up to 5 weeks which would be \$25. Non payment then would hold up your transcript. Looking back this was 100% interest per week – even so, on Friday afternoons we often went for the \$5 loan.

In the spring of my senior year after a baseball game, Coach Horenberger called me to his office to tell me that he had talked to the President and was planning to

bring me back to campus as soon as possible to coach our basketball team. He would give up basketball coaching and concentrate on being Athletic Director and coaching baseball. I was floored. I had no idea that this was even a possibility. Without any coaching experience he was handing me a college coaching job -- it turns out handing me my life's work.

After coaching in high school for three years, I returned to coach at my Alma Mater in 1964. My salary the first year at Illinois Wesleyan was \$6,500 – at the time of my retirement it was \$124,000 – the product of 55 Years of 3 or 3 ½ % raises. Coach Horenberger retired in the early 80's – his highest salary ever was \$21,400 --- yet he felt he had the greatest job in the world.

My college acceptance letter sent to me May 30 , 1957 was from Dr . Merrill J Holmes the Illinois Wesleyan President. Dr Holmes was nearing the end of his presidency.

I did not really know Dr Holmes at all, but Coach Horenberger tells of going to see him to ask about the school buying a bus to travel our athletic teams. Dr. Holmes responded , “Mr Horenberger, we are in the education business not the transportation business.

President Holmes was followed in the presidency by Dr. Lloyd Bertholf. I viewed Dr. Bertholf as having a strong religious background and indeed at that time we were closely connected to the Methodist Church. In speeches I have often said that Dr. Bertholf's significant achievement was agreeing to hire me to coach the basketball team! It was during his presidency that our athletic conference decided to abandon athletic scholarships and move to need based financial aid. Our coaches were distraught. They had been allowed to share something like 20 times tuition to divide up in full or partial athletic scholarships to award to recruits. (Coach Horenberger got me with a half scholarship to play three sports – I think I needed a better agent!) It turned out that the need based plan was much better. We could recruit as many athletes as we wanted and give them all financial aid if there was a proven financial need. Once in a while we would not be able to give an athletic scholarship to a really outstanding player who had no need and lose him – but over all need based aid was much better for our teams.

Dr. Bertholf was succeeded by Dr. Robert Eckley. Dr. Eckley was an economist, coming to us from a successful business career at Caterpillar Tractor Co. Dr. Eckley had the greatest ability to say no when it came to money matters than any person I've ever known. When I succeeded Coach Horenberger as Athletic Director and was adding the Athletic Director responsibilities to my basketball coaching duties, his plan was to not increase my salary at all. I was being asked to double my work load and dramatically increase my responsibility-- with no added compensation. When I challenged this his answer was, "at Illinois Wesleyan we don't suddenly raise an employees salary and at the same time we don't suddenly cut an employees salary. He finally agreed to give me a \$1000. raise. In my early years as AD, sometimes I would approach him with a financial request and he would often say, "Dennis, obviously we can't do this --- " Later as I gained a bit of self confidence I would challenge him by saying, "Dr. Eckley, it if was obvious I would not be asking".

In the Eckley years we did not add a large number of buildings , and when we did was pretty much a "pay as you go" proposition. We added Fred Young Fieldhouse and the Science building in an agreement whereby Country Companies temporarily used the buildings on campus while waiting for their new home office building to be built --- then the shells of the buildings were handed off to us to convert to our use. We also added the Sheehan Library , the Aquatic Center and the Chapel.

Dr. Eckley was in firm command of the faculty. I felt that it was his view that the faculty's job was to teach while he did the administering. His tight fist ed economic policies were the basis for our school's strength through the years.

Dr. Eckley was followed by Dr Wayne Anderson ---- for a short "failed" presidency. When he was hired the faculty was excited in that he told them everything they

wanted to hear – but then he seemed somewhat uninterested in the job and he was quickly replaced.

Minor Myers Jr. was hired in 1989 to succeed Wayne Anderson. President Myers was somewhat a “visionary” who pushed hard to raise the university’s profile as a national university. He was the extreme opposite of Dr. Eckley in many ways. He was a product of Academia, with a professorial resume. He involved the faculty to a much greater degree in the running of the school than did Dr. Eckley. Where Dr. Eckley would be characterized as a financial “saver” , President Myers was a spender. He made the faculty happy by significantly cutting their teaching load. During his tenure we would build Shirk Center for Athletics and recreation, the Center for Natural Science, convert the Memorial Gymnasium into the Hanson Student Center and build the Ames Library ; he also acquired a city block of land to build the Jack Horenberger Baseball Field.

President Myers was a full speed ahead-- foot to the floor optimist who sometimes considered a donation pledge as money in the bank. Some of these pledges did not materialize, leaving parts of projects unpaid for -- causing a financial strain on the University. In his tenure we spent well over 100 million dollars on campus construction and all of the buildings are outstanding.

For the purpose of architectural firm selection, I wrote the planning document for the Shirk Center. This was a 15.5 million dollar project and the plans were absolutely program driven rather than budget driven. The Shirk Center became the model for many Div III schools to aspire to --- dozens of Athletic Directors came to campus to tour the building. They often were accompanied by their college president – when I would make the point that we made all decisions based on program rather than budget – they warned their AD that that was “dreaming”. An example was my inclusion of a “practice gym” to supplement the Performance Arena and the Activity Center. The idea to have a 2<sup>nd</sup> gym was

really appealing --- but I felt that there might be some negotiating in reaching the final plan and the practice gym could be a negotiating chip--- nobody ever asked to negotiate. We now wonder how we could operate without this gym. Many schools, because of strict budget restraints built compromises, on one of our site visits I recall an AD telling me the day they moved into their new facility the football locker room was “out-dated”. How sad was that!

The most significant feature of the Shirk Center was building separate spaces for the basketball arena and the running track. Up until this time Athletic Centers were built with the basketball arena inside the running track so you had to build “only one room”. If there was a basketball game --- all other activity was shut down and the fan seats were far away from the court. Instead of a performance court inside the track , we built four activity courts. We then built a basketball arena to stand alone.

The order of Presidents was perfect, Dr Eckley was frugal and led the university to a strong financial foundation – President Myers came next and spent resources building wonderful facilities.

Illinois Wesleyan did indeed achieve increased national recognition under President Myers leadership. It was sad when he died at age 61. He lamented to me the fact as a lifetime non-smoker he had lung cancer.

Dick Wilson was hired to succeed Minor Myers as president. His credentials included a successful career as a Vice President and Assoc. Chancellor for development at the University of Illinois.

The Perfect order of presidents continued, as President Wilson was an effective fund raiser and a manager who worked to set our school’s financial house in order. The construction slowed a bit as President Wilson reverted to the Eckley policy of not building until the funds were in --- the high tech State Farm classroom building, the Joslim Atrium, the Gates Housing Units and the Shirk Center expansion all happening under President Wilson’s watch.

As Athletic Director I had a closer working relationship with President Wilson than with either President Myers or Eckley. He guided our school through difficult economic times while interacting warmly with both the faculty and the students. His decision to retire at the same time I did made retiring easier for me.

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The closing of city streets had a significant effect on the footprint of our school. When I was a student here in 1957 --- East street ran north and south through campus just east of Memorial Center with parking allowed on the east side of the street. University Street ran east and west just north of Presser Hall and the Buck Library with Parking on the North side of the street. The quad had a bit of a look of a parking lot. In the 1960's the city allowed us to close those streets which made our quad more defined, much prettier and safer. In recent years we were allowed to close Graham street to facilitate the building of the Ames Library as well as Beecher street south of MaGill Hall for safer student access to campus and to allow for the creation of the Egbers Walkway.

On campus we had moved from the Buck Library to the Sheehan Library to the Ames Library. The last move being a giant jump forward. Buck was converted to a computer lab while Sheehan was torn down.

Sheehan was built on the site where Old North the original Illinois Wesleyan classroom had stood. Old North was torn down to make way for Sheehan. I had a British Literature class in Old North with Professor Schultz. The exterior of the building was a crumbling grey brick, the floors rickety and the hot water heating system clanking. Sheehan was later razed and replaced by the ultra high tech State Farm classroom building. I was disappointed that this classroom was not named New North – but it lost out to the important State Farm sponsor dollars.

My four years of basketball was played in Memorial gymnasium. This was a small gym, with balconies on two sides and a stage at the north end. The floor had about a hundred coats of wax, the interior walls were a “dirty dark” brick with amber wood seats in the balcony. Downstairs were temporary bleachers. It was not a glamorous place to play, but I don’t remember us really being concerned about that –we were just happy to be college basketball players and most of our opponents had similar facilities or played in high school gyms.

Fred Young Fieldhouse was constructed to replace Memorial Gymnasium for men’s basketball. The building was “wedged” into a space on Kelsey street at the east end of the football field . We had been having football and baseball share the same field. After the fall football season ended we would scrape the infield to be ready for baseball in the spring --- after baseball season, we would seed the infield and pray for good growing weather to be ready for next fall’s football season. When Fred Young Fieldhouse was built we had to “squash” the 400 meter running track into sort of a “pregnant” egg configuration rather than an oval. The left field fence was shortened to less that 300’ and the distance to the backstop behind the umpire was only a few feet I once asked Coach Horenberger why they chose that location for Fred Young? He responded that nobody ever consulted him about it. Dr Eckley was in total command.

As we were preparing to move into the new Quonset hut type fieldhouse, Fred Young (an IWU alum who was a nationally famous football official and Sports Editor of the Daily Pantagraph) met with Coach Horenberger to lobby to have the building named after Dr. James Norman Elliot, a former IWU athlete of his era) Coach Horenberger told Mr. Young, “we are not going to do that Fred, we are naming the building the Fred Young Fieldhouse. Mr. Young responded to Coach Horenberger with the quip, “Jack, for once I will happily yield to your wishes.” Fred Young Fieldhouse served us well for almost 30 years – packed house

basketball excitement there was highlighted by the “Jack Sikma” era teams. It was pretty much basketball only –the running track was a square cornered concrete hallway where the athletes had to yell “track”as they approached every corner.

We had a practice football field across Sugar creek from Fred Young. For many years the players had to tiptoe across evenly spaced rocks in the water to get to the field. One day when the creek as a bit high, Coach Bob Keck ordered tackle Karmy Kays to give him a “piggy back” ride across the creek – Kays went half way across and sat down in the water dousing Coach Keck. Later when we took down the ancient wooden light poles from the stadium field, the poles were used to construct a wooden foot bridge across the creek to the practice field.

With the building of the Shirk Center, the Fred Young Fieldhouse was torn down. On a grey winter morning It was sad to watch as the site of so many exciting games tumbled down.

The biggest physical expansion of our school was north of Emerson St. as we replaced the Fred Young Fieldhouse with the Shirk Center. We were able to close Kelsey St. and create a walking promenade between the Shirk Center and the Tucci football stadium. We named the stadium Tucci Stadium upon the addition of an Artificial playing surface a half dozen years ago. All but one of the homes in the area north of Emerson were purchased by the school to make room for the Shirk Center and for campus parking. When we tore down Fred Young Fieldhouse, it was like pulling a fist out to a balloon, the balloon being our odd shaped running track. This allowed us to return to the traditional oval running track – we were thrilled that we were able to “fit” a softball field in the northwest corner of this property. Softball had been sharing a field with soccer, much like baseball had been sharing with football.

In the mid 90's we purchased 13 properties between East St. and Franklin Blvd across Division St. just south of the soccer/softball fields to make room to build a new baseball field. We didn't just build a baseball field, we built a ball Park. The brick walls behind home plate were reminiscent of the brick walls at Wrigley Field. Again we were able to close a street to enhance our campus. Division Street was the dividing line between Bloomington and Normal and was located just north of the left field fence at Horenberger Field. This created a situation where if a player hit a home run he hit the ball "out of town".

The four tennis courts that were on campus when I arrived in the 50's were moved to make way for the new Science building. As a part of the land acquisition for the baseball field we built 7 new tennis courts adjacent to the new baseball field. These courts were made possible because of the generosity of Elmer and Midge Beadles, IWU alums and longtime Titan supporters.

So, we had moved from Memorial gym – through 30 years of Fred Young Fieldhouse – to the Shirk Center and a remodeled synthetic turf football stadium, as well as having expanded to 'stand alone' fields for football, baseball, softball and soccer and added new tennis courts.

When I returned to campus in 1964 the men's and women's athletic departments were administered separately with the women's programs being run by Marian Niehaus. The women had basketball, volleyball, softball, track and Field Hockey.

They had no athletic conference affiliation. In basketball and volleyball they competed in the IAIW (Illinois Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) – I don't remember them ever competing for a championship.

Millikin , Augustana joined me in pushing hard in 1986 to get our women into our conference. The Chicago area schools didn't want to travel downstate to play our women's teams. . We threatened to pull our men's programs out of the CCIW if our women's programs were not granted membership. The conference grudgingly agreed . This conference membership was a big step forward for our women with team championship incentives.

The men's department was headed by Jack Horenberger the Athletic Director, who also coached basketball and baseball. Don Larson coached football as well as swimming, golf and tennis and Bob Keck was head track and wrestling coach and our only full-time football assistant. When I was added to the staff I took over the basketball coaching as well as being another football ass't and I relieved Don Larson of the tennis coaching duties. The first tennis match I coached was the first one I ever saw – so for a period I was a glorified chaperone.

The four of us did it all! We had no Athletic Trainer so we taped all of the ankles and tended to minor wounds, calling Dr. Fred Cunningham with more serious injuries, we did all of the team's laundry, stuffing the dirty gear in the two washing machines and the one dryer we had, (a dryer break down became a huge crisis), except for football we traveled in cars – the coaches car and any players who would volunteer their car for a bit of mileage money, we lined the athletic fields, taught all of the PE classes and recruited players. Ed Alsene was hired by the school the year after my arrival to be a part of the schools Public Relations department and that included SID duties – which was a huge help in taking the stats burden off the coaches.

When Coach Horenberger retired in 1982, Dr Eckley named me to succeed him as Athletic Director. There was a bit of tension in the department at the time, because I was the junior member of the staff. I explained to both Coach Larson and Coach Keck that I was told that the new Athletic Director was going to be either me or an outsider --- leaving me with an easy decision to accept the position. In a short time any angst was behind us and we moved forward.

In 1994 when we moved to the Shirk Center, men's and women's athletics were merged to operate under my direction, with Barb Cothren the women's Athletic

Director moving to the role of Head of the Physical Education Dept and to be Senior Women's Administrator. Barb has told me that privately she had fears that the women's department would be overrun by the men's teams. This did not happen, on the contrary it was the start of a new and exciting time for our female athletes. For many schools Title IX was contentious because women's teams were seen as taking away facilities from men's teams --- here we all moved into the Shirk Center together and able to start fresh sharing all of the facilities

Today we sponsor 11 men's sports and 11 women's sports – we have won four NCAA Women's track National Championships as well as a Women's basketball National Championship. This past year we won or shared 7 of the 11 CCIW Conference championships in Womens' athletics.

As I look back on my years as Athletic Director --- expanding facilities and the development of Women's athletics were the most important successes of my tenure.

On the basketball coaching side, in 1965 Coach Horenberger left me with a team that was returning 4 starters from a championship team so it would have been really hard for me to fail. We got off to a great start by advancing to the NAIA finals in Kansas City in my first year.

The recruiting of Jack Sikma in 1974 was a defining moment in our basketball history. Jack chose Illinois Wesleyan over Purdue, Kansas State and the University of Illinois --- setting the bar high for all future Titan teams. Jack went on to a 14 year All-Star NBA career.

In 1996 our team advance to the NCAA Final Four in Salem, VA and placed 3<sup>rd</sup> – our team returned to Salem in 1997 to win the National Championship.

All three of my children graduated from Illinois Wesleyan – Angie as a nursing major, Steve as a Business major and Eric as a Biology major. Angie was on the tennis team, Steve on the baseball and football teams and Eric on our basketball team. Illinois Wesleyan has been really good to the Bridges family .

I've always been proud of the role athletics has played in the big picture at our school. There was a point where I challenged a small pocket of faculty members for referring to some of our athletes as “dumb football players” It was troubling to me that a few were hung up on this stereotype when many athletes were the best students in their classes. We have been steadfast in holding our recruits to the same entrance standards as the entire student body and particularly after we dropped the physical education major, our athletes competed in the same classes as non-athletes. Only one of my basketball lettermen failed to graduate.

At this point in our history over 40 % of our students are varsity athletes and this is vital in our struggle with enrollment.

I guess my biggest concern as we go forward is our price tag. Our tuition next year will be \$45,654 and is being raised steadily each year --- in 1957 my parents were worried about the \$490 tuition ---

Over the years our school has met every challenge – as I'm confident we will meet today's.