

Clayton State University Archives

Faculty Oral History Project #001 Transcript

Transcription of the “Interview with Dr. Gordon Baker” was conducted on 31st day of January, 2019 at 12:30 pm. Oral history subject Dr. Gordon Baker, former Dean of Library at Clayton State University, was interviewed upon his retirement from the institution by his Executive Assistant Ms. Heidi Benford. Introduction statement giving general information about the recording session appears at the start of the audio recording. The interview recording took place in the CSU Archives Department’s Reading Room located on the second floor of the Library Building. Pictures of this interview session are contacted within this session’s materials of the Oral History Project Collection.

Heidi: Good afternoon Dr. Baker. I am so happy to have you here today to answer a couple of questions for your oral history. Because we wanted to get a little insight of your years here at Clayton State University, and even though there has been a name change over the last fifty years of its existence, we wanted to get your take on it. So, I have some questions I would like to ask you so here we go.

When and where were you born, and did you grow up in the same place?

Gordon: Umm I was born at Georgia Baptist Hospital in Atlanta. And I have spent most of my life in South Metro Atlanta.

Heidi: Ok and your parents and what was their occupation?

Gordon: My parents were Howard F. Baker and Mary N. Baker and they both were career educators. My dad was a teaching principal, a principal, and super intendant of Henry County Schools. My mother was a classroom teacher and retired with thirty one years of teaching from the Henry County School System.

Heidi: Alrighty, well you have a wealth of experience in the education system and it seem that’s wonderful and I hope that the students you’ve taught value what you had to offer and gave them some insight and encouragement to continue with their education and hopefully become an educator like you. From there when did you start you career in education? And what motivated you to do it, and was there a lot of family support because of their education background? Or let us know, did you have another career path?

Gordon: Well, my parents never pushed me towards education. They wanted me to do anything else but. And at one time I wanted to be an architect. I used to design houses and all but then when it got to high school and I had to take Geometry and Trigonometry I knew that wasn’t my goal in life. So I next decided I wanted to be a Botany and Biology teacher because one of my favorite aunts taught Botany and Biology at Athens High School in Athens, Georgia. And she always was so excited about it and so when I came to Clayton, when it was Clayton Junior College, I took the first Biology class and we had to dissect a pig. That ended that story so I decided I would fall back and become a high school English and Social Studies teacher. And

after graduating Clayton with my A.A. I went to Valdosta State and there, the very first semester, I took an Education class and I also had my major professor for my English classes. He was a very, very pro William Falkner and I could not stand William Falkner's writing. So I knew it would be a long haul and I dreaded that whole semester – quarter. And I thought what was I going to do to overcome this hateful dislike of Falkner. And in my Education class I saw this video, no think it was a 16-millimeter movie I don't think there was a video yet. But anyway, we watched this. It was on Elementary Education and I suddenly realized "that's what I wanted to do". I wanted to be an elementary school teacher and teach everything and work with them [students] in their formative years. So umm I made a career path which caused me to have to go back and retake some introductory classes that I did not have to take as a Secondary Ed [education] major. And so I began my career taking Elementary Ed classes. But I always knew that I wanted to work in a library too, so I got a minor in library science and that. So when I graduated, I had a BS [Bachelor of Science] in Elementary Ed [education], and a minor in library science.

Heidi: Wow, that is very impressive. So, I hear that you said that you attended Clayton Junior College. So when did you start working at Clayton State University now, but I know there were name changes over the years, and how long have you worked for the University?

Gordon: I started working at Clayton Junior College on January 9th, 1979. So, I had been here over forty years.

Heidi: Wow --

Gordon: And I was hired as the evening and weekend librarian. At that time, we [library] were only open on Sunday, so I worked 2 nights a week, and worked on Sunday.

Heidi: So what do you think was your most happiest moment working at Clayton State, and also what was your most challenging experience at the University?

Gordon: [Hesitation] Ugh you know I hate to umm say this, but I think the happiest moment I had was when I was named Director of the Library.

Heidi: Ok.

Gordon: That had been a goal and I accomplished it and that would be right with the day we cut the ribbon for the totally renovated library. I think those were my happiest points about working here. And you said the worse?

Heidi: What is your most challenging experience?

Gordon: Most challenging experience has always been dealing with the budget.

Heidi: I think that's everywhere [giggle]. Who do you think was your most influential person that you worked with during your time?

Gordon: At Clayton?

Heidi: Yeah, at Clayton. I'm sorry.

Gordon: I think probably Bob Fox, who was our former Director. He and, He and I sort of mentored each other through many situations. And then another person would be Winnie Thacker, who was our umm Secretary/ Administrative Assistant. She was always a good sounding board, and always gave great advice.

Heidi: While working at CSU [Clayton State University], what accomplishment are you most proud of?

Gordon: Oh that would have to be the renovation of the library building. When we built this library, and yes I was here [Clayton State University] when we moved in this library, it was only supposed to be for fifteen years, so really in 1995 we should've had a new building, but we didn't. And, over the process we lost space, and finally umm in 2005 we were basically just a one floor of our building library. And it just was not enough space so I was so excited when we were told we needed to renovate the library we would get the lower level back.

Heidi: That's great. So, not only the library has changed, what has changed throughout the history with the institution?

Gordon: Well, the institution, you know I've been here [Clayton State University] ... I was here [Clayton State University] two years as a student from 1971 to 1973 and it was really a very unique place. I had gone to Stockbridge High School which was a very small high school at that point in time. We only had 122 students in our graduating class. So, coming to Clayton, I think maybe we had 1500 to 2000 students. So it was still a very intimate campus, and everybody really knew each other, or at least we waved at each other. The professors all knew the students. It was really like family and I'm glad to say that over our 49 years, I think we still, well 50 years in May, we've still got a family-like atmosphere. Sometimes it's not as close as it used to be, but I still think our faculty still care about our students in a positive way. It's just not about retention, but about how they're progressing and their achievement.

Heidi: Okay. Is there anything you miss the most about the way it used to be?

Gordon: [Laugh] I really miss food services, how it used to be. [Heidi laughing in background] When the majority of time I was here, the food services were over in Magnolia Hall. [lengthy pause] Edgewater Hall, it was in Edgewater Hall. The student center was downstairs, and we had a grill in there, and the ladies who worked the grill knew every student. You could walk up, and they would tell you exactly what you were going to have. And the food was good, of course it probably wasn't healthy with all the grease and all, but it was good. But it was just a neat atmosphere down there and I don't think we have that now with food services.

Heidi: [Hesitates] I don't know Gordon because we still have Linda who does--

Gordon: We still have Linda [mumbling between the two]

Heidi: It kind of keeps that connect with the past. What is your earliest memory about Clayton State or what great stories or legends do you have about the University?

Gordon: Well my earliest thoughts about Clayton when I umm when I was a student, I came up for orientation and I had broken my ankle in four places before I graduated from high school.

And I had a cast going all the way up my thigh and we had orientation, and I think it was in the middle of August back then. And four of my friends from Stockbridge High and I drove up here [Clayton State University] and I drove, even with that cast on, I could drive. And I drove my mother's great big Mercury. We all piled in and came up from Stockbridge and you know, here I am on crutches walking all over campus and it was a fun day though. We had a good time. But we went out to get in the car, and the car wouldn't crank. [Heidi makes noise] And somebody had left the lights on in the car [laughing among the two]. Now I won't say who, but anyways, someone did and so really the best, the first experience I had was a positive experience with campus security. They came out and got the car started for us and off we went back to Stockbridge. But, I know when I started working here [Clayton State University] there were many things. But another incident before I started to work here though, when I was teaching 5th grade science in Griffin and I arranged with my college biology teacher, Pat Harry, to bring my 5th grade science students to campus for a field trip. And, we worked with umm Dr. Perry, Dr. O.C. Lam, and Dr. Becky Howgard, and ... Dr. Helen Brown, and they had different things set up for the children to do. We spent all day here [Clayton State University], we ate in the cafeteria. But it was a great experience because most of those students in Griffin really had never been to Clayton [County]. And to come and see where I had gone to school, it really meant a lot to them. And we just had a very positive experience. But then when I started to work here [Clayton State University], it was fun because I got to hobnob with a lot of my former professors. And I think my funniest experience, Dr. Downs, who who's the University's 1st president, he was president when I was here [Clayton State University] and when I started working here [Clayton State University]. One night, I was here, and he came in and he said, "Gordon, I need your opinion on something." I said, "Yes sir." And he had this big book of carpet samples [Heidi laughs] and he said, "I need you to tell me which shade of carpet that you prefer for the library to be re-carpeted in." And I – here I am, the part-time, night librarian and he's asking me. And I said, "Well [stutters], don't we need to get the Director's [of the library] opinion?" He said, "No I want your opinion. You've been here, you know what we need," and all this. And little did he know that I was also color blind [Heidi laughs] but, anyway, we started talking about each colors. And I made him tell me what color he thought it was because I used to work at Macy's in men's, and there were a time when we had to help customers pick out ties. And I always let them tell me what color they thought tie they wanted, in what color the tie showed them it was. So, we decided on a color for the carpet and my boss called me the next day and said, "I got this memo from Dr. Downs, he said that the two of ya'll picked out carpet for the library." And I said, "Yes, I was pressured to do that." And he said, "Hey, at least we're getting carpet!" [Heidi laughs] So, I think that's one of the funniest things that happened.

Heidi: Oh, so you're responsible for that orange carpet we had?

Gordon: No, we already had the orange carpet. It was the carpet in the center that we picked out, which did not hold up very well. And did not last long. It sort of faded away.

Heidi: It was a lot of walking back and forth through those shelves. So, I know you mentioned earlier that Bob Fox and Winnie Thacker were influential to you by working at Clayton. Were there any others that you worked closely with?

Gordon: Well in the early days, the person I was paired with was the Head of Circulation and her name was Barbara Studley. And she was from Massachusetts, but I never had been around people from Massachusetts. So I learned a lot about living up that way. And Barbara and I really got to be good friends. I got to be friends with her family. And Barbara eventually went back and became a teacher. And [then] became a school media specialist. And I was always happy that she got that experience. But, you know— there have been a lot of people along the way Kathy Jeffery, who eventually was our [Clayton State University] Associate Dean was always very helpful and a good friend. Debra Meyer who was Head of Technical Services was a very good friend of mine and we did a lot of things together. Gwen Bell was really my mentor in reference. She was Head of Reference for thirty years. And then I came on board and took her place. And we've just been good friends over the years, and I've watched her children grow. And then Rosemary Fischer, our Archivist, is a good friend. And then there umm let's see umm Cara Mullen, who was my first administrative assistant. And she grew up through the ranks, and then there was Jennifer Duke, who was my administrative assistant. And finally there was Heidi Benford [Heidi says "yay" in the background] who is narrating this conversation, or asking the questions [laughing in background]. And she and I have been together for 25 years and [laughing] it's been a wild time [background noise]. There's never been a dull moment with Heidi and she's really been a great friend and mentor.

Heidi: Well you've been a great boss and before you even became my director. You were a wonderful librarian, very down to earth, very open, and just real comfortable to be around and work with. I greatly appreciate you as the person you are, and that has been good, a very good inspiration to myself. But now comes to the good part!

Gordon: Uh oh.

Heidi: You're retiring! So what are you looking forward to the most as you enter this enter into this retirement stage?

Gordon: The most umm I-I'm looking forward to not getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning. I think there should only be one 5 o'clock, and that's in the afternoon when you can have adult beverages [laughing], even though I don't have that many adult beverages.

Heidi: Well you can have a ginger ale [laughs].

Gordon: That's right! A ginger ale.

Heidi: Or a root beer.

Gordon: But I'm looking forward to that. I'm ... you know it's funny that because people think well when you're retiring, you're just giving up and going away. Well no, I'm not I-I'm cutting back working. But that's going to give me more time to come back to Clayton State and visit, and see people at a different level, you know. Come back and rummage through the archives [laughing in background] and just visit people. I and I look forward to moving into that realm. And I'm still going to be professionally active and teaching part-time at Valdosta State in their Masters of Library Information Sciences program, so I'm going to be around.

Heidi: Aww that's good to hear. So, we won't lose contact with you. We'll just come knocking at your door [giggle].

Gordon: Well that's right, and I expect seeing a steady parade of Clayton State people in Savannah, Georgia.

Heidi: So how- with you going into retirement, how do you think your coworkers will remember you?

Gordon: I hope they [laughing] I hope they will remember that I was nice and kind most of the time. I think though the most I hope is that they remember that I was not a micro manager. That I was laid back, but I expected them to do their jobs, and for the most part they all did their jobs. I ... you know I just hope they'll have fun memories, and I hope they'll be glad to see me when I come back [Heidi laughs].

Heidi: I know I will if no one else is. So, it's always a delight to be around you. And what do you think you'll miss most once you retire, and what do you want people to know about working at Clayton State, or even in the Library Department?

Gordon: I think I will miss the people the most. The people here in the library are really all good friends, and I have some very good friends in other parts of the campus. And I think missing almost daily contact with them will be the most difficult. But thank goodness we do have email, we have free telephone long distance now so we can chat. But you know, I think what I want people to know most about Clayton State is, even though we 7,000 students, it's still a small college campus and I think it's still a community. It's not as intimate as it used to be, but it still is a nice, friendly campus. You're not overrun with students. The faculty, for the most part, still care about student progress, and about the safety and the happiness of the students. So even over this 40 years, we still have some of the basic tenants that we had when we started.

Heidi: Yeah, things have changed but in some instances for the better. Umm and but you still love what we do here at Clayton State, and still support it as best as you know how. So, things are kind of wrapping up. Is there anything you would like to talk about that we didn't get to touch on or anything that you would like to add?

Gordon: I think one thing to know is that the people at Clayton State have always been so willing to work with the community and especially with the high school students. When I was a high school librarian, the people who were here on the weekends, wasn't me [laughs], were always glad to see me if I brought my Eagles Landing [school located Henry County] students to do research, or really anything as long as they had a little advance notice to let them know we were coming, we always welcomed the community in. Especially the high school students. And I and I think that made us a good partner in the education of the surrounding counties. And I think, you know, I think that's important that we're sort of a role model, and I always like to say Dr. Downs, used to like to keep the university quiet. Because he said we were always the education center. But we just didn't want to spread that around a lot. And I always said you know, Clayton State was the crown of the Southside, or the Southern Crescent, and the library was the crown jewel.

Heidi: That's a good interpretation with what we all know. Well that's about it that I have for you Dr. Baker. And I greatly appreciate you taking the time to give a little insight on your time here at Clayton State University, and how you got into the field of education. We wish you all the best on your retirement, and we look forward for you to come on back to visit. And as always remember: "Dreams Made Real" [Clayton State University's tagline].

Gordon: That's right. They are. Thank you.

Heidi: Thank you.