

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Walter Powell Interview
May 5, 2009
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Teresa Debacco
Transcribed by Morgan Bonekovic
Proofread and edited by Rebecca Cunningham and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Dr. Walter Powell

TD: Today is May 5, 2009, and I am Teresa Debacco for the Rock Voices Oral History Program. I'm here today with Walter Powell. How are you today?

WP: Fine, thanks.

TD: I want to start off with a little biographical information about you: your full name, date of birth, where you came from originally, just some basic facts.

WP: Sure. Well now, my title here at the university is Dr. Walter E. Powell. I'm a professor of political science and law, and I was born and raised in New York City. I was born January 6, 1929 and this was the year of the stock market crash, the Great Crash of 1929.

Now, when I was born in the end of the 1920s here, the country was very prosperous, they called it the "Roaring Twenties." What's interesting is President Coolidge was in office when I was born, and a few months later Herbert Hoover came in as president and he had a terrible term in office because of the Depression, the stock market crash. The Depression got worse, and millions of people lost jobs, lost their homes, businesses. It was just terrible.

I remember this growing up as a little boy in New York; I saw all this, it made a big impression on me. In fact, Hoover lost reelection because of the Great Depression. He was a good man, but he couldn't do anything about it. His philosophy of government was "the economy will right itself." Well of course it didn't, and the Democrats with Franklin Roosevelt promised they could do something differently and they got overwhelmingly elected.

Roosevelt, according to historians and political scientists, was the greatest president of the twentieth century. As a little boy I took great interest in politics. Probably unusual for a little kid, but I was more interested in politics than I was in sports [laughs]. I played baseball, football, and hockey like other kids but when I came home after that I turned the radio on—no television in those days—and I listened to all the news analysts. They'd all talk about what was going on and I'd listen to it. I remember my parents were amused that a little kid would be interested in politics, but I was.

And of course those were momentous days: the Great Depression, what we call the New Deal, the Hundred Days of Franklin Roosevelt doing all kinds of experimental legislation to get the country moving [pause] Welfare, free medical care, CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) for young men to have jobs. TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority], WPA [Works Progress Administration]: hiring people to do public works, post offices, dams, national parks. The government, for the first time, became a big employer and hired millions of people to work, giving them income. So the country got moving very slowly. The Depression lasted from 1929 until 1939 and those were my formative years, so I remember those things very vividly, very vividly, like they happened yesterday.

My parents lived in New York City. The two of them came from Connecticut and they moved to New York City when they got married. They moved around from house to house, apartment to apartment, like most people did in the city, and I went to public schools and I got a very fine education. I was a very early reader. I remember I got promoted and skipped grades because I was such a fast reader.

When it came to high school, I went to a high school in Manhattan which specialized in aviation. I had an early interest in aviation, and I think that developed during World War II, because, you know, the United States didn't get into the war right away. World War II started in 1939 when Germany attacked Poland, but we didn't get into the war until December 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt had to build up the armed forces: the Army, Navy, Air Corps, and so on.

I had a particular interest in the Air Corps and aircraft, so in high school I studied aircraft technology with the idea of becoming either part of the Air Force or an aeronautical engineer, something like that. And I got part time jobs at airports to learn something about flying, and actually got a pilot's license when I was fifteen and a half. I was a little young but, you know, you fibbed about your age in those days about a lot of things [laughs].

Just before I graduated from high school I joined the New York Guard. Again, I was a little bit underage but everyone did it to get into the military, and when I became of age I joined the Army Air Force. So I served, you might say, the tail end of World War II, and so the war made a big impression on me. We built up the mightiest military force in the world: twelve million people in the American military. Nobody had a force that big, and of course we became the industrial and military power in the world. We helped defeat the Japanese, the Germans, and when the war was over, the world was free. The United Nations came about as a result of our doings, and unfortunately President Roosevelt died in 1945, just a month before the end of the war, so he didn't live long enough to see what he had accomplished. But he does go down as the greatest president in war and in peace, in the twentieth century. Of course George Washington and

Abraham Lincoln are listed number one and number two, but Roosevelt's number three. So that period was great for me.

Another thing in the military, I liked it so much I thought about making a career of it. I did some flying, I did electronic work, and I thought seriously about it but some people said to me, "Get a university education. If you want to make a career of the military, get a university education." And so I listened to them. I got out, and under the G.I. Bill of Rights, the World War II benefits, I was able to go to college for four years under a scholarship, and I attended the University of Connecticut. My parents had come from Connecticut. Turned out to be a very fine choice.

The University of Connecticut had any major discipline you wanted to study, and I was particularly interested in law, political science, history, and as my studies progressed I became interested in college teaching. Some college professors became role models for me. I admired them so much that I thought I'd like to do something with the law, and so I ended up basically teaching political science and law, and I did go to law school. I attended West New England Law School, got a law degree, and I got admitted to practice law in Pennsylvania.

I taught first at some public high schools in New York for a few years, but that wasn't what I wanted to do and I moved up to the college level. I taught some courses for the University of Connecticut, part time at their branch. But then I got a full time job at Central Michigan University, taught there for a year, then I got a job at Springfield College, Massachusetts and taught there for three years, again teaching political science, history, and some law courses.

And then I found an opening here at Slippery Rock University. This was back in '65 and I came here for an interview. I'd never really heard of the university except football scores on the radio, that was about it. I had no idea where it was located, and I discovered when I came out here that it was a beautiful location. Western Pennsylvania: beautiful scenery, trees, lakes, rivers, very much like New England, so I felt at home right away. Of course I didn't know anybody, but people were very friendly: the faculty, the students. I loved it. And after a couple years I got tenure and became a tenured professor here.

Now in the early days Slippery Rock was much smaller, I think around three thousand students when I got here. Faculty was somewhat under 150. A lot of our courses were taught in Old Main, believe it or not. Old Main today is an administration building; it's the oldest building on campus. But that building was one of the early college buildings where everything was done: classrooms, gym [laughs], offices. So when I taught, we had our departments in that building. There was the Economics, Business, Social Science Department, the English Department, and the president's office was downstairs on the first floor. Almost everything was in that one building. Of course there was West Hall and East Gym, and the field house was the furthest

building away from the main campus, the Field House. Today, we've got much, much more beyond it.

So the college was very small and you got to know everybody. Our department was very small. I'm looking here at a photo of the early days of the department; there were actually three of us in it. I was one of the early members of the department. They hired me to teach political science, and Dr. Hayhurst, Dr. Selman and myself were the entire faculty of Political Science. Three of us, and we taught everything. We taught all the subjects: foreign, domestic, you name it we taught it.

As the years went on we expanded our department. We picked up Dr. Larry Cobb, Dr. Don Megnin, later Dr. George Force, Dr. Barry Hammond, and that was the early days. But our department expanded from three instructors to twelve. I also served as chair for two years; I tried that out and I felt two years was enough for me and I'll let somebody else do it. So we've had other people as chair, a number of people. The current one is Dr. Mark Daniels; before him we had Dr. Richard Martin. Dr. Richard Martin served for many years, and all have done a fine job.

One of my chief responsibilities in recent years has been Pre-Law chairperson, because I'm a lawyer besides being a professor. I have a Ph.D., but I have also a Juris Doctorate degree and I'm admitted to practice law. So I've been teaching a lot of the law courses: Constitutional Law, Courts, Criminal Law, Civil Liberties, courses like that. I brought the knowledge I learned in the court room—dealing with clients, dealing with judges, district attorneys—into my courses.

I've always felt if you're going to teach something you should know what you're talking about, and practical experience as a lawyer is the way to do it. There's no substitute. You can read about the law, read books, but it's not the same as being in the courtroom speaking in front of a jury, talking to clients, going to jail to visit people, there's no substitute for that, you can't get that out of books. It's like teachers who have practiced teaching: you got to actually do it. If you don't do it it's all theory, it's all theory, see?

So over the years we've had a pretty good, I would say pretty [good] law program, many of our students have gone to law school. Some become judges, lawyers, U.S. Marshals; we even had one student who became the head of the criminal division of the FBI. Now that's pretty good, I would say. I'm not saying I was all responsible for that, but I'm saying that our university—and I'm sure other departments contributed too. But we've had a good pre-law program and a student who goes here will find that he can't get a better education.

We've had one student go to Yale University Law School, full scholarship. That's not an easy thing to do, to get a full scholarship for Yale Law School. A graduate of Slippery Rock

University: that's the kind of thing we professors are proud of. When our students come here I say, "You needn't be ashamed of going to a state university." I've worked at Yale University myself; I took some graduate courses there. Our teaching is comparable here. There's nothing wrong with going to a state university. Many people succeed in medical school, in law school, and of course the main reason is [it's] less costly. You know if you're going to Yale or Harvard you're paying \$50,000 or more a year, and here you can probably get your education for less than half of that. And it's just as good, just as fine. I know: I attended the University of Connecticut myself.

I have many, many fond memories of the people come and gone over the years, very fine professors and presidents. Now one girl, one lady stands out in particular and that's Wilma Cavill. You know she's the longest serving professor in the state system. I think this is her fifty-first year. She is a physical education coach, teacher, and she was one of the first people I met here when I came on campus. And oddly enough, she knew exactly where I came from. She had visited and worked in the town in Massachusetts where I had lived, a little town called Southwick. So we hit it off right away. And of course Wilma has been a great success and an inspiration to all of us over the years through her teaching and also as a union leader. She was president of our faculty union and is still very heavily involved with that.

As far as the buildings I worked in, as I said I started teaching in Old Main. Old Main was in bad shape in those days. For a fire escape they had a rope hanging out the window: that was the fire escape [laughs]. Ceilings were coming down in the classroom and we had buckets to catch the rain water. The building was in pretty bad shape. They were in fact thinking of tearing it down but they decided they had to preserve the historic building. I'm glad they did.

West Hall was the same way; it's called Carruth-Rizza Hall now. That building was slated to be destroyed when Paul Rizza, a retired professor and his wife, their family, Mrs. Carruth, donated the money to restore that building. And it cost well over one million dollars believe it or not, and they saved that building. Now that is an example of selflessness on the part of a family, a professor. I think that's just a marvelous thing, just a marvelous thing.

Myself, I was unable to do anything like that, but I did establish a one thousand dollar a year scholarship, pre-law scholarship, for a student every year at Slippery Rock, with the help of the Butler Bar members, which is the organization lawyers belong to in Butler County. So I'm proud of that: that I established a thousand dollar a year scholarship. We've had three or four students over the recent years taking benefit of it.

Leadership on the campus: we've had so many fine presidents over the years. Dr. Aebersold, who in fact was a department member here in Physical Education, he was chair, and then he

became vice president, and then became president. I think he's one of the first faculty members who went through the ranks, in my memory anyway, from faculty member, chair of the department, up to vice president and then president of the university. Much was done under his work.

Dr. Watrel, another fine president who did a lot, establishing the football stadium and expanding the campus. There's so many I just can't mention them all, but our current president [Dr. Robert Smith] is doing a marvelous job in terms of updating our university and bringing it into the high tech field. New high tech buildings, modernizing, bringing technology to all the classrooms, improving teaching. I think those are things I feel are important over the years.

Students of course [are] very active politically. I remember particularly during the Vietnam War, this was a hot issue in the United States. It divided the American people; it divided campuses, and on our campus students were divided too; faculty were divided. Some students were pro-Vietnam War support, others were not, and we had demonstrations on the campus. I never saw the campus so excited, so active as they were in those days. Peace marches, marches against the war, marches to support the government, and students were very much involved in it. Teach-ins, they used to call them teach-ins. This was the time of the Kent State University shootings where the National Guard shot some students during a demonstration at Kent State. We didn't have anything like that here but we had a lot of activism and involvement by students.

The comparable thing to it was the recent election, when President Obama was running for office. His candidacy seemed to stir up a lot of interest in college campuses around the country. There [were] a lot of young people interested in politics in a way that they hadn't been for quite a while. I was impressed by that. And so you know, I think it explains why Obama won by a large percentage of votes: people were excited about him, his personality, his education. And they have great hopes for his leadership.

So . . . missing Slippery Rock [refers to list of questions]. Well I'll miss the students of course. I think the students are the most important thing in a professor's life. And I've had some wonderful students over the years. In fact I had the grandson of one of my students come into my class [laughs]. He said, "Your class was recommended." I said, "Who recommended it?" He said, "My father . . ." You know, he went on and on. I thought [laughs], "His father . . ." So when you stay at a place long enough, you do begin to get second and third generation of people. I think Miss Cavill can talk about that.

So it's a wonderful thing, I think, professors who has dedicated their lives to knowledge and helping young people and I've felt that is the most important thing in my life. Making money is secondary. I think I could've made a lot more money being a high class, high priced lawyer, and

I had opportunities for that. But I chose to take a job here and keep it here even though the pay was nowhere near what I could've earned practicing at a big law firm. But I don't consider that a sacrifice; I consider it a worthwhile thing to do in my life.

So I'm eighty years old now, I've lived through many wars, I've lived many places, I've seen many economic and political upheavals, but I feel that if you dedicate yourself to some job or career you like, you're going to be happy. I think that's the key to happiness. Find something that you look forward to doing every day, and I've felt that way about teaching. Every day when I get up I look forward to doing it with a smile on my face. I never feel regrets about doing it. I think that's the real key to happiness in professions.

Of course if you'll be lucky enough to find a life partner. In my case I married a girl who actually was a graduate of Slippery Rock University, and we hit it off. She had served in the Air Force, Nancy, and we had five children and they're all grown up now and they have their own children. I have nine grandchildren now; nine grandchildren and one great granddaughter. So what more can you do in one lifetime [laughs]?

TD: I want to backtrack a little bit. I have a couple of questions for you. I saw that you were a member of the U.S. Air Force and that now you've taken an interest in restoring old military aircrafts. Would you like to tell us a little bit about that hobby?

WP: Sure, sure. Well about ten years ago I noticed that a friend of mine had a piece of an aircraft for sale and, you know, it seemed reasonable enough and he was a good friend of mine. So I bought this piece of the aircraft, the cockpit of an airplane. And I got it here to Slippery Rock and then I said, "Gee, wouldn't it be fun if I had the whole thing [laughs]?" So I began to look into that.

What I discovered was that there is a worldwide group of people who are interested in restoring aircraft. Not all military, some civilian, but my particular interest was U.S. Air Force, so I proceeded to acquire parts for this aircraft. It took years to do it, but I got all the parts and then I realized, "Well, I can't do this in my backyard at Slippery Rock." You know, zoning laws and so on. So I bought a piece of land out in Mercer, Findlay Township, about twelve acres. It was just rural land, with just trees on it. And I began to put my aircraft out there and I assembled it. Then I started clearing the woods, and putting up buildings and acquiring more aircraft and more parts and one thing led to another and so now I have a museum out there. It's called the Western Pennsylvania Warbird Military Museum. We have several aircraft; probably the prize of the collection is an F-86 Sabre jet from the Korean War. It's called the finest fighter plane of the Korean War.

I have a Beech C-45, which is an Air Force transport plane, and it also uses the bombardier navigator trainer. I have some World War I aircraft: a Nieuport 17, a Spad 13, Fokker D-8. I have a Y-O-55 which is an experimental aircraft the Air Force used for testing rockets. I have a large uniform collection of all wars going back to the American Revolution right up to the current day displayed and things of that order that connect it with the Air Force, but also the Army, Navy, Marine Corps. Have a little bit of displays for all of the branches of the service. It's become a passion now.

I'll have a little more time to do it since I'm going to be retiring this month. I've already had groups out there. I had groups from the ILR, Institute for Learning in Retirement from Slippery Rock. We had thirty people out there last weekend visiting and touring and I gave lectures on it. I'm very familiar with military history, the Air Force particularly, dating back to World War I, and so I give talks on fighter planes and bombers and fighter pilots and changes in the war. And it's my passion; it's a hobby and now I'm going to be doing a little more—using it by bringing people in and talking to them about it. So, that's how it all developed.

TD: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we wrap up?

WP: Like I say, I'm not going to be leaving here. My wife and I are going to continue to live in the community, so we'll be involved in the university and involved in activities and involved with the students and continue to have this, this wonderful connection with a lifelong passion of teaching and university life.

TD: Okay, well I want to thank you very much for being here with us today for Rock Voices. We always appreciate these interviews. Thank you.

WP: Thank you! You did a good job.