Interview with

SAMUEL COOPER

October 30, 1985

INTERVIEWER:

Mr. Cooper, if you would, could you explain a little bit about when you came into the university and what part you played?

COOPER:

Well I came to the university right after World War II. I came when they would take anybody, teachers were so scarce. I had graduated from Oberlin College in 1936, which would have been 10 years before. I went on and did some graduate work in 1936 in New York City. Then I took a high school teaching job at Sandusky, Ohio. Then a teaching, coaching job in Bellevue, Ohio, where I stayed till I went in the service in 1942. As Archie Bunker says, "WWII". I was in the navy for 3 years. When I returned I decided not to return to my high school position, but came to Bowling Green State University which was not too well known in those days it was just considered kind of a glorified normal school. Although I had done most of my growing up in Northwestern Ohio and had gone to another liberal arts college in Northwestern Ohio most people tended to look down on those as a little better than Bowling Green in a condescending way. But I had taught school and coached in Sandusky, Ohio. And the Superintendent of the schools was Dr. Frank Prout, who a few years afterwards came to Bowling Green, I think it was 1939, to become its president. He had been on the Board of Trustees at Bowling Green. Then was made president when [after] Dr. Offenhauer became president. He was president about a year after Offenhauer was, then was killed in an automobile accident and they designated Dr. Prout, who was superintendent of schools in Sandusky, as president. That was about 1939 or 40. Well Dr. Prout had a bias and prejudice in favor of anybody who had a Sandusky background. So that helped me a little bit when I came over to inquire about a job here. The reason I came over here to inquire about a job here was because I was particularly good friend of Bob Whittaker, the football coach, with whom I had a personal friendship and had been an assistant of his. He wanted to have some help with football and he wanted a track coach, assistant track coach. He also knew that I had a little swimming background. So he persuaded me to be interested in coming over here. I came over in 1946, Dr. Prout hired me in the hall. He never interviewed me, never saw any of my credentials or anything else. He said if they want you over there you got the job. That is the way we hired in those days. We didn't go through selection committee, screening committees, all kinds of that whoop de do. Incidentally, I think we got just as good faculty then as we did when we go through all of these elaborate procedures today. Nobody knew then about professorships, or rank, or tenure, or contracts, or degrees or anything like that we just kind of got hired. We didn't get paid very much. Bowling Green was notoriously low in salaries. In
fact, good high school jobs paid better than Bowling Green's professors paid in those days. I came over here to be a teacher-coach. I was an instructor. I had only a Master's degree. I enjoyed it every minute since. I enjoyed it. Bowling Green was very good to me. I enjoyed every minute. I even enjoyed some of the very exciting days when we were having problems and dissension and so on. By the way, I heard the other day the word that is used mostly in commencement speeches. The word that is used over and over again in commencement speeches is the word, "crisis." That's what somebody studied and said crisis is the most used word in all commencement speeches. What I'm trying to say by making reference to that is that I think colleges have always been in crisis. There usually financial crisis. They never have enough money to be the quality institution they want to be. I have been in Bowling Green and a continual kind of a crisis of some kind. But inspite of the fact its moved on and I respect such a group and grown. And its been a very happy interesting career for me. The reason I made reference to they took anybody in those days is because there was a tremendous teacher shortage after World War II. I think Bowling Green had had something like 1,200-1,400 students before World War II. Many of them two year teachers. Most of them women. Then suddenly in 1946 when I came we jumped up to 5,000, which was tremendous. Students lived in the men's gymnasium in the locker rooms. They lived in the women's gymnasium. They were just crowded all over the place. We just had to assemble quickly a mass of faculty to take care of them. Enrollment had just suddenly tripled. So I made that remark about they would take anybody rather facetiously. It was true. There were plenty of jobs available. They weren't necessarily great high paying jobs but I had no trouble at all getting a job. I was born in Toledo, Ohio. I had been to Bowling Green several times but never too much impressed with it. I remember coming over here as a senior in high school and taking a scholarship test as part of a scholarship team. Taking a test in history when I was a senior. I remember that trip to Bowling Green, but other than that I hadn't been to Bowling Green. As a matter of fact, not too many people would have thought too much about going to Bowling Green, if you didn't have to. It was regarded as kind of a suitcase college, too, in those days. Do you know what I mean by a suitcase college? Well it means that most of the students were from the little towns, and farms, and cities around Bowling Green. And most of them went home on the weekends. And that's where we get the word suitcase college. In other words they came on Monday with their suitcase and stayed for the week and then went home on the next weekend. So there weren't many dormitories. There weren't an awful lot of weekend social life. I'm talking about maybe the years prior to World War II. It was a very low key kind of a school.

INTERVIEWER:

So you basically when you came in you started the entire swimming program. There was nothing there before?

COOPER:

Well, I would like to say that, but that's not quite true. The swimming pool was built in 1939. Incidentally, it was built as a WPA project. Does that mean anything to you? No. Well in the 30s, of course, was the famous depression. Which you people hear about but makes you smirk and smile. Anyone who lived through it knows what we were talking about. But you people are kind of amused by it. But in the thirties, of course, was that depression. And
these programs were put together by the federal government to take care of unemployment and get people back to work. They were government projects. They were called things like The Works Project Administration or Public Works Administration. What they did was to build a lot of bridges, and roads, and parks, and anything that they could get going. For instance, City Park over here was a WPA project. Anything that they could do to create jobs. Most of the jobs were manual jobs. They didn’t want a lot of fancy equipment. To create jobs for people. So the swimming pool was a WPA project. It was a very nice pool for its day. You, of course, haven’t seen it, but it cost $150,000 to build. That’s, of course, peanuts today. So the pool was built in 1939 and it was kind of the showcase of Northwestern Ohio. So actually we had a swimming team in 1939. Then we had a swimming team in 1939 until the war broke out, about 1942. They puttered around with swimming a little bit during the war, but hardly what you would call a swimming team. But we did have a coach by the name of Bud Cox, who was in the Naval Reserve. He was the first coach and I think he was here 2 years. He went into the service very, very early. He was succeeded by another fellow by the name of Joe Glander, who was also a friend of mine from Sandusky. Dr. Prout brought over and he had the swimming team for I think ’41 and into ’42. Then he, too, went in the service. So we had a little bit of a swimming program, but it never really had a chance to get off the ground. So during World War II, there was a little semblance of swimming but the continuity was kind of broken by the war. I came here right after the war, of course, so I was able to pick up the team and put it on a more substantial basis. But I couldn’t take credit for having started it. I came in ’46 and then I continued as coach for 18 years.

INTERVIEWER:

So you say that when you came in you were under Dr. Prout. Then Mc Donald came in right after that. What were those years like here for you?

COOPER:

The Prout years or the Mc Donald years?

INTERVIEWER:

The Mc Donald years.

COOPER:

Dr. Prout was President from about 1940 to 1950, roughly. Then Dr. Mc Donald came in 1950. Well I’ve been under every president here. I’ve had something to do with every president except Dr. Williams, the first president. The first presidents, Dr. Williams, Dr. Prout, Dr. Offenhauer, they were basically high school administrators. Bowling Green was kind of regarded essentially as a teacher training institution mostly for women. Dr. Prout was called Dr. Prout, but I don’t think, I know he didn’t have training beyond his Master’s degree. He never left the campus. He really had kind of a glorified high school administrators view of the college. He never left it. He was a good administrator in a way in that he got things done. We didn’t have much in the way of committees. He made most of the decisions himself. He had his finger in everything. For example, he was well known for the fact that he used to go to the hospital every night when we had a hospital on campus. He’d drop
in every room and have little visits with the students. He had a nice office, but kind of a small office, in what is now called University Hall. He had one graduate student who worked part time. It was his entire secretarial core.

So he had an office and his secretary was in a little area which is now a kind of closet for the English department on the second floor of University Hall. What I am trying to say is that the administration was really simple. You had a Dean of the College of Education. We had a Dean of the College of Business. We had a Liberal Arts College Dean. We had a Graduate School Dean. We had a Registrar and Treasurer and that was about the extent of the Administrators.

So he made most of the decisions and he consulted with his other administrators, but there wasn't much in the way in which you would call faculty participating in decision making. The students were expected to study and they had a good time. Dr. Prout was a very pro-fraternity man. He liked sports. He liked winning sports. But he had some interesting ideas too, he had no use for alcoholic beverages. I remember that if anyone got in any difficulty with alcohol why they would really lower the boom. Also Dr. Prout was kind of famous in those days because he also resented students having cars. We had a no car rule. Students were not allowed to have cars. I'm talking now about the period after the war. There were ways of having them because you have to remember that from 1946 to 1950 most of the men students were G.I.'s. Many of them were married or got married. When I grew up in the 30s in college, if one got married that was a cardinal sin. People got kicked out of school for getting married. But the G.I.'s broke that. Many of them came back married or married while they were here. They were the most dominating group. Well you can imagine having regulations with respect to alcohol, cars, so on. For these more older, more mature veterans of the war many of them had wives and families and so on. It was particularly popular. But the housing problem was very, very difficult after the war for both the students and the faculty. People in town, by the hundreds, were encouraged to take students into their homes. If they would agree to, the university would provide them beds, dressers, study desks, etc. Most of it was second hand. A lot of it was made down in the penitentiaries and so on. It was non-descript type of furniture, but they were anxious to get students put someplace. Some three bedroom, one bath upstairs houses might very well take in as many as 8, 10, 12 students. Incidentally, I think, $2.50 a week was the going rate. That was a lot of money. If a town person had ten students in his house and was getting $2.50 a week, that was $22.50 a week. If you wanted to put it in a monthly rate that would be $90 a month, I believe. That would pay for the rent on a nice house and then some. But dances were the social dances the kind of dances where you hold your partner and you had a dance band that you could understand and get some rhythm to. I am showing my age now. You ask what it was like in the 40s. Every week there was two or three dances on campus. The only big place to have a dance was in the men's gym. They used to drive me crazy because we were trying to use the only gymnasium on the campus that amounted to anything for our classes, to train our teachers, to have our basketball games, and basketball was very important. After the war we had wonderful teams. Then we'd have two or three dances sometimes in the gym on the weekend. We had old bleachers that you have to put up by hand and take down by hand. Students would want to come in early and decorate the gyms to get ready for the dance. Sometimes they weren't real anxious to get it all cleaned up and taken out after the dance so we could have classes the next day. I am trying to think a little bit what was it like. I think the students enjoyed life though after the war. We didn't have much in the way of dormitories on campus then. The dormitories that were built right after the war, one of the first ones was that
Fraternity Row, not the new Fraternity Row, but the old Fraternity Row. Then Bowling Green had a unique plan of leasing those out to fraternities, but if the fraternity couldn't fill it then they would put other students right in there, too. Dr. Prout was very pro-fraternities. He never left the campus. Really he wasn't what you would call a scholarly president. He just as I said he had kind of an orientation for college administration. It was just kind of an extension of the high school. This isn't to say he wasn't a good president or didn't make his contribution. At this point I will stop and see if I am on the right track here by saying that I think every president that we have ever had and I told you that I have had something to do with every one except the first one has been different. It almost makes me think that college administration is not so much a science as it is an art. That each of them had their own style. Many of the styles were entirely different. The way they went about achieving their objectives and so on were entirely different. Sometimes hard to say that they were all good presidents in some respects and they were all lousy presidents in other respects. You could almost say that each one had a little different value system as to what was important and what they would work at and so on, and Dr. Prout was the right man for his time but maybe, but his time ended in 1950 and then the infamous or famous Dr. McDonald came on the scene. Dr. McDonald was here another 10 years, 1950-1960. He was the scholarly academician type of president. He completely turned Bowling Green in a different direction. He was a tremendous hard worker. His administration would have been referred to as dictatorial or almost tyrannical, but if you were to call that to his attention you couldn't have insulted him any more because I first heard the term faculty and student participation in administrative decision making under McDonald. He set up all the ways of involving the faculty and the students and so on in decision making for the university. Then he would go ahead and do it his way anyway which was maybe an unfortunate way of administrating the university. But I think the reason that he did what he did was because he was so anxious to have this be a good and great university. His goals and objectives were so much loftier and higher than others that he would get impatient when people couldn't get us there. So he would pick up the ball and carry it himself to get it there. In other words, he would ask for advice in decisions and help and he would assign responsibility to others for them then it wouldn't suit him so he would do it his way. He made a tremendous contribution to the university. One thing, for example, I'm conscience of the fact that somebody might be hearing this a few years from now and they might not have ever thought about this but one thing that Dr. McDonald did was to take faculty salaries at Bowling Green State University, which were among the lowest in the country; they weren't as good as an average good high school salary, and more than double them in ten years. Ten years after he came here... We were talking about Dr. McDonald and I said that he had, I particularly remember in his 10 year tenure as president he had done so much to increase the quality and the salaries of the faculty. Shortly after he got here I remember that he really knocked the faculty for a loop when he issued an edict that nobody at Bowling Green who didn't have a Ph.D. would in a few years and there after have no future what so ever at Bowling Green. Backed off on that a little bit but when he kind of came through with that as an edict why I think he really meant it. He saw that as one way of increasing the quality of the faculty, but he put his requirements very, very high for faculty, but he also rewarded them if they did. But that kind of almost tyrannical; I don't like the word tyrannical to describe him, but that's what many of the students and faculty tended to regard him as tyrannical. That was the thing that got him trouble. Of course, I was here
during the famous student strike days of 1960. I'm talking about not the Vietnam strike, but the strike over Mc Donald when the students and the faculty rose up against him. I'm not sure he really merited that kind of an uprising, but once it started to roll there was no stopping it. He left here a heart broken, bitter, disappointed president. He fought back hard to try and defend himself but the pressure just got too much. I had just been elected the President of the Faculty Council as it was called in those days. Which was an organization that didn't have much authority or power. Partly because it didn't really care too much about exerting itself. As soon as Dr. Mc Donald was forced into resignation then the faculty said now we are going to take over and run the university. There was a period there in the 60s when the faculty did kind of take over and they developed a new charter. Which by the way is the one under which we operate today. Which supposedly now gave the faculty a great deal of authority and decision making in the university. I once heard that Dr. Mc Donald say I understand this is not original with him but I first heard it from him. His definition of a faculty member was a faculty member is a person who thinks otherwise. Which is kind of humorous in a way but that was kind of characteristic of his dealings with the faculty. They were always thinking differently from him. So we went through a period in the 60s in which the faculty took over with their new charter. It is interesting today here in 1985 there is certain elements that the faculty who are already saying that they see this faculty authority and power and so on eroding. It is rather interesting that Dr. Virginia Platt, history department, who is now a member of the Board of Trustees who retired the same time I did together with her husband, Grover Platt. Came the same time I did then the two of them retired the same time I retired. Were very active in the behalf of the faculty and very instrumental in helping bring into being the new charter which gave the faculty a lot of authority. Just recently she has publicly indicated that she is quite concerned about the erosion of the faculty involvement in the university decision making. Then some of the hard fought rights and privileges the faculty got days prior to the Mc Donald or the days after the Mc Donald demise. She sees as being usurped or eroding or being taken away. That's rather interesting observation for me to make. Well then for 3 years we had Dr. Harshman as an interim president. He was an interim president for a year or so and then the Board of Trustees decided they would make him legitimately president not just acting president. He was president for 3 years 1960-1963. He was a pretty good man for the job then, because what he basically did was not rock the boat. He was more interested in just steadying the ship so to speak. He didn't do an awful lot of drastic decision making one way or the other. He served as president for 3 years. All the time in those 3 years it was known that we were going to look and get another president. So he was kind of a mark-time president. But served his purpose well. Then in 1963 or 1964 Dr. Jerome came onto the scene. I was interested in that appointment because there were three of us faculty who were designated to be on the screening or selection committee or whatever we called it in those days. And the three of us were Don Bowman, now retired Physics professor, very capable and significant person in Bowling Green's student and faculty life, Virginia Platt, and myself. I have always said that I thought they picked the three of us in those critical times because we had a conservative and a radical and myself, of course, a nice steady middle of the road person. Because during the Mc Donald years you were kind of put in a group. You were a for or against or a kind of an in between. I think Virginia Platt might have represented the radical group, who were anxious for change. Don Bowman, who kind of supported the Mc Donald administration, and myself, of course, who had the good sense to see a little
of both sides. So Dr. Jerome came on the scene about 1964 I think. He was here about 7 years. He, too, brought a new style and a different set of values and priorities. He did a lot of good things, too. I honestly think that one reason Dr. Jerome left after 7 years was because he felt that he was somewhat throttled by the faculty he felt that he couldn’t administer the way that he wanted to because the faculty was binding him so to speak. And finally he kind of had enough of it, and left. Although I think his view of his own vocational career was don’t stay too long; move on in a reasonable length of time. So he left about 1970. We had another president for about 12 years, Dr. Moore. He again brought a new style, which again had its good and bad points. He was here I think until he died about 1982. Then was succeeded by Dr. Olscamp. I sometimes at my age and looking back on my vocational career, sometimes I ask myself a question. Is the university better now than it was? I can’t give a clear cut answer. I sometimes ask are the students better than they were before? I am talking about students as students. I am not talking about their character or morals or anything like that. I am talking about students as students. I find myself saying in some respects they are better, some respects they are worse. I don’t think, this may sound almost paradoxical, I don’t think the students study as hard as they used to. I think in some respects they are cleverer than they used to be, but I don’t think their scholarship has the depth or the quality it used to have. I know that I could get in on a debate with my colleagues about this I am speaking now as purely opinion, I can’t document it. I do think the students who came out of high school following World War II and particularly into the 50s and 60s were not nearly as well prepared as a group that goes to college as they were prior to World War II. This again could be debatable. I do think I see some improvement in the scholarly or academic qualities of the students the last 5 to 10 years. I think the pendulum is swinging up again. But I didn’t enjoy, maybe I’d better put it this way. I found myself out of step or out of tune with the students of the 60s and into the 70s. I remember that was when the students said and I believe most of them believe don’t trust anybody who is over thirty. Although I always enjoyed the students and I always got along pretty well with them, I found myself more comfortable and more content with the students before the 60s and into the 70s than I did the ones during the 60s and 70s. Now that may be just a matter of conflict of values I’m not sure. I like the students of the 40s into the 50s better. They were my kind of students. I am sounding like Archie Bunker here. I’m enjoying the students more today. I think I like the moral codes of the students better. I like the value systems of the students better in the earlier students. I think they tended to respect authority more. I didn’t like the period when there was excessive permissiveness, when you could do your own thing. I didn’t like that. I am not saying they were wrong. I’m just saying that my preference in taste was for the former rather those middle group of students. I see the pendulum swinging back again toward what I like to say are my type of students, but that’s a judgement I am sure there are others would take judgment with me. I know there are a lot of faculty who think that’s when the university is doing its best job when there is dissent and ferment and disagreement. When there is a certain amount of volatile environment and there is confrontation. Excitement about causes and all of this kind of thing. Some faculty would say that is the ideal college environment. Although I don’t think a little bit of that is too bad, but I think that when that is almost an end in itself then I think it defeats what I think is the functioning purpose of a university or college or higher education.
INTERVIEWER:

How did you feel when the pool was dedicated in your name?

COOPER:

I was surprised. I was thrilled. I had pretty much been brought up in the tradition that to name college buildings for people who were dead or who had a lot of money and you hope maybe that you would recognize their financial support in return for that money. That's being departed from lots of places now partly under the theory that why don't you name these for people when they are still alive and they can enjoy it. That hadn't taken place too frequently before this happened. I kind of liked the idea, but I was surprised because I thought if it is ever named for anybody it will be named for somebody whose dead or somebody that made a big healthy contribution of money to the university. Because that was so often the tradition. I was pleased and thrilled. I haven't gotten over it yet. I tell people that I'm really a little suspicious yet that I tell them that really there was a rumor around that my wife had a lot of money and that the university was trying to get to my wife's money through me. That, of course, is facetious but I'm still not exactly sure why. The building that excited me the most, of course, was the Ice Arena, which was my brainchild. We were talking Ice Arena in the early 1960's. Two or three years before Bill Jerome came on the scene. Now I don't know whether we ever would have gotten it off the ground if it hadn't been Bill Jerome coming out to see me because Bill was a great ally for an Ice Arena. He came from the East he was a winter sports enthusiast himself. He had gone to colleges that had hockey teams. He was a skier and all of those things. So that when we said what we like would be an Ice Arena, we had a good ally. Most of the faculty and the rest of the university people thought we were out of minds. What in the world would we need an Ice Arena for. I had been convinced that it would be a great facility for us. To meet student needs of all kinds. Ohio State had had one. Oberlin College had had one. Penn State had had one. I checked with all of these people and they were kind of happy with having had them. When Bill Jerome came on the scene again he let us think big. We really started out to get just an outdoor refrigerated rink with maybe a little cover over it. The magnitude of our thinking about that time was about a quarter of a million dollars. When we got through with what we wanted we were now talking about $1,800,000 dollars. It was Bill Jerome who really encouraged us to think bigger than our thinking had been at that time. So as I say the idea of an Ice Arena was not Bill Jerome's, but he was the guy who made it possible for us to get it into orbit and be of the magnitude that it is. I loved the Ice Arena in a different way from why I like the pool. I was determined that we were going to show all the skeptics of the Ice Arena that it was a good decision. So I decided that I'm going to do everything we do in there. I'm going to get excited about hockey, which by the way hockey again was my brain child. We had a hockey team 3 years before we had the arena. We never built the arena just to accommodate the hockey team. So I joined the figure skating club, and I joined the curling club, and I got excited about hockey, and so on. I joined the skating club just partly to demonstrate that it had its place. Even old guys like me were going to use it. I found that I liked skating and I was 55 years of age. I didn't know a hockey skate from a figure skate. The reason I'm kind of telling you this now is because at the same time Scott Hamilton started to skate. So I like to say that Scott Hamilton and I skated at the same time. For about 2 months I was way ahead of him. I was a lot better than
he was. We became mutual admirers of one another. I was 55, I think he was 8 or 9. That’s a remarkable story of Scott’s not only his skating success but it enable him to over come a physical handicap. It was very close to taking his life. To this day he attributes the fact that he is well and alive to the fact that he skated. If you had ever seen him when he was an 8 years old kid you’d wonder if he hadn’t just about gotten to the end of his time. He was a pathetic little creature. If you saw the success that he had as a result of skating, you’d understand the miracle that it is. Well that interest mutual interest one and the other has continued to this day. I followed him around of course and I still keep in touch with him. I was over in Sarajevo at the Olympics. Of course, I really am thrilled to be skating with him. I told you I joined the skating club before I knew it we were putting on an ice show and I have been in every ice show we have ever had. I had a number of solos. I think people just kind of enjoy an old guy going out there and making a fool of himself. I don’t do too bad for an old guy. I still skate to this day a few times a week. I have had two open heart operations. I didn’t know I could ever have two. I thought if you survived one you were lucky. But I had two and I feel just great. The second one really fixed me up real well. I have got to stay active. I skate because I like to skate I don’t think about I’m skating to stay healthy but there is no question in my mind that skating is real good for me and my heart and health. So I remind myself and I tend to get a little bit lazy or indifferent. I don’t feel like going out there to night. I remind myself that I had better for my own good. When I get out there I love it. I guess I am staying this to you. You asked the question "How did I feel about the pool?" I am thrilled to death about the pool, but the facility I think represents my endeavor and creativity and excitement about having brought into being for Bowling Green and all that has come out of that Ice Arena, is the Ice Arena more than the swimming pool. That is why I am telling these two things at the same time. You said "How did I feel?" Well I am just delighted about it, but you know if I had my choice of going over and swimming in the swimming pool or going to the Ice Arena and skating I would have no trouble at all. I would go to the Ice Arena. Swimming to me just to get in the pool to swim back and forth is dull as heck. I really was a diver more than I was a swimmer. I always had success at diving. I did go to the 1936 Olympics right out of college as a member of the team. I didn’t get to compete, on the basis of my diving skills. But I honestly have to admit, I perhaps sound like I am a hypocrite, but I think the Ice Arena has made a tremendous contribution to the University in many, many ways. One of the best town gown unifiers that we have. It’s developed a new dimension of activities. It’s opened up a whole new kind of sports, curling. We were the only college in the country until a few years ago that had its own curling team. The number of girls, and little kids, and national championship in hockey, the Scott Hamiltons, and all that have come out of the Ice Arena. The Ice Show, the year around operation, the skating schools. All of those things that have come out of the Ice Arena. I will have to admit in a somewhat hypocritical confession the Ice Arena excites me more that the swimming pool.