

INTERVIEWEE: HENRY CORD MEYER
Founding Chairman, Department of History

INTERVIEWER: Samuel C. McCulloch
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SM: This is an interview with Professor Henry Cord Meyer, Founding Chairman of the Department of History. This is an interview on May 11, 1990 in HOB-360.

HM: Well, as you know, Sam, in response to your question, will you repeat the question, please?

SM: The question is: Since our last taped interview in 1974, what changes at UCI have occurred that you consider significant?

HM: Well, as you know, Sam, I have been retired now for ten years; and, in that capacity, I have had absolutely no contact with the ongoing affairs of the university, with the exception of my honorary position as a member of the Board of Directors of the University Club. And I'm really very much of an outsider, therefore, and hardly in a position to judge. I would make probably only one comment, based upon my experience as a board member of the University Club, and also as the result of a few conversations with my fellow historians over the last two weeks. That comment relates to what strikes me as the ever increasing bureaucratization of the administration of our university. It seems to me that in every way and in every area things are becoming more and more and more complicated

and bureaucratized. Things are slowing down. Things are not getting done effectively in various areas. And the thing that strikes me as being most indicative of this change in the quality of the administration of the university as we are . . . as I perceive it from the outside and from the public relations stance of the university, we are in process of building a world class university. In that connection, I perceive that we in the History Department have recently hired a so-called super star whom we are welcoming to our history staff, for a combined annual salary of a little bit more than \$150,000 a year. I expressed to some of my colleagues some curiosity on my part that we were thus acquiring at incredible cost an individual whose major career is already behind him, whereas we are just now losing one of our really important younger American historians to the city of New York university system. And I expressed some dismay at what I thought was a transaction in which the History Department might not really be the gainer. And two of my conversationalists said that I had missed the major point, that the reason the department needed a super star was that in the new directions of our university administration, only super stars were being listened to. But there was now a fifth, or is it an eighth wheel, in the administration around the Academic Vice Chancellor in which department chairs are virtually unheard from, in which deans take a position of some distance from

what is going on and that there is, in fact, a new body of consultants consisting of these super stars, to whom the Academic Vice Chancellor primarily turns for information and advice. And therefore, my conversants in the History Department said the major point was not so much as to get a significant historian in the department as it was to get a voice that would speak for the department in this new administrative bureaucratic development of our world class university.

SM: Now, from this I gather that Jack [John P.] Diggins is leaving us.

HM: Yes, I spoke to Jack yesterday and Jack said, well, he wanted to try that on for size. He was taking a leave for one year, but he was very much intrigued at the thought of joining that kind of area and university set-up and working in a major city of the United States with all of its academic and research resources and so forth.

SM: On the other hand, Henry, he might start to hanker after California, as we always hoped when we recruited people that they wanted to come to California. Now, the next question, Henry: How has the Department of History changed? Since you and I often will eat with one member or another, so what's your judgment?

HM: Sixteen years have now passed since our last interview about (inaudible) the university and the department. At that time,

we had about a dozen members among our historians and I estimate that today it's a little more than twice that number of historians who are with us. What strikes me as the major change that has been occurring is that sixteen years ago there was a group of very active and fresh militant faculty who were in process of making various kinds of changes in our curriculum. Today these individuals are all middle aged and they seem to be somewhat on the defensive to maintain the changes of sixteen years ago in their direction of . . . something in the way of universal historical developments that emphasized class struggle, the evils of capitalism, alienation and other ideological themes of that era. In its place, it is indicative now that there is a return to a more factually analytical kind of social history, a concern for intelligent writing abilities and a re-emphasis of certain of the more traditional theories and areas of history teaching.

There is one thing, however, that continues to be missing at any major American university, and it is rather epidemic in our whole California university system, and that is the lip service that is paid to teaching as a function of the professor, but that the actuality and the circumstances appears to be that teaching is hardly regarded at all in the distribution of the merits and of the promotions. The historians, including those that were first recruited here at the campus, were rather outstanding in their own interest in

pursuing teaching and making teaching a major component of our work. A few of them that I have talked with still maintain that as an ideal, but I am afraid that they fear that they are involved in a losing battle.

Just before sitting down with you here this morning, I just took a quick . . . I walked down the hall to check the various office hours that our colleagues, both younger and more middle-aged, are making available in order to work with their students individually. The office hours that are offered run between one and one-half and two and one-half hours per week. And I note with some wry interest that of all the posted office hours, only that of Samuel C. McCulloch indicates that he is also available by appointment. I believe that tells us something very important about what is happening to teaching at the American university.

SM: That's right, Henry. And furthermore, I also give my home telephone number and tell them that they can always call me if they have any problems. Well, next, Henry, what is your judgment . . . Well, you've really given me your judgment of the administrative changes. Do you want to pass over that one now? Yes. Well, four: What effects does the new freshman mix make? What effects? the freshman class this year is the first class ever to have a minority of Caucasians in our student body.

HM: Well, I'm afraid I'm really not in a position to comment at all importantly on that. It is a subject of considerable discussion in the daily newspaper and in various kinds of problems that are arising about the question of minorities, both among students and the teaching staff of the university. And I believe it would be better left to examine those kinds of published sources, or to speak with people in the administration who are intimately in contact with these issues.

SM: Well, I can tell you from my personal experience, since I taught a course a year since I retired, one course, and the number of orientals in my courses has jumped from . . . Before I went to Australia, before I retired, I normally had about three, and now I have about seven. And I can tell you about how I have to work with them about the English and writing of an essay. Next question, Henry: How is your research work coming along? You continued as an historian. You have gotten out or will get out a book of your collected works. And your book on airships will be published by the Smithsonian. What comments do you have?

HM: Let me indicate precisely what the relationship of the word "airships" to research has. My book is entitled, Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics, 1890-1940. It is basically a series of topical examinations of various aspects of the political manipulation of technology as seen in the example of the great

rigid airships of the 1920s and the 1930s. The book that I am completing as a second volume in my collected works has as its centerpiece a long essay that I have been involved in researching and fragmentarily writing over a period of the last fifty years, a procedure that I would not recommend to any of my younger colleagues. This particular essay deals with the question of a slogan that has turned into a concept. That slogan is Drang nach Osten, and relates to the whole millennial long history of German pressures eastward against the various Slavic peoples of Eastern and southeastern Europe.

I am less concerned with the facts of that long, 1,000-year process of pressure and eastward movement than I am in the question of how the slogan arose and what its fate has been as it has moved from a single instance of use by a Pan-Slavist agitator to becoming a general historical conception among non-German historians. I end the essay on the theme that the German historians have a major task ahead of them now in 1990 to sit down with their Slavic colleagues and to work out some combined notion, some combined conceptualization, that they can agree upon to describe and to deal with the positive and the very negative aspects of that 1,000-year-old process of eastward movement.

Beyond that, I hope that I will still be able to complete a third book which will be a very clearly intellectually

oriented study of the political history of the airship from earliest times until its demise in 1940.

SM: Well, that will be very interesting. I hope the Smithsonian will take that volume, too, Henry. The last question, you have free rein here. I want to have any comments you may wish to make about the writing of the history of UCI and what I might include in it and so forth.

HM: As regards the writing of the UCI history, I think that I would make just one suggestion that I think would have been helpful to me if I were undertaking such a formidable task. I notice that the years are passing and that you are trying to keep up with the changes, up to the most recent events, as indicated by your question about the student body mix for 1989 and 1990. I wondered if it would be helpful to individuals that you are still going to interview if you would be able to take out a little time now and to stretch out in an initial written draft three kinds of things. First of all, the intellectual background of the development of the UCI campus, as growing out of the educational reforms of the late 1950s and the master plan. And then, secondly, a topic of a few pages dealing with the ways in which Irvine and various people in Irvine, like Walter Burroughs and Joan Irvine and others that we have known about in our time, how they worked with the university and with the community to bring the new campus to this particular area. And thirdly, then, perhaps an overview

of the work of those first few people who came on campus, Dan Aldrich and the Vice Chancellor for Financial Affairs . . .

SM: L. E. Cox.

HM: L. E. Cox, and I think one of the very first of our intellectuals on campus, Professor [Edward] Steinhaus. And how this very small group of experts, constituting maybe only a handful between 1961 and late 1962, how they worked to establish the first efforts onto which then could be built the kinds of activities that you participated in when you came together with the first of the other deans to do your work. I raise this point because I think it would be very helpful to any other interviewees, that they could have maybe ten or fifteen pages of your prose to peruse about that very early period, that would give them a backstop against which--to use an expression from practicing tennis--to bat their balls back and forth as they talked with you. That's about the only comment that I would presume to make.

SM: Well, I think that's very helpful. And furthermore, Henry, I've got quite extensive notes. Actually, Dan Aldrich was appointed in 1962, Ed Steinhaus came in 1963, in July, and I came in December of 1963, or I actually arrived in 1964 in January. And I shall think about that and I think that would help. Well, thank you very much, Henry. This has helped me. I wish we could get more from you. Have you got anything more to say?

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HM: (Shakes his head, indicating no.)

END OF INTERVIEW