

WILLARD MICKLISH INTERVIEW  
BRUCE KOTTOM, INTERVIEWER  
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Q: My name is Bruce Kottom and I'm doing an oral interview on the topic of community reaction toward the change from an agricultural school to a branch of the University of Minnesota. I'm interviewing Willard Micklish who resided in the Morris area during this time and who is currently the president of the Golden Cream Dairy. Mr. Micklish, how long have you lived in Morris?

All my life. Fifty some years.

Q: Were you associated with any groups involved with getting a college here?

No, not in the early days I wasn't. The formation of a group of people started with Clayton Gay and a few people that tried to get interest (going). Then as the possibility became more possible, why then they found out they had to get much more professional in the organization. Then it started to develop into the West Central Education Development Association.

Q: Who's idea was it to start the college?

My recollection is that it was probably Clayton Gay, who was a lawyer in town. He was a gentleman who always used to tell me in the early days, don't call it a college, he said, we're after university. We're after a branch of the University. He was very much emphasizing that from the very, very beginning days when it was a very remote possibility.

Q: Why was he stressing a branch of the University?

Because he wanted a special type of education that would not be duplicating colleges like St. Cloud, Moorhead, and Mankato.

Q: What was the community's initial reaction when a college was first proposed?

Well, it was just an idea. Everybody thought it was a very good idea. Like anything else, somebody had to do alot of thinking. They had to develop alot of hard work; they had to get it well organized. As the idea became more realistic, as they found out there were fewer and fewer high school students going on to college in West Central Minnesota, the idea made more and more sense. So then it started to snowball. Then they said maybe the University would be receptive, the Board of Regents would be receptive to making it a University (branch). Of course things really got into gear and enthusiasm was there and then the momentum really started to move.

Q: Was there any opposition that was strong at the beginning?

No, I don't think there was any opposition at all. Alot of people thought it wasn't possible, that everything was geared to the large metropolitan area; that they really weren't going to do anything to help the rural areas. The only little opposition was what we'd do without agricultural education because they were phasing out the West Central School of Agriculture, and this was important. But it wasn't being phased out for no other reason than that there were fewer students. Agriculture was (becoming) much more sophisticated and they were becoming more business orientated, rather than just high school type agriculture education.

Q: Were there any groups that were more for the college than others? Like business or farmers groups or...

No, I think everybody was pretty much for it. We tried to bring in alot of groups

of people, but mainly most of these start with the professional and business groups because they seem to be the ones who people collect money from. They seem to be the ones who get things done. Then after it kind of got into gear, well then everybody else checked the ideas, to see if it's what they want or if it interests them. Then they move with the plan or not the plan. But the important thing was that we realized we had to have area wide support, not (just) Morris, Minnesota. But the greatest interest came from Morris because the campus was located here, which was a land grant college branch of the University.

Q: The WCEDA board pushed and pushed for a branch of the University. Did they do this on their own or was the community there to back (them)?

No, it was pretty much community (backed). We had people on the board from at least a 60 mile radius, Montevideo, Benson, Alexandria....Just a lot of people were on the board because we realized that the cultural impact would be all over West Central Minnesota.

Q: This brings up an interesting point I wanted to find out about. When the money was raised, you said it was from the community of Morris, does this refer just to the community of Morris or does it refer to a broad area?

I think it refers to a broader area. I would say that probably 80% was from Morris and then another 15% from the nearby cities and probably 5% from out of the area. Oh, Benson and some of those areas realized that it would be a good idea to have this type of institution here. Basically the people literally banged the doors of the businesses in Morris and even in house to house solicitation.

Q: If you were to estimate, how big a radius would you say that money came in from?

I would say that we've confined it pretty much to about a 30 mile radius, a 30 to 40 mile radius of Morris. In fact we're conducting a fund drive right now. We get (funds) from Wheaton, Herman, Hoffman, Benson, Cyrus, Chokio, Graceville,.... We usually raise about four or five thousand year to help. Basically at this time to recruit students to come to UMM.

Q: Did the community care at that time if it was a branch of the University or just a state college? Did they just want a college period?

Well, The community in the very beginning was not really informed. It was an embryo that was started by Clayton Gay, Senator Bahmler and few businessmen. But Clayton Gay always said 'university'. That was probably a very, very important reason why we got a branch of the University here and other people got state colleges.

Q: But Clayton Gay and Ed LaFave and others on the board...I don't know if Clayton Gay was, but Ed LaFave was a graduate from the University of Minnesota. Did this help or hurt their trying to sell the idea that Morris needed a branch of the University instead of just a state college?

Oh, I think it definitely helped because it's quite important to know the people in the administration of the University, main campus. It's very important to have good political friends, between the politics of education and the realities of the needs. That was quite important, to have somebody identified with a graduating class of the University.

Q: When the Morris community knew the school was coming, how did they feel about donating money?

They were very, very receptive. The headlines came out on the Minneapolis Tribune: University Branch at Morris, Minnesota. It was really a tremendously proud day for everybody. It was easy to get support and money and just anything to make it possible. There was a great deal of competition from many towns all over Minnesota and trying to balance off the political pressures from other communities to West Central Minnesota was quite a decision for the Board of Regents and the politicians.

Q: Did it hurt at all that it was always referred to as the Morris experiment? Did that hurt at all with the donations? People had second thoughts?

No, I don't think so. I think the reason they had to call it an experiment is because that name was more saleable to some of the people that lost out. There was a branch of the University at Duluth; this was the next branch. Of course there were connections in the University here to the farm campus so it was an ongoing relationship but in a different administrative level.

Q: What type of courses were offered at the agricultural school when the agricultural school was still (in operation)?

Well, a high school type of courses plus the agricultural additions to the course. It was never thought of as a Junior college.

Q: Were they enough to satisfy the needs of a kid who was going to be a farmer?

In the early days, yes. They did a very fine job for many, many years. I would imagine for about forty years it operated a very fine farm campus.

Q: You said in the early days. Was it starting that it wasn't offering enough courses for the farmers?

No, I think that the enrollment had declined. You see, we had a lot more farms in the 30's and 40's and 50's. All of a sudden you had a tremendous consolidation of farms. A great number of children leaving the farm for the big city. So naturally enrollment went down with the size of the farm families going down. Where a large farm was 160 acres in the 30's, 40's and 50's, it is considered a very small farm today.

Q: If it did meet the needs, how did the WCEDA convince the farmers that a college was needed here?

The farmers realized that they were getting to become big businessmen with tremendous investments and capital flows. They had to really change from small operators to big operators. Big businessmen. They needed more education and they needed better economics. They had to run the farm just like the businessmen runs his business. So university education was appealing to the farmers.

Q: I listened to the Stan Wenberg transcript and it stated that only 30% of the fathers whose kids attended UMM that first year had gone beyond the eighth grade as far as school went. With this being so, how did the WCEDA convince the community of the need for a college?

Well, this is one of the great things that WCEDA learned: that there was a tremendous lack of high school students going on to college in West Central Minnesota, in fact the lowest (number) of high school students going on to college in the state of Minnesota. Of course that first year shows that not only had they not gone on to high school but that they just quit at eighth grade. So it

showed a great educational drought out here and the great need for getting more educational facilities out in the country rather than concentrating everything into the metropolitan area and compounding metropolitan problems with traffic and pollution and people. To decentralize the state and bring equal opportunities to the whole area.

Q: He also said that at that time it was a very prosperous community as such. How could they convince them if it was already a prosperous area?

Well, there were tremendous changes going on at the time. The farm population was getting smaller, the farms were getting bigger. Businesses were getting larger. (We) were going through a tremendous economic change where everybody realized that if they didn't change with it, they'd be left behind. So they just became more receptive to change. Rather than resisting change, they became more receptive to change.

Q: Did the people of the community hesitate to send their kids to Morris because the faculty that was just coming in was rather green and they didn't have too much teaching experience as such?

No, I think that they relied upon the good judgement of the main campus administration. This was here, and economically many of the people, if it hadn't been here, couldn't have sent their children to college. They could live at home or they could commute. Many of them commuted for 30 miles each way and the only difference was that they had their car mileage. It made it possible for them to get an education. They didn't have any alternatives. They either came here or they didn't get an education. When they came here they found out it was a very great experience because everybody was really hyper and getting things going and moving. We had a tremendous first Provost, Rodney Briggs, who had that tremendous enthusiasm. (He) just went to every high school opportunity to talk to students. He was going day and night, really conveying the enthusiasm, the newness, and the greatness of the University. The perfect man for the job at the time.

Q: Another thing that I remembered about the Wenberg transcript was that it stated that a lot of the farmers would tell their kids that they wanted them to stay on the farm. ...that they'd give them a car if they didn't go to college or something such as that. How did they convince people like that that they should let their kids go to college?

Well, there are always some people who want to keep children at home for their own purposes. But I think as the children looked at other farms dying, merging and so forth, they realized that there was a change coming in farming. The tractors were bigger; the farms were getting bigger. It (took) bigger investments. The bank insisted on better credentials and better judgements; and you got better judgements by being a little bit better educated.

Q: Even if the people in charge of the college were sure it was going to stay, how did you sell it to perspective students because it was always called the Morris experiment? If they wanted to get an education they wouldn't want to go one year maybe and then go some other place....

Well, that only lasted for probably two years and that was basically brought out to appease several other communities. We knew that after one or two years it was pretty much permanent. That experimental name was dropped quite quickly after that.

Q: But how did they sell it to the students?

Well, at that time there was a tremendous amount of students going to college. The big boom as you recall. There was a tremendous need for teachers in those days. This was the days of Russian science, the Sputniks and so forth. Education was really a very high priority. The United States government was pushing it so it was quite important to get good universities and good education. It just snowballed.

Q: So that's how they got the students then?

Right. Everything was full. It was just a tremendous demand. You realize that at this time we did not have Marshall, Minnesota and we did not have a lot of junior colleges. All those came after UMM.

Q: In reading some stuff, I saw where key legislators said that if Morris waited until 1961 there would never be a school there. Why did they say that? What were their reasons for saying that?

I think like anything, this is a matter of timing. Perfect timing and good execution and good judgements, that there's a right time to move. (At) this time the United States government, the state government, everything was "go" on education. The legislators were receptive to it and we had the finest organized education group in the state of Minnesota. There was no other operation that really compared to West Central Education Development Association. We were complimented, in the state capital, on what a fine job we'd done.

Q: That was the '59 legislature that passed it. Why did he think in two years that it would make a difference, that they wouldn't (pass it)?

The idea that we had here kind of snowballed. Then you had many other towns that wanted the same thing that we were successful in. So instead of having just one person come in, or two or three, there were 20 communities. The competition was so great and finally there wasn't the money. It just couldn't finance all of these. Of course even in the next ten years (a) tremendous amount (was) spent for education in the state college system, the junior college system, and vocational education. Everything had to fit in at the right time. We fit in for the University branch and we were very fortunate to have UMM.

Q: So you think he saw these other things like vocational and junior colleges were going to take in the funds...either this came now or it wouldn't be able to....

Right. It's a little bit of a bandwagon. Some people miss the bandwagon and some people got onto it at the beginning. They saw the need; they went after the need; they got the need. Then somebody says me too.

Q: In the first few years of the college I assume Briggs tried to get the community involved in the college. Why did he do that?

Well, we would never have had a university without a few key people, what we call business and professional people, Dr. Fred Behmler, Clayton Gay. We had the Ed Morrison's, the Tom Staehlers, we had Ed LaFaves, and so forth. Whenever he needed help and push and political muscle, he would come to the community. But the trouble is that you can't expect the same people to do the same job year after year. That's a problem we're having today because not enough of the young people will get into gear and get experience to take over the job that others have started. The Dean at that time said, I'm very fortunate to have such an active group of people that are not educators, but really the man of the street. That helps me to do a better job when I have to do it.

Q: So he tried to show the college to the community because he was afraid that it might close down if he didn't have this whole community support at the beginning?

No. I think he was thinking that a university should also be of value to the people that lived there. They got cultural things, if a person just exposes himself. They've got tremendous movies that you can go there for a very little fee. They've got their night courses. They've got talent that comes out here. All you have to do is walk out there and expose yourself to the tremendous culture and improvement courses.

Q: Do you think he wanted to do this, that he was trying to expose those people to this idea and just show them what an attraction it had?

Yes. In any community, in any organization, you always find people that are negative or opposed to something before they even understand it. It's just their nature not to be for anything. Many times people are never for anything unless it benefits them directly rather than indirectly. Then they will support it.

Q: Even though the college was only in operation for one school quarter before the legislature met that year, they were going to decide if the experiment at Morris was going to be allowed to continue. What was the reaction of the community to this?

Well, they were very happy to have it. They were very grateful to the regents for committing themselves to a very bold experiment. They were going to be very, very sure that it was not just an experiment, but that it was going to be permanent, so everybody worked doubly hard when the word experiment got on the agenda.

Q: Was the community afraid at any time...? There were two requirements. I can't remember the exact amount of money that had to be raised, and there was supposed to be at least 250 students enrolled that freshman year. There were only 238. Were they afraid that the legislature might decide that there wasn't enough students for the need of a college at Morris?

No, because in any new institution you start slowly. A lot of people didn't even know we were out here even though we were in the headlines quite a bit. A lot of people said 'I don't want to start (at) a university that's brand new. I want to go to a very sophisticated institution' so there was resistance from students who said I want to go to mature university rather than a new university.

Q: After the college was in operation for a couple of years, was there any opposition to the college that surfaced that hadn't surfaced at the beginning?

I'm not aware of any. I think that people...it would be very difficult to be against education. I doubt if there was any at all...the normal person really is not as concerned and doesn't know about it.

Q: Was there any unrest about the faculty because they bring in a kind of a different atmosphere with them?

Oh, I think yes. The faculty brought in a tremendous benefit, because they brought us what you might call new blood, new ideas. They added tremendously to the churches, to the various organizations in town, all the way from the city council to city planning. They just brought a world of talent. The children improved the high school system by bringing in bright young kids and bright young ideas. It was just a great impact, socially, economically and everything else.

Q: Was there any opposition to minorities coming into the community?

We didn't have any minorities to speak of in the early days. There were just a very few. Then as the years went on, we had the minorities showing up, but basically they had very few problems. They had a few rumbles but nothing like any other part of the state or the other part of the country.

Q: There was a black English teacher trying to find a home or something and they didn't want him to buy it or something like that...

Oh yes, I remember that. That was maybe 15 years ago, but that soon died out. The first black or anything like that is always a big deal and after that happened they found out that he's just like anybody else.

END OF SIDE ONE--BEGIN SIDE TWO

Q: Even after the school had been in existence for one whole year, you've mentioned that there were certain other communities that were in opposition because they were jealous; they wanted a school for their town. The western and southwestern four year college committee was still against it, after one year. Did this bother the Morris community?

I really don't know. I think probably Ed Morrison and Ed LaFave and those people could inform you more on that. But I know that we tried to operate with as many groups as possible, telling them that we'd support them if they'd support us. If they had a viable idea and were well organized, why we'd support them. We weren't an organization that was strictly selfish, just for our area, because we knew that we could not accomplish what we wanted to accomplish without the support of the North Central or the Northwest Alliances and Southwest Alliances. We were all in the same ball game. We were basically talking about the wealth going to the metropolitan area and nothing coming out here.

Q: Were they ever worried that the regents might see that there was opposition and it would never be cohesive?

No, because you see, UMM is entirely different than a state college system. There's only two outstate campuses, basically, UMD and UMM. So as soon as the UMM experiment was here...there was a separate situation when Marshall, Minnesota wanted to get a state college or St. Cloud or Mankato or Moorhead wanted to expand theirs... that was an entirely different ball game and entirely different set up.

So they didn't really care about opposition from other places?

No, no. It was a matter of 'you got a branch of the University.'

Q: Do you think that's one of the reasons why the people in charge to trying to get a college here wanted a university instead of a state college as such?

Yes, it's a higher degree of education. The University of Minnesota is one of the top educational institutions in the United States. You've got a degree from here and you've got one of the best degrees in the United States.

Q: Getting back to this group, they did have an article published in the Minneapolis paper with derogatory comments with respect to the Morris college. Did this worry the Morris community at all? Being that it got in the paper that was state wide, it might get people to start wondering if this really was going to work here.

Anything like that did. But this type of situation, you had to expect that. You just work and try to convert and are persuasive and you do your homework and get the job done.

Q: So it did worry the community, but it didn't really...

Well, it's part of the job. If you've got a big project, you've got big problems. If you've got a little project, you have little problems. This was a big project, but it didn't have many big problems. But it had alot of little problems. It moved very well and it moved very fast when it did finally move.

Q: Did any of the people think..."well, wait a minute here, I donated all that money, what might happen to it?" When the saw something like this, was there anybody that worried about that aspect?

No. The businessmen and some professional men donated money to causes every month; whether it's to get new doctors or whatever it is. It's part of the on-going committment that people have to make a better community. They just hope that the organization that is getting money has done their homework, has got it well thought out, it's going to be well spent and (that) it'll amount to something worthwhile.

Q: So it's kind of like stocks and bonds in a way?

That's right, that's right.

Q: Thank you very much; I think that's about it.

END OF INTERVIEW