AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WALTERS

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project
Endacott Society
University of Kansas
ROBERT WALTERS

B.S., University of Kansas, geology, 1962

M.S., University of Kansas, geology (please fill in date)

Service at the University of Kansas

First employed at the University of Kansas in (please fill in date)

Research assistant, Geology, (please fill in date)

Manager of Facilities, Center for Research, 1970-2004
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Q: I am speaking with Robert Walters, who retired in 2004 as manager of facilities at the KU Center for Research at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on June 22, 2004. Where were you born and in what year?
A: In 1938.

Q: Where were you born?
A: Lawrence Memorial Hospital.

Q: Oh, really? You’re a native. We don’t find too many of those. What were your parents’ names?
A: My mother’s name was May and my father’s name was Frank.

Q: What was their educational background?
A: Elementary.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?
A: I had two sisters, both older than I.

Q: Did you grow up in Lawrence?
A: Yes.

Q: What was Lawrence like when you were growing up? How was it different than it is now?
A: Less people. Life was centered in the downtown. It was the main shopping center. There was a tradition that people, especially people out beyond city limits, would come in on Thursday evenings and park their cars and watch people walk
by. We don’t do that any more. The city has changed some but not terribly. The changes have been, I think, positive.

Q: What was your father’s occupation?
A: He was a farmer.

Q: So you lived outside of Lawrence on a farm.
A: Yes, until I was about 20.

Q: Did you go to one of those small schoolhouses that used to be in the country around Lawrence?
A: That’s right. The school was named Bismark.

Q: So that would have been east of here.
A: That’s right.

Q: Was it a one-room school?
A: Yes, one room and one teacher.

Q: For eight grades, I suppose.
A: That’s correct.

Q: Do you think such schools provided a pretty good education?
A: I think so. I came in to school in town basically at the junior high level. There was quite a bit of difference between the city schools and the country schools.

Q: Where did you go to junior high in Lawrence?
A: Central Junior High School. It was located at Ninth. There were four buildings. They were all bought and converted to offices. They still remain that way, except one building has been torn down.

Q: Then when you went to high school, did you go to Liberty High School?
A: I went to Lawrence High School. My class got in on the tail end of Lawrence High School’s building progress. I remember one of the duties that we had was to carry books from Liberty High out to Lawrence High School and deliver them to the appropriate places.

Q: Did you have influential teachers during this time?
A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember any in particular?
A: I can remember several under which I did not take any classes. My memory is not very good these days.

Q: Did you participate in extracurricular activities?
A: Yes.

Q: What ones?
A: I played football.

Q: Did they have a good football team?
A: Not too good. We didn’t win the state championship, which Lawrence High School was famous for doing. But it was quite an experience and I enjoyed it.

Q: Did you have summer jobs or did you just work on the farm?
A: I had summer jobs usually.

Q: What did you do?
A: For several years I worked for the Department of Agriculture and was a field person. I would go out and take measurements of corn fields or wheat fields or whatever and report those back to my office.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?
A: 1956.

Q: Did you go right on to the university then?
A: I did.

Q: Had you always assumed that you would go to college?
A: Yes, pretty much. However, KU was not my first choice. Southern Methodist University was. I can’t tell you the reasons for that. I still to this day can’t figure out why I had such a throb for SMU. But my parents told me that they could not afford for me to go to SMU. So they put me in KU. I was told that I would have to help finance my own education. So I went to school and I also worked part time.

Q: What sort of work did you do?
A: I caught on with the geology department as a research assistant for a couple KU geology professors. I did all sorts of things.

Q: What was your major as an undergraduate?
A: Geology.

Q: What building was geology in at that time?
A: Lindley Hall, and it is still in Lindley Hall.

Q: Did you have influential teachers during your undergraduate days?
A: Yes.

Q: Any that you remember especially?
A: My memory. Sorry.

Q: Were you involved in extracurricular activities in college?
A: No, I wasn’t good enough to play college football, baseball or basketball. However, I joined a fraternity and the fraternity had football teams and basketball teams. So that is the way I participated in extracurricular activities.

Q: What fraternity did you join?
A: Delta Upsilon.

Q: KU was a lot smaller then, wasn’t it?
A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember about how big it was?
A: I would say about 15,000.

Q: When did you graduate?
A: I graduated in 1962. I went out looking for a job. I was looking for a job in the petroleum industry. I went to Denver, Colorado, to seek employment out there because Denver had become a center for some of the oil companies that had their offices there. I did my walking and cold calls. I got turned down by each and every one. I soon learned just a bachelor’s degree was not a high enough scholastic achievement to qualify for a job with an oil company. So I came back and applied for graduate school and made it in to graduate school. Then I proceeded to take graduate courses.

Q: And this was in geology also?
A: Yes. Geology for a master’s degree.

Q: Did you write a thesis?
A: Yes, I did.

Q: What did you write about?
A: I wrote about an old mine over in Kansas City, Kansas. The mine had collapsed on several occasions. It was a limestone mine. The first time that it collapsed it took a house with it. There wasn’t anybody in the house at the time, fortunately. But then over a period of a couple years there were other happenings where the mine pillars failed and there were collapses there too. There were about five or six collapses. I took that on as my thesis, the cause and effect of the destruction inside the mine.

Q: Do you remember what professor you were working under?
A: Yes.

Q: Who was that?
A: There were several. My major professor was… memory.

Q: In what year did you receive your master’s degree?
A: It took me a long time to get my master’s degree. It was in the seventies.

Q: Were you also working at the same time?
A: Yes.

Q: What were you doing?
A: I was working for the Geological Survey.

Q: What did you do?
A: I was just a general assistant. I did all sorts of things.

Q: Were you married at this time?
A: Yes.

Q: What is her name?
A: Anne.
Q: Was she from Lawrence also?
A: No.

Q: Where was she from?
A: She was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. She lived in New York, Birmingham, Alabama, and Minnesota. Her father was with a very large paper company. He would take assignment that caused him to change residence from time to time. She went to school in various places and ended up in this region in Kansas City and had to make a choice where she wanted to go. She decided to come to KU. I met her on a blind date.

Q: What was her major?
A: Education.

Q: Were you ever in the military?
A: No.

Q: So then after you got your master’s from KU, what did you do?
A: I sniffed around for a job again and found out very quickly that there weren’t very many and it would be quite a task to find one and there would be a lot of competition. So I elected not to go that direction. Plus, I was at a time when I thought I would be eligible to go into the military or that they would take me. They called me and asked me to go to Kansas City to take some medical testing and also interview about general things. I did that with the full understanding that it could be a matter of a week or a few weeks before the military would ask me to join them. So I went back home and waited and cleaned up all my business things and prepared for entry into the military. Several months passed by and I got a
letter from the United States military. I opened it up and it said, “Mr. Walters, we
don’t want you.” I was disqualified because of a so-called injury. I had a double-
jointed clavicle (shoulder). At that time Vietnam was starting, but it had not
gotten hot yet. I believe that the military really didn’t want to take people who
had problems that could cause the military problems later on. So they gave me
my out.

Q: So then you were looking for a job again.
A: Yes. But I remembered what the oil companies had said when I went to Denver
about a master’s degree being fundamental to entry. So I went back and tried to
get into school again, but I couldn’t. I went to the department and asked if they
had any jobs. They did and I got a job and became a research assistant.

Q: In the geology department.
A: Yes. I stayed that way for several years. The University has a group called the
Center for Research, Inc. It’s a not for profit organization that is attached to the
University for the University’s benefit. I was transferred over there when I was
offered a position there. It sounded interesting because it was a lot different from
what I had been doing. So I started work with the Center for Research and
worked there until I retired.

Q: About when did you start working for them?
A: About 34 years before I retired.

Q: What sort of things did you do for this group?
A: The organization had a component, a research organization called (unclear)
laboratory. (Unclear) laboratory was very deeply involved in trying to build and
manage radar systems looking at the ground for mapping (geography or geology) purposes. There were two geologists who were there as well. I went over as his assistant and stayed there until my retirement. I enjoyed it. It was a great experience, new technology. I got to travel a lot, which was interesting.

Q: What sort of places did you go to?

A: I went out to western Kansas and flew on an airplane, a NASA airplane doing radar tests of the ground. Then I went to Alaska and stayed up there supposedly for three weeks, but it didn’t turn out that way. For two weeks we flew every day. We flew out over the water or ice halfway to the North Pole and then back. That was quite a fascinating experience.

Q: I’ll bet. Were you involved with mapping the whole time that you were there?

A: Yes.

Q: I think you said you were there for about 34 years.

A: Yes.

Q: How did things change there during that time? With scientific advances, there must have been a lot of changes.

A: Actually, the responsibility of the Center for Research was to be responsible for administering the research projects. That means making sure that whatever they did with their money they did correctly and all the rest of it. That is still the way it is today. Also, the Center for Research was responsible for some services to researchers, such as if they had a need to buy something, they would write a purchase order for something and send it over to the Center for Research and the Center for Research would say yea or nay. When they said nay, they would
become responsible for buying the particular piece of equipment and get it to the researcher.

Q: Where is this located?
A: It is located now on West Campus as far as you can go. The building used to the Alumni Association.

Q: Has the Center for Research grown during the time you were employed there?
A: Yes. In the last five to ten years it has grown rapidly.

Q: Did you belong to professional organizations?
A: I did for a while but not too many.

Q: Did you ever hold offices in them?
A: No.

Q: You probably didn’t have contact with students, or did students work there also?
A: Students worked there. I was a student. There were other students who worked too. Our building was a good place and we had made some changes to the building. We bought a lot of new furniture when we moved in. So it was a very pleasant place to work.

Q: When you started working for the Center for Research, was it located somewhere else?
A: No, it was there. It is my understanding that back in 1951 it had been built by the financial foundation of the University as a think tank. It operated that way for about a year. The people who were responsible for it decided that they were not achieving what they felt to be their mission. They decided to close it. Then the financial foundation bought the building from the University and put their people
into it. The employees stayed where they were. The employees were all over the campus, primarily in science and engineering. Then later on the financial group built a new building on West Campus and we obtained the building they were in. We moved in 75 people from places around the campus. It was to be our headquarters and bring everybody together. It was an excellent move, in my opinion. Still to this day it is a great building. It is well built. We did some work on it to make it even better and bring it up to modern day standards. We bought some new furniture and things like that.

Q: You said you had some students working for you. I usually ask the people I interview if they remember any students who went on to greater things. Perhaps you don’t even know what happened to some of the students who worked there.

A: I don’t.

Q: Were you involved in community activities in Lawrence?

A: Yes.

Q: What activity?

A: I was elected to the City Commission.

Q: Oh, really? When was that?

A: (unclear)

Q: How long were you on the Commission?

A: Four years.

Q: That’s one term, I suppose.

A: Yes. During that time I became the mayor for one year.

Q: What were some of the major issues the City Commission was discussing then?
A: One of the major issues was the development of a new bypass. They put it to a vote and voted it in. But to this day it still lingers because the people at Haskell Institute do not want it built. They were very vocal about it. There were other people too with objections.

Q: They didn’t want the wetlands disturbed.

A: Yes. Those were interesting days.

Q: What does the mayor of Lawrence do? Is it a ceremonial type of position?

A: In some ways it is. The only power the mayor has is the power of the agenda, setting the agenda. There are some other things the mayor is responsible for too, but they are not as important as the agenda. Being a dumb old farm boy I went there with great ambitions and what not. But after a while I became very comfortable with it. I don’t know if I ever made any contribution or not. But it was certainly an interesting proposition to do for four years.

Q: Why did you decide to run for the City Commission? Had you ever been elected to anything else?

A: Well, yes, but not to the stature of the City Commission.

Q: Were you on the school board or County Commission?

A: Nothing of a political nature.

Q: Was there a particular issue that caused you to run?

A: No. I had a lot of people supporting me. In fact, a group of people persuaded me to run for the City Commission. I agreed and went out into the streets and talked to people.

Q: Did you knock on doors?
A: Yes.

Q: Any other community activities?

A: I’m still involved with the Chamber of Commerce. I was a member of its board of directors for a while. I still enjoy the Chamber and I am a member of its agricultural committee.

Q: What does that involve? I didn’t know they had something like that.

A: It involves farm people. It’s a place for farm people to come and talk about things of a farming nature, the ups and downs of the prices of products and lack of rain or too much rain.

Q: Not too much you can do about that. Will you have continuing involvement with KU in your retirement?

A: I don’t know. I doubt it.

Q: I guess I forget to ask. Do you have children?

A: Yes, three boys.

Q: What are their names?

A: Andrew, Christopher, and Michael.

Q: Do you have grandchildren?

A: No.

Q: What do you plan to do in retirement?

A: Not very much.

Q: What is your assessment of KU or the Center for Research, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?
A: I think KU has developed growth over the many years that I have been here since the days I lived out on the farm. I think it will continue to grow. I find KU to be an excellent school. It gives you an excellent education. It gives you diversity. It is not only the school, but there are things of a social nature as well, which are very good, I think. So all in all I am impressed with the University of Kansas and support it, especially the basketball program.

Q: Do you go to the games? Do you still have tickets?
A: Yes. We will find out in a couple of months what kind of tickets we have.

Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add that I didn’t ask?
A: There is one thing that I have done in my life that is a little unusual. I purchased, owned, and operated a moving company. The name of it was Evan Smith Moving and Storage. I had it up until about seven years ago. I sold most of it, pieces and parts. That was fascinating. I had worked for that company while I was in school, in addition to doing other things. It was an interesting business to have.

Q: There is a lot of moving that goes on in Lawrence.
A: Yes, in and out.

Q: I guess that’s about it. Thank you very much.