Transcript of Interview with
WILLIAM H. FICKEN, JR.

January 27, 1986

INTERVIEWER:

Mr. Ficken could you please identify yourself and your background.

FICKEN:

Yes, I am a 1963 graduate of Bowling Green. I am from the Cleveland area and currently I'm Vice President of the Builder Division of Mollen Faucet Group of Stanadyne Corporation out of Hartford, Connecticut. We are about a 500 million dollar operation at Stanadyne and Mollen is a $200 million operating group within Stanadyne.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, what brings you back to Bowling Green today?

FICKEN:

Today I am going to be participating for the fourth year in the Management Center's program executive and residence under the direction of George Howick. This is an opportunity for me to spend a couple of hours with seniors in business administration giving my personal views of what it's like in the real world of business and what my experiences have been since graduating.

INTERVIEWER:

Have you done this before?

FICKEN:

Yes, four years now. At the request of George Howick.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you know George when you were in school?

FICKEN:

I did not know him then, I met up with him after I got out of school through a variety of alumni functions.

INTERVIEWER:

Was his name familiar to you before?
FICKEN:

When I was in school?

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

FICKEN:

Not really.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, what we are getting at is you came here in the wake of and in the midst of student unrest, that is, there had been the revolutions led by George and there had been, of course, problems after that and so on. And you in fact were here during the entire, I suppose some would call the undoing, but in the sense the most difficult years of the McDonald administration. However this affected you directly as a student now I would like you to comment on but none the less you were there during those two years and we would like your impressions at least about what was going on and how you reacted to that here.

Before the interview began you indicated a little bit about the process involved in getting you to come to Bowling Green and so on and I would assume that the Dean of Men at your highschool was selecting Bowling Green possibly because it was a conservative institution and would prepare you properly for the career that you wanted. What did you anticipate before you came to Bowling Green and what did you find once you got here?

FICKEN:

I think I anticipated a family atmosphere, this is the way it was projected to me. As I started to say before the interview began, I came down here as a senior in highschool with my father’s car to visit the university and after touring the campus I felt very comfortable with it, but the comfort level increased when I went downtown and parked on Main Street and simply walked the street. There was a feeling that the city was part of the University and the University was part of the city and that stayed with me all the way through. I did not find that in any of the other schools I visited during my years at Bowling Green, Ohio University or Miami or Kent State.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you find in any time during your four years here that the politics of the campus were in fact interrupting your education?
FICKEN:

Not really, frankly I interrupted my own education by not doing as well in my freshman and sophomore year as I could and the last drive that I recall was in the spring of 1961. That was the spring semester that I was not at the University, however a number of my fraternity brothers who were also out of school called me one Sunday night and said all hell broke loose down there and let's get down and get involved and I chose not to because the University meant too much to me and just didn't feel it was the right thing to do. So I can't say that I was ever on the campus at the time the riots took place.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, did you find that the rules were too restrictive when you were here? For example, you mentioned borrowing your father's car, but in point fact you wouldn't have been able to make much use of it had you been able to keep it here.

FICKEN:

Actually, no. As a sophomore you could bring a car here and I had my own car on campus and frankly I was afraid that when I left school that that might be taken away from me, even though I brought it myself. No, I didn't find that the rules were too restrictive I was raised in a very conservative home and we had rules that we had to follow and you learned early in our family that these were the rules for a good German based family and these were the rules and you followed the rules. There are ways to get around the rules and still behave yourself. One of these areas was I pledged Theta Chi fraternity in the Spring of 1960 and Theta Chi at that time was one of the top four houses on campus. The thing that it was known for was that we had an opportunity to partake in the beer drinking that other fraternities didn't have in spite of the very strong conservative attitude of the administration towards socializing and having parties and that was the Meade's Bar in downtown Bowling Green. The bartenders there were always Theta Chis, they did not have any 3.2 beer in the place and the owner apparently knew when the Federal Officers would be in town and we would be advised to come in or not come in when we were under 21. So it offered us kind of an exclusive club, it was always interesting for girls to want to go out with Theta Chis because they could go to a bar where they could drink though it was illegal. That was part of the mystique at the time of let's do it so that we don't get caught because we were told not to do it in the first place, therefore it becomes more fun.

INTERVIEWER:

Was that part of the mystique that led to the University deciding that you should leave?
FICKEN:

Probably, yes. Actually, my grades fell during the semester that I pledged. Fell severely and I was unable to pull them up when I moved into the fraternity house as a first semester sophomore. So I returned to Bowling Green in June of '61 as a summer school student and found summer school to be the greatest experience I ever had. And returned the summer of '62 not because I had to simply because I wanted to and took extra courses as a result and had a comfortable final two years.

INTERVIEWER:

So your in business now, did you come here to enter the college of business or did you go some other route academically?

FICKEN:

No, I came to go into business. I was raised in a family business and I wanted to pursue that area. I ended up with a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration with a major in Marketing and a double minor in Finance and Speech.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, while you were here, and maybe since you’ve been gone thinking back over it, who stands out in your mind in the college and the faculty, the College of Business, as people that were particularly effective, motivating, whatever that might have been for you personally?

FICKEN:

OK, help ride with me on the pronunciation of some of the names and maybe you can help me out, I can see the faces. Certainly, Dr. Manhart—Lou Manhart, Dr. Voskviil and Dr. Abell, Dr. Mandell—Maurice Mandell, in Finance, Dr. Jicha.

INTERVIEWER:

He left not too long after that where he went to Pittsburgh, but is back in town now, retired.

FICKEN:

He was my old advisor and over on the speech side is Dr. Tucker who is a still here, I understand.

INTERVIEWER:

Ray Tucker, no.
FICKEN:

No, Dwayne Tucker.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, Dwayne Tucker, he is General Manager of the Television Station.

FICKEN:

That's right, he was just getting WBGU off the ground when I was a junior and senior and I went into that program and I was the only business student in that program at the time in radio and television production, primarily television production. And he was dealing mainly with Speech and English majors there, I was the oddball and I wanted to take business situations that I knew of and put them into a theatrical type of situation and he encouraged me. And I saw him recently at the Convocation, 75th Anniversary Convocation, last, this past November.

INTERVIEWER:

You came back for that?

FICKEN:

I came back for that Convocation and I had a chance to talk with him. He claimed that he remembered me.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, you were an unusual bird so he probably does. You know, being out of the normal as you were saying in terms of business and communication, which can actually be unusual. Now, I am interested that you went off with that question was asked I think most normally to people who were here during that period and one of the names that appears, that you did not mention, was Gilbert Cooke. Maybe you did not have him?

FICKEN:

I had Dr. Cooke and I would have mentioned him, I was trying to get all of them together. But definitely Dr. Cooke was a strong factor as we call him, Cookie. I didn’t have him for as many classes as I did Mandell. I identified more with Dr. Mandell.

INTERVIEWER:

One of the questions I wanted to ask you is you didn’t mention George Harshman, not that you would have necessarily would have had him in a class. Ralph, excuse me, Harshman. But he was the Dean of the College of Business and later became the interim president for two years and so on. Did you have any contact with him at all?
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FICKEN:

Very little, very, very little. The image, though, that I recall of him was security, peace, quiet, keep the lid on and let's just keep the ship rolling smooth.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, probably while you were here, wasn't Benjamin Pierce the Dean wasn't he?

FICKEN:

William Schmidts, no, Schmeltz.

INTERVIEWER:

OK, Bill Schmeltz would be after Harshman. No, I mean after Harshman became president didn't Schmeltz take over?

FICKEN:

No, Pierce was Dean for a number of years between Harshman and Schmeltz.

INTERVIEWER:

Schmeltz became Dean while you were here?

FICKEN:

Yes, and when I was asked to leave the University he was very helpful in defining exactly where the problem was. We were not attempting to get any grades changed, we simply wanted to make sure there were no errors. In total I was, I went out by 4/100's of one percentage point and so I wanted to make sure the area was defined.

Later on there was a very interesting evening in 1967, I was invited back by my fraternity for the Parent's Weekend program and asked to be the guest speaker. My wife and I were all expenses paid and here we sit at the head table and I am sitting right next to Dean Schmeltz who had a few years earlier had asked me to leave the University and now I come back as a featured speaker and sit next to him at the head table. So it was a thrill and he was glad to see me and I was glad to see him.

INTERVIEWER:

You've obviously kept close contact with the University all these years.
FICKEN:

Very close, very close.

INTERVIEWER:

Has that, can you track that out? I mean it was a good experience for you, obviously, but was it particular people and particular things that made that happen for you that maybe didn’t happen for other students?

FICKEN:

The four years that I was here are probably the four of the most memorable years of my whole life, and I’ve been out of school now 23 years and I’ve made this statement in front of my wife so she won’t be jealous of that either. There was something that happened during those four years that I can’t define, but I felt that when I left that I owed a lot to the University. The University gave me more than I gave it. I always took issue with students who said "Boy, I can’t wait to get out of that place, what did I do with my time, I wasted my time, and I don’t want to see this professor again, I don’t want to see that building again." I thought that they were very short sighted in what they had been through, what their parents had paid for and maybe what they had paid for. My education was basically paid for by my parents. I wasn’t forced to do it, I earned my own spending money. I did not work while I was here, but when I left I felt a very strong attachment and family atmosphere that was here and still is here was very important to me, there was a great deal of pride. The fraternity, at that time, meant an awful lot to me as well.

So as I, when I left I was trying to get into a career and in 1967 I was approached to participate in the Expanding Horizons program, which was Dr. Jerome’s first major step at a major fund raising that would create an endowment that hopefully would go on. I remember his selling that program in on the basis of how much money and how much endowment was at the University of Michigan in those days. So I became an area leader for the East Side of Cleveland and we had a number of people, probably 75-80, in my organization. We were meeting at the Euclid Public Library and the Richmond Heights Library and we had everything structured to get these gifts. It worked and at least for a short period of time and then it died. Our impression, in Cleveland, was that it died and I became very disappointed. About 1970 I quit giving, and I suppose it was selfish and I just said no, we worked hard, there were a lot of people that worked hard and nothing came out of that at least that we could see. Maybe it came here on campus, but not up in Cleveland. Maybe we were unfair in even asking for it, but that’s the way we felt.
In 1973 I got a phonecall from a fellow named Larry Weiss who was a '67 graduate and is currently in the Alumni...

INTERVIEWER:

Director of Alumni Affairs.

FICKEN:

Director of Alumni, right, and Larry had just returned and he called me at my office and I was with IBM at that time and asked if we would go to dinner. I said I would always take a free meal from anybody. He came up and my wife and I had dinner with him. She was very concerned about going to dinner, she said you know they want money. I said fine let's see what the terms are. So we had a very nice evening and that was when the Alumni Center was presented to us.

I felt very strongly that the alumni were not recognized on the campus at that time all you had was Dr. McDonald's old home and it was as though it was just a little piece of something sitting across the street from the campus and not really a formal part of the University which the alumni are. So that evening I agreed to participate in that program and support. It was also the first time that anyone had said to me you can designate where you want your funding to go. Expanding Horizons did not really permit that program. It was simply, as I recall, a solicitation of funding. So where I could designate I felt very comfortable about it. The, my involvement then became that of coming back for Homecoming.

I didn't get involved with the teaching aspect that I am going to be doing later today until about 1982 and the reason that happened was that I had a responsibility in my present company to try to communicate to my middle managers the concept of marketing. Now that seems kind of dumb and kind of basic, but they really didn't understand marketing, they understood sales. I was looking for a speaker and I could have gone to a Paul Harvey type or anyone in between. I decided to come back to the University to see if I could get some recommendations and one of the places that I was recommended from Larry Weiss, for an example, was Dr. Steve Goodwin here heading the Marketing Department. He and I talked for 45 minutes or so and I found that he was not quite the type of speaker that I wanted and he agreed that he wasn't and he recommended that I contact Gill Frisbie, professor of Marketing, and I talked with Gill and immediately knew that he was, at least by phone, the type of guy that I wanted. I then came down heard him in a program asked him if he would come up and address our group. He came up and spent a day in our factory, learned how we work and how we think and then put together his presentation and addressed our group
for about a two hour period. After that he said I think you ought to get involved in some teaching at the University coming down periodically and I immediately agreed to it. I got a poor man’s Paul Harvey in Frisbie so that it’s on the record he looks like James Caan, the actor, with Paul Harvey delivery, I’ve told him that many times. He was well received and I have made copies of that tape for our people and they use it as a good basic thing to understand where we’re going. And that’s how I became involved.

INTERVIEWER:

That’s interesting. Now, given your longevity with the University which I think is very interesting, you’ve been in a good position to judge not necessarily the presidential style up close but you have certainly seen the effects of presidential styles. I really would like you to characterize those changes from the time you entered as a student under McDonald all the way through to the present, no holds barred, positive and negative.

FICKEN:

OK, let me preface this and also put on the record, I am currently on the Board of Trustees of the Alumni Association. The McDonald years were the strong, you’ll do it the way I want you to do it, the signing of the card that you will not participate in alcoholic beverages which you had to sign off on before you were allowed to register. These were the rules, girls can’t walk outside in slacks, I believe, they couldn’t walk outside with there hair up in curlers all those kinds of things. Very restrictive, very conservative, but also knowing that there is someone up there that you have to answer to, so that wasn’t all bad.

Dr. Harshman was kind of an Eisenhower attitude or appearance to me. He was the grandfatherly type who smiled pleasantly probably did not project to me as having a bad word to say about anybody. He kind of rode through the early 60’s and I believe he was in office during the Kennedy assassination, and I was just out of the University at that time.

Dr. Jerome gave me an impression of a step up for the school, a reaching out of Ohio as I perceived it at that time and going to someone who had a more Eastern background, let’s say, the more traditional Ivy, lots of pomp and circumstance, and raising the level of Bowling Green, from let’s say a farm appearance, to a more sophisticated level, at least that impression.

Dr. Moore came in and projected the constant Chief Executive Officer of the corporation. With some restrictions, recognizing that he did not like smokers around him in the President’s Box at the football games and you could only smoke at a certain section at the box when you were invited, my wife and I were
fortunate enough to be invited. But, that was the impression at that time and he was for the wild and crazy 70’s he was the balance between what we were coming off of in Vietnam to a more up to date modern business approach to things.

Dr. Olscamp at this point, my impression, was that he came in under a great deal of question. Because Mike Ferrari was quite well known and well thought of on the campus following the death of Dr. Moore. The family feelings started to come in again and there was a very strong movement, probably if you brought it down to a particular point it was probably one vote if you had seven votes cast there were probably four for Dr. Olscamp and maybe three for Dr. Ferrari and I’m using that only as a descriptive way of putting this across. My personal feeling was that Dr. Olscamp was a product of the University Board of Trustees and some politics within that Board. I don’t have any facts to base that on it’s just material that I picked up. The attitude and style and reactions of some of the Trustees during the first year of Dr. Olscamp’s tenure here, they were close, they were hovering, they were watching, he was playing to them more so than the Chief Executive Officer really should. It was done in public to a greater degree than frankly I appreciated.

I was not impressed with Dr. Olscamp when he first came, I am far more impressed with him now. I think he has become a much greater, a much better, speaker. He’s cleaned up his act so to speak, his ability to address groups his calmness. His wife comes across as a very strong supporter of his style, I think she has been a very important factor in his growth in his career at an early age.

I think his direction is good, I don’t think he will be here that much longer. There’s a lot more things that he wants to do, but he certainly has enhanced the growth of the University. I don’t know how the political situation is being dealt with on campus. I just hear from the few people that I do know that it is still there it has not been offset by performance.

INTERVIEWER:

Interesting. Of course, your career with the University sort of dovetails with what the real involvement of the alumni with the University that is prior to the early 60’s the alumni were not involved as far as I can tell. Historically, Jim hoping to be the one who probably tried to get it moving. My question to you then is, with the Alumni Association as strong as it is now, are there things the University is not doing for the Alumni that it should be doing? Are there ways in which the Alumni could be better involved in the University?
FICKEN:

I think they have to start selling themselves when the students come in as freshman. This, of course, is done through the Undergraduate Alumni Association. I think there has to be a lot more marketing of the Association to the Association. I have said this in Board meetings and recognize that you are talking to a marketing guy.

As an example, we are bringing on five new Board members to the Alumni Board at our May meeting which will be held on Commencement weekend. In the past, we have mailed out ballots and we have asked the Alumni Association to vote on five of the ten. We haven’t done this for quite a few years, it is now a function of the Board making recommendations. As recent as last year we would send out exactly what those recommendations were and ask for the support of the Alumni Association. Well, the return is ridiculously small for the 85,000 plus alumni that we have out there, so they’re not interested. The reason they’re not interested that they don’t really know and the Association, nothing critical about the Association, needs to work on reaching the Alumni.

The majority of the alumni that are out there did not have an active Alumni Association when they were undergraduates so they left with an attitude that was kind of complacent or I gotta give $50 a year and that will make them happy. So you have to work to change those kinds of trends. Now the University, or the Alumni Association is running an article in the Spring issue of the BG News on the new Board members which has never been done before and we will also have a descriptive narrative, if you will, of exactly what the Alumni Board of Trustees does. The figures are, as I said, 85,000 Alumni and there’s been 140 of us who have been fortunate enough to serve on that Board, including George Howick. When you think of those numbers and you think of how do you learn about that Board and what that Board does and what it means to the total alumni, the only way you can find that out is to be back here at the University under today’s ability to communicate.

So, in the future you have to start as a freshman and say that it is very important to be an alumni of Bowling Green because you see Ohio State alumni walking around very proud and Michigan alumni and on and on and on. I’m not sure that is quite the feeling we have and that’s the Association’s responsibility.

INTERVIEWER:

Are there particular Alumni to you that you can point to and say that person really does represent Bowling Green State University and is a proud carrier of the traditions that you perceive as valuable?
FICKEN:

No one particular one stands out. I’ve had association with a lot of what I would call very prominent people, of course Dr. Jimmy Light, transplant surgeon in Washington has been on the Board. Nick Mileti who was a fraternity brother of mine about nine years earlier. Nick frankly assisted me in acquiring the first mortgage that I ever held for my wife and I. Then you start to look over the prominent people, Major General Fulwyler who is presently on the Board and what he’s brought to it, some of the local Cleveland on-air radio personalities and the unbit. The gal that’s on, I can’t think of her name on Channel 5, I draw a blank. The other people that are more local that really project the University, Bill Bitner through the Foundation Board.

INTERVIEWER:

Another fraternity brother?

FICKEN:

Yes, right, our Theta Chi’s and....

INTERVIEWER:

Jerry, is he after you, or no I’m sorry I’m off on Helwigs we were also...

FICKEN:

Well, those were, they were, there was another Jerry and that’s the, out of Chicago, the Greenways. There were two Greenways, Jerry Greenway a Theta Chi and his older brother, very active, always back from the early 50’s.

INTERVIEWER:

So you were, you mentioned several times, the family aspect. Now what, it’s a general term, could you be anymore specific? What kinds of things other than the town, University, kind of symbiotic relationship, what other kinds of things made you have that kind of a feeling? Was it people or was it a combination of people or what?

FICKEN:

It was people. Everybody seemed to be working together. Jim Galloway sticks out in my mind when it came time for placement. The manner in which he and his staff advised me when I was interviewing as a senior. I also had another opportunity back in 1973 about 3 or 4 weeks after I met Larry Weiss for the first time. I was having some career questions with IBM and I called Jim and said I’d like to come down for a day, bring my wife a along and I’d like to talk to you a little bit and just
get your input. So it was, great Bill, come on back. So it had not been ten years…

INTERVIEWER:

So you were saying you came back to the campus to consult with Jim Galloway.

FICKEN:

Ya, I felt like it was coming back home. I didn’t hear from Jim what I wanted to hear. He told me I was nuts, he said you got the world by the tail in a downhill pull, you’re with one of the finest corporations going. I said fine but I ‘m not happy. He said I’ve got something like 1200 alumni out there who would love to place me, love to have me placed in tomorrow in new jobs. But, they get anxious and they forget the realities of life and they should be thankful they have what they have.

At the same time I think he was also looking at the number of undergraduates that he was going to have to place and that would be a priority over the Graduate. My wife came with me, she is a ’64 graduate, her name is, her maiden name was Diana Lee Shotkey and she goes by Dina. She was in the process of raising our second child and was looking to get back into teaching and was attempting to find out from Jim what she would have to do to get back in about 1976 or 77.

So it was a matter of a simple phonecall, a lot of the faces had not changed at the University it was like coming back home again. We were received warmly and with respect. We were told what they felt we should be told and we made our judgements from there. Eventually I left Bowling Green, or left IBM, and it was one of the better moves that I could have made, but of course our frame of reference in 1973 was that the world was going up and up and up and we couldn’t see what was going to happen in the next year.

INTERVIEWER:

But to come back to something, it seems that in your statements that you do assume there is something that marks the Bowling Green graduate as different than an Ohio State graduate or a Cleveland State graduate or whatever. I’m after what those qualities are from your perception.

FICKEN:

You know, I wish I could put my finger on it. I have about a half a dozen people in my company right now that are Bowling Green graduates. I am the oldest. We acquired a company this last June and I inherited an individual who was ’71 graduate of Bowling Green and either I psychologically adapt to Bowling Green graduates and just manage them a different way or there is
something tangible about those of us who come from the University. There is something special, I honestly can’t put my finger on it.

INTERVIEWER:

It would be absolutely fascinating to find out, to be able to pinpoint that and find out in fact there’s a qualitative difference, you know between.

FICKEN:

I think it’s got to come from the atmosphere on the campus. The Miami graduates don’t feel as strongly about Miami of Ohio. Kent State graduates will always live with the stigma of 1970. Ohio U graduates, well they go down there and they’re in the hills of Southeastern Ohio and they just don’t seem to project that confidence. As being on the Alumni Board I know that the University has a limit in total number of students, 15,000 students. Miami and Bowling Green have those limits. Both those Universities turn them away, Ohio State turns them away but OU and Kent right now are under enrolled. I would have to raise the question does the faculty and the administration of those two schools feel as strongly about their product as what the faculty and administration feel about the Bowling Green product. And do they market it in the same way. I wish I could pin it down further.

I can give you another example, the 75th Anniversary of Kent State and Bowling Green are shared. When the Alumni Association approached Kent to participate in activities their attitude was apathy. As the events at BG started to unfold then their enthusiasm began to build but they really didn’t care about it. So I think it’s the manner in which the project is projected.

INTERVIEWER:

That’s a good point.

FICKEN:

My daughter, oldest daughter, will be a freshman here in the Fall of ’86. We didn’t put a lot of pressure on her, she came here with us on a number of occasions, she wanted Mass Communications in Marketing. She made her own decision. She did not visit any other universities, she just decided about a year and a half ago, I want to go to Bowling Green. We said you decide that on your own but if you want to change fine. The only stipulation that we put on her, was that we felt that any colleges outside the state of Ohio really were not worth the expense. I am not a $15,000 a year father, I’d rather put my money into other things beside the prestige a $15,000 a year institution. Then you narrow it down to private schools within Ohio and then you begin to look at what is offered through the
state schools of Ohio and it narrows down her view. I’m not prejudice.

INTERVIEWER:

But you’d be good recruiter. I know you have a schedule to keep so I don’t want to keep you anymore. We really do appreciate you taking the time to participate in this and certainly you can think about that release form if you want reservations, opinions.

FICKEN:

I have no reservations and the comments I made about Dr. Olscamp and the others I would say right to his face.

INTERVIEWER:

Is there anything that I didn’t, we didn’t ask you, that you’d like to say for the record?

FICKEN:

Only that I hope that the people that listen to this 30-40-50 years from now might be able to answer your last question to me and that is what has made the University special. Maybe another side of that is what did the University, or what did I do with and through the University that created this feeling within me, and within my wife, and many others that we know. If they can find that answer they can bottle it and sell it to a lot of schools and hopefully the future generations will work well off of that because I think it’s something special. It’s an honor for someone who flunked out in the middle of his Sophomore year to be able to come back and be a permanent part of the University and I appreciate it very much, Mike.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you, we appreciate your time.