

Transcript of Interview with Gene D. Lewis by Leah Wickett

Interviewee: Gene D. Lewis

Interviewer: Leah Wickett

Date: 02/09/2017

Location (Interviewee): Cincinnati, Ohio

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Transcriber: Kevin McPartland

Summary: Gene Lewis discusses his time here at UC with a special focus on the Civil Rights movement, his involvement with it, and the campus' experience with Vietnam.

Categories: Civil Rights, Arts & Sciences, Activism, City University Transition

Tags: Selma, Kent State, survey courses, Tom Bonner, Clifton, protests, Cincinnati, History Department

Leah Wickett: Right, this is Leah Wickett. I am a grad student here at UC for history. I will be interviewing Gene Lewis. My partner is Thao Nguyen, who will be recording this interview for us. So Let's get started. So can I just get your full name? Your full name?

Gene Lewis: Gene D. Lewis.

LW: Okay. And where and when were you born?

GL: February 20 1931, in Globe, Arizona.

LW: Okay. And your parents names and their occupations

GL: Abner Lewis, Father, labor. Mother, May Lewis, housewife.

LW: And where did you attend college? And what was your focus to study there?

GL: Arizona State College was is now of, course the university, the largest public university in the country. BA, MA, studied history.

LW: Okay, and what was your focus that you did in history?

GL: In history? I did American.

LW: American? Okay. And the date and the circumstances of getting hired here at UC and why you chose UC?

GL: I came in 1958. And I had done my dissertation finished just a year before on an early American engineer, concentrating during the period of 1820 in the Civil War, he was killed in the Civil War. And the College of Engineering here and but given notice that their accreditation

was in danger, unless the diversified they're curriculum a bit, away from the technical side, to more humans--humanities, social studies, etc. business and because we were on a different calendar, they did not intermingle with the College of Arts and Sciences. So technically I was on the budget of the College of Engineering, although my office was here in McMicken Hall. That soon changed in 1963. But in total I was there for five years, totally to engineers. Taught them American history, western civ, and then their senior year, all of them in one class took a course called contemporary problems. It's focused on the 20th century.

LW: And then what positions did you hold here at UC other than professor?

GL: Oh, I was assistant to--executive assistant to the president, President Warren Bennis. And I was Senior Vice President and Provost of the university in the 70s. And our department head in history for probably different times 12 years.

LW: And then what do you bring in tenured here? What was the process like at that time when you were tenured?

GL: Tenured or when I arrived here?

LW: Well both.

GL: When I arrived here [Laughs] were a very small and they're very isolated, in terms of national identity, as an urban university. We were supported by the city of Cincinnati. Quite small, I think we had five or six teachers, in the department in history, and the whole hall of the third floor of McMicken where we are sitting now, we had about five or six departments from the Business College. It was not diverse. I was interviewed by five or six older white men. That was it. There was no affirmative action. [inaudible] decided to hire me before I got here. I arrived at the airport, no one there to meet me. [inaudible] I had to stay overnight because I had appointments for the next morning. I had to find my way to the hotel downtown. After I went to bed that evening, I remembered I didn't know where the university was. So I got up, dressed, and went down to the lobby to the desk and asked how do I get to the university. They said 'you take a bus out here.' And Dr. Reginald McGrane was department head at that time in English. He retired the next year so. But required retirement by age in those days. And he said be here at eight o'clock. Well, I caught the--caught the bus up to the front of Clifton, asked where McMicken Hall was, they said up there. I had his office number. Came up as you're sitting on the floor in the hallway when he wobbled in, good morning. He said 'I'm busy teaching. Go do something. Meet us at lunch in the student union.' And we had an interview of about 10 minutes. Nothing about me. I didn't even meet the Dean of the College of Engineering at the time. And then we went to the president's office. And he came out chuckling. Reginald McGrane went in and talk for 30 minutes. Turned out, they were talking about a book they were doing together. And when I came out, maybe 1:30, 2. He said, 'well, my machine isn't running, right. So you have to get back, wherever you're going.' So I walk down the hill and caught a bus back downtown, bus to the airport. And that was my interview. And that probably is pretty symbolic of the state of this university at that time. Practically all the rest of the earlier hires the next two, three years were graduates of this university, not the PhD, but bachelors and MA. Though, though, with the interview process, there was dramatic change soon after that.

LW: Do you remember when you got tenure? And what that process was like?

GL: Oh, yes. There was no process. It was that the department had looked around and thought, well, he needs to be tenured, or she, it was always he at that point. He needs to be tenured. So when 1969--oh, tenure! I was talking about promotion for Professor. Tenure. I learned about it, I think I got tenured in 63. And I learned about a year later almost, it's not important, they're not going to get rid of him. And when I was made a full professor in 69, I found about it from the newspapers. No process whatsoever. That was to change too.

LW: Do you--can you talk a little bit about the courses that you taught while you're here and how teaching for you and for the university changed over time as you were here?

GL: I taught a variety of courses from Western Civ to 20th century to engineering college. When I came here, I taught all together American survey courses. And I developed several courses, Taught Civil War for a few years, Reconstruction. I taught the Jefferson-Jackson period, I taught the Old South. And how's that change? Well I came back from being a provost, and seeing as I taught contemporary problems in engineering, so decided to do a world history course too. It was mostly of the US and its interaction with other countries, not really world history. And I taught a survey occasionally, large classes. I remember, we had about 1000 students, and I co-taught with Tom Moder in Wilson Hall 69, 70. In fact we were teaching in 1970 when students broke up the classrooms around the university in protest over Kent State. And then I developed a course, through Jackson and Jefferson, but primarily after I became head in the 90s, I taught one of those courses occasionally, but I taught historiographical seminars. And that was a way for me to keep up with what was going on in American history and really coming to understand better American history that often saw, probably correct or so, reflects the time that you're writing. And if it's a time of diversity, and inclusion, then in turn more social cultural history, and that is reflected. Early period of professional history, maybe not quite as early but near period was all economic. Everything was based on economic contracts and so on. And then after the World War Two, it turned the more to a type of consensus history. And then with the great changes in the 60s and 70s, it became much more progressive, conflict-oriented again, but on the progressive side, and so on. So that's why history can never be written just as--once and that's it. Because it--it reflects those who are living and then go back and examine what preceded this what caused this. And so see, women suddenly are getting into read American history, because they had been blocked out all those years. And same with African Americans and other groups.

LW: That's great. So what was your educational approach and teaching? So do you recall any of the activities you did in course? Was it lecture heavy? Do you remember your teaching style?

GL: Oh in classes are largely lecture because the classes are big. Advanced courses, we had discussion. And in the survey courses, we broke up and ran through a system usually conducting discussion section--discussion section, you lecture only maybe twice a week. And then on the third time, you've had discussions. I don't know what they do now.

LW: Pretty much the same thing.

GL: I understand enrollments are down, and 127 was occupied all the time, [inaudible] teaches, I think up to 180 students there. I don't think we do that anymore. So I don't know but you do.

LW: Okay. So you were involved in some of the programs here on campus as well, in the history department and the Student Budget Committee, it looked like in your paperwork that you were a part of that event. Do you recall any of those organizations and departments?

GL: There were committees in the department, but, thinking more generally, I was on budget problems my entire career here. Never had, and, maybe we're not terribly unique. But I think we're unique in Ohio, because we were starving for funding. And we waited to become a state university 15 years too long. When I was provost, right? I ended being provost just before we became state, we were terribly broke. And the problem was trying to break this university into at least, 20th century, if not the late 20th century, was to try to hire good deans. And that was my role. And it's very hard to attract top-notch deans here that you really want without getting money. And of course, it was in that late period of time that we became unionized because of salary problems. And then I became department head for a long period of time 88 to 98. The dean promised that when I had retirements, we will get two replacements for one retiree. That would have two secretaries. And there was something of a little recession, but we had those every three years at the university in about 91. And that one Secretary that we had retired, we never got another one. That places an awful lot of burden on one person and the head to fix all those--tours that you have to do. We never got two replacements for one. And in fact, back to the secretary thing, I've often wondered what we did wrong there. And important to the dean's role at that time, the dean has been demoted here a lot now, but at that time, they controlled the budget. Totally. He was from [inaudible]. And I learned that they had five secretaries of general funds and we had one. And that, you know, you fought budget all along. And it was in--about the same time that the secretary retired, he sent out a note that we had to make cuts. Well where do you make cuts in this department? The budget is 95% personnel, faculty. All we could cut is a bit of paper and maybe a computer to here or there. But that's it. You know what, the only thing he made us cut, you know what we had to cut? We had to jerk out a third to two-thirds of our telephones. That's my role in terms of budget. It makes you grow old, the fighting constantly. And I spent much of my time either teaching or doing that. And in the university, you've got to view it as a community. And--but occasionally, within the community, you have some top down stuff. The top-down was the budget. They kept it secret of what other departments did, divide and conquer, in a way. And understand now what they've done is, in the last five or six years, they fired all of the business part of the Arts and Science college. And the budget is over the [inaudible]. Now that is really top down. And probably they're not great discussions over where we should be going in one direction we should be going. But in the main I support what they're doing now, and that [inaudible] inclusion, interdisciplinary. And that's hard to accomplish all those without a lot of resistance. And in some cases, it's desirable to resist if the purpose does not further education. You have to look at that closely. I probably talked more than you wanted me to.

LW: You're good, you're good. So do remember being an advisor on any committees because it--like maybe Cincinnatus, or fraternities, or or anything,

GL: Oh, goodness. [inaudible] there's an award called the Barber Award. Dean Barker was dean of the college for years, and only left a couple of years before I arrived. And when he retired, he set up a fund the Barber Award for best student teachers relations. And because of all my--in engineering, I didn't have much to do with departments at all, they tried to integrate in that department a good deal. I spent my time with the student organization and trying to advance them. And the second year I won in the barber award after it was inaugurated in the 60s, so spent a lot of time and I noticed that it's interesting. The last thing I think that Professor Zane Miller, you've heard of him, ever wrote, was a birthday card to me a year ago--excuse me--in 10 or 12 days. And he wrote in there, he was the best mentor of undergraduate and graduate students I've ever met. So that tells you my work there. I drifted away from the question I'm afraid.

LW: Right. So you talked before in our other interview a bit about your work with going to the march during the Civil Rights Movement. Would you want to talk a little bit about that?

GL: The Selma March?

LW: Mhmm.

GL: Well, you know, that began and, you know, education comes from many forms of human relations of knowledge. I grew up in a rural area of Northern Arizona. Tempe, where Arizona State, is located, is a suburb of Phoenix, probably had four or 5000 students when I went there. Northern Arizona had a reservation there, Apache Indian Reservation 20 miles away. My interaction with that group was minimal. We had none other than our school--grade school. I had no interaction as Latinos. That was the southern part of the state. And so when I left Arizona State, I bet I hadn't met a dozen African Americans in my life. And I told them that interview about coming from Globe, Arizona, to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois on a Greyhound bus back in 1953. And taking 24 hours to go across the state of Texas in those days. Got to Tulsa, my first experience with such obvious racism, where the fountains--water fountain in the in the bus station, colored and white. And my interaction with an African American who was a graduate student at Illinois. He was discriminated against. And it was an awakening. But when I came here in 58, I bet the enrollment of African Americans in this university must have been about 100 would have been something. The African American community was largely located the West End and at that time, and it was clustered there. Several got out. What started to spread was the belt of I-75 and was finish in about 59 or 62, around there. They cut out the whole community. Separated it. And some of my interactions with black people who slowly but steadily--and what happened, of course, was the arrival of Martin Luther King in the 60s, his awful assassination in 68. And a president from of all places Texas, named LBJ that was able to push through the Civil Rights Act or Voter integration, voter voter rights and so forth. Accommodations. And the voter rights thing was terribly important to American historians. They had been fighting, talking about this for a good deal of time. And the leaders of the profession, including C. Vann Woodward, Richard Hofstadter and others, decided that we would join him in--Martin Luther King--in march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the 65 and Tom Bonner, a hero of mine, and did more than call this university to transition to a modern University. Anyone. Remember King. He came here in the fall of 63. And Dottie and I had just gotten married. We live down here in an apartment on Woodside Place, and Tom Bonner became chair of the department. Well, we came together quickly in terms of interest and our political affiliations, and so on. And I remember him

sitting in a chair at that apartment on Woodside Place where the business college is now. After John F. Kennedy was assassinated. So we've grown, grown very close together and in 65 I was still remembering we lived in the same building at that time--I was remembering why went out there? I Oh, I know why I went out there. It was a largely Jewish community, and so, we taught the Romance languages in this hallway, this hallway. We lived out there, and he took a job elsewhere. He said, 'Gene I'll help you buy my place. I'll provide the second mortgage for you and everything,' that's why we were out there. Just getting started. And Tom Bonner came out there and said, 'if you'd like to go with me on this march.' I said, 'oh yes, yes.' What an experience that was. We flew to Atlanta, got in there just about dark. And some old yellow church buses driven by black folks met us there, and drove us that night to Tuskegee, and stayed all night there. And the next day, we didn't walk all the way from Selma, that's probably 45,50 miles on the outskirts. We met and thinking, this is a peaceful march with no protests. In terms of yelling back at the rednecks who were yelling and screaming at us. And we were protected by the National Guard it was there. And I remember walking hand in hand with Richard Hofstadter. If you don't know who Richard Hofstadter was, he was one of those consensus writers back in the 50s and 60s you should look him up. And we marched hand in hand. And these yahoos from all around, yelling obscenities to us. We got before the old Confederate capital in Montgomery, at about, say 10 or 11 o'clock that morning. These black folks--as we call them blacks even though they're African Americans now-- had waited too long to be in front of that old Confederate place and they weren't about to quit early. We stood there and it was in late--middle to late March or pop Alabama by that time--for three hour, without any water anything--to listen. Of course, Martin Luther King spoke. John Lewis was there. You've heard of him I hope. He's a congressman from Georgia, John, John Lewis. And then when we disbanded, they said, 'get to your buses quickly.' And Tom and I stopped at a filling station and asked, 'could we use your restroom?' And they said, 'no, you can't get out of here.' And we jumped to that bus and got back to Atlanta that night. In the meantime, a woman from Michigan, driving back to Selma, that night was hijacked and killed, that became national attention. Great experience for me. And then 68, 69 we have uprights in here UBA, the United Black Association, we had really grown the numbers of African American students. You can imagine coming in, an old foggie, white president, conservative. And I was president of the AAUP, that's Association American Professors. And we were trying, and Tom Bonner himself, tried to get some way or another, that faculty, students, administrators, would come together and discuss these problems that we were facing. They never do [inaudible] And we'd find a donor University Senate set up where there were students and faculty about equal numbers--administrators, much smaller--to discuss these issues. And I was elected the first president, and a month later, Kent State occurred. We had to shut down the university because it was just, unheard of. We worked so hard and all sorts of discussion and sessions and seminars on bringing us together so that we can reopen. And the University Senate met that to reopen the next day on Monday late in the middle of May--see, we were on a quarter system, so school went on forever, into June graduation. And we met to decide if we can reopen the next day. And that very afternoon, Jackson State, all African American University in Mississippi, had great riots and African Americans here on campus demanded that we respect that the same way we did Kent State and close down. And we ordered to, Then we had to convince Langsam. And he wasn't even there, so we had to get in our cars Tom Bonner and I, he was provost at the time and I was Chair of the University Senate, went down to his house in [inaudible]. And Mrs. Langsam had gotten word that the African Americans were coming down there, And she yelled out all sorts of obscenities about them and

get out of here. And we went down to City Hall. At that time, the university was still urban, and the mayor was there. The trustees met. Langsam wouldn't let Tom Bonner or me in the room. So we sit down in the lobby of the City Hall. Well they were convened in there two or three hours, and came out there the way that we could reopen so it was closed. I don't know what the question was.

LW: Yeah, that's great. So you didn't talk much about--would you mind talking a little bit about the Vietnam War protests here on campus?

GL: Well. The reason of course, that got the footage that it did, was because young men were drafted those days. And it was the worst--it was a hell of a mistake. And then the Iraq War was. The Iraq War didn't generate that kind of protest on campuses. Why? don't draft anymore. It's all volunteer. And the Vietnam War, it was escalated. We had the terrible 68 presidential election, where LBJ had dug himself in. He--you know, LBJ was a great president until he turned to Vietnam. He didn't know anything about foreign affairs, got us into the jungle. And they confused what we call a dominoes theory with nationalism. Truly, almost communism, but it was not communism that China could take over. It was masquerading as communism. You understand what I mean by that? It was more nationalist than communists. And China was going to move in, they're afraid after the Korean War. And we're gonna go in there and treat North Vietnam. And well, at any rate, the riots were terrible here. And--we--Tom Bonner, organized, a peaceful protest, and it was peaceful. And we walked all the way downtown. And we had a lot of leaders on the way down there. And I remember someone put a [note] on Tom Bonner's back before he noticed it, that said 'Friend of North Vietnam.' At that time that was a--and several faculty were arrested. Not several, some. One in our own department. Dr. Herbert Shapiro, worked in the--taught African American History, and Tom Bonner and I bailed him out. That is the type of thing. And I remember one of our vice presidents [inaudible], real gentlemen, Vice President of Finance, had a lady secretary been here for 30 or 40 years and she was very outspoken. When she came in that morning and the students had occupied administration. And right next to her office was the men's restroom. She took a broom in there cleaned it out in no time. [Laughs] 'Get out!' So there was some humor in it all too, but it was--it was not an easy time.

LW: And do you recall at all if the Watergate scandal or the resignation of President Nixon was something that affected campus at all?

GL: I was executive assistant to the president and there was nothing going on in terms of-- usual protests of it. I remember one protest that--I had, the first job I had as provost I was going to Sanders Hall which is not here anymore, cause they blew it up [Laughs]. It was not safe and find a column the resistance there. But no, I don't think a national events in the 70s upset to university that much. I could be wrong, I'd have to go back and check them out. You know, you have to take some of this with a word of caution. You're talking about stuff that occurred 50 years ago.

LW: Okay. And so, as far as your living here, near campus, what was that like? What was your impression of the transportation system at the time? How did you come to campus each day? So what was it like living near campus and working in campus for you?

GL: I didn't always live near campus for the first several years. I did--I was not married to--I lived on Probasco, good place. And then moved out to Western Hills. Shared apartment with a fellow who's kind of a good friend, became a professor down North Carolina University and has a very distinguished family. Lived out there and I drove little Ford cars, [inaudible] I taught those engineers, they [inaudible] in those days. And I remember coming in down Western Boulevard and there was a little hill there. This day days before front wheel drive or cars, it was snowing much as it was this morning. And I came up behind a woman in a car that got out and shoveled. She was stuck, shoveled under her front wheel, and got in the car and drove off. I told that to those engineering students, they still remind me of that. That really tickled them that this occurred and then we have been Ambling Village, as I told him for six years, and I we moved into the place where we now live when I became provost, and [inaudible] So we have--again, almost 50 years.

LW: And then did you bus here, for when you lived in Clifton? Did you bus here or did you still drive?

GL: Drove. There were no buses. [inaudible] [phone rings] I'm sorry. [To phone] Sorry, Carl, I'll call you back. I have to leave this on because the wife's recovering from knee surgery, I'm the chief rehaber. [Laughs]

LW: So we talked about that a little bit. So, do you have any--did you have any involvements with the scholarly field outside of UC?

GL: I didn't have much time for a lot of that often. My wife did. And she carried me along good deal with time. She was and is a great part [inaudible] Democrat. And she was a delegate to Democratic Convention in Florida in 1972. And our great sponsors now the Vice Mayor of Cincinnati, David Mann, we are great friends. And, you know, who was dominating through 72? Richard Nixon won a landslide election, I think Democrat only took two states at that. And two years later, he was had resigned. George McGovern. George McGovern was a classmate of Tom Bonner. And then she was the assistant to the Mayor. Certain--and when he became mayor later, and he appointed me to the Bicentennial Commission in this historic Cincinnati in 1988. And have you ever been to Bicentennial Park downtown? That's the most visible thing. There's so many parks down there. Now you've been there. If you'll go in, there's a brick to the bicentennial commission and my name is on one of them. [Laughs] And then Dottie was the editor of the Cincinnati heritage magazine, Cincinnati history. Worked 25 years, I don't know. So I kept in contact with the city a good deal that way. And then she worked for Legal Aid Society, you know, what the Legal Aid Society is?

LW: I don't, I'm sorry.

GL: Volunteer lawyers. She was the organizer of that, to help the poor, and those that need legal assistance. And then after that, and she's still a member of HOME, you know what that is? Housing Opportunities Made Equal.

LW: Okay, I did know what that is

GL: She was president of that for that for a while. And still a report board member of it. So she pulled me into some of those factors. But I'll tell you, there's a full time job being her.

LW: And when did you retire from UC?

GL: 98

LW: And are you still involved with UC academically beyond retirement? Were you?

GL: Not so much academically, but I'm a member of the Emeriti Board, which is sponsoring this. And, I'll give a little money, after this [Laughs] And you'll probably get more, if you behave.

LW: Well, thank you for allowing us tonight to interview today. And we really appreciate your time.

GL: I'm grateful. As an old historian, you know, you have to learn if you don't know, you have to take a lot of this with a grain of salt unless you--particularly the factual part unless you verify it as others. So reminiscences is not exactly history if you give a flavor to it. It's a sense of how people felt, but it's not historically totally valid until you corroborated other sources. So am I right?

Fritz Casey-Leiniger: Indeed, exactly. I have to say that listening to you listening to you talk today. Helped me--helped enrich my knowledge, well of you, and of the department. And I think you--that kind of give you--I think you said it gives you a flavor of the history. And so going back and forth between these reminiscences that provide a really valuable flavor and then you know nailing down the facts with you know, we were at the UC archives yesterday and Kevin showed us how to, you know, do research and in the University Archives. Going back and forth between the oral histories and the University Archives will provide, you know, both the factual stuff and you know, the very rich personal reminiscences.

GL: I had such a hard time University as provost. a president that was not good. And all those papers are in the archives, but it's just too bitter experience to go back to look at them after maybe one of these times. If your people want to look at them, do insist they take you in there, but if you want to call me about or talk to me about it I'd be happy to.

FC: Great. I think that will help. Yeah.

LW: Thank you so much.

GL: I'll bet I was quicker. [Laughs]