Interview with Edward G. Holley

Chapel Hill, NC, April 27, 1998

by *Tommy Nixon*

About Professor Edward G. Holley ...

A major figure in 20th century American librarianship, Edward G. Holley has served his chosen profession as library administrator (Director of Libraries, Univervity of Houston, 1962-1971), library educator (Dean & Professor, School of Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, 1972-1985, and professor thereafter), and library historian. He has produced over 100 books, articles, and essays on topics as diverse as library biography, the history of library education, copyright, library administration, and the place of personal morality in public life. Indefatigable in his service to librarianship, he has served on countless high level committees, worked for accreditation standards, defended the MLS, testified before Congressional committees, and acted as library consultant. As ALA President during turbulent times (1974-1975), he was largely responsible for establishing a federated system for ALA ("every tub on its own bottom"), thereby saving the 100-year-old association from likely financial disaster. While at Houston he not only oversaw a major addition to the library and a significant enrichment of the collection, but was responsible for hiring Charles D. Churchwell as Assistant Director for Public Services, the first black professional on that campus (1967). As Dean of the Library School at Chapel Hill, he recruited stellar faculty, established a doctoral program, and expanded the Master's program to two years, providing a core curriculum known famously to students during the Holley years as "The Block." As professor and advisor, he has been an inspiration to his students and has directed a number of significant doctoral dissertations. His own writing is characterized by intellectual rigor, thoroughness, and fair-minded critical assessment. He has been the recipient of almost every major award his profession can bestow, notable among them the ALA Scarecrow Press Award for his published dissertation, *Charles Evans, American Bibliographer* (1964); the ALA Melvil Dewey Award (1983); the ALA Joseph Lippincott Award (1987); Distinguished Alumnus Awards (Peabody Library School, Vanderbilt University, 1987; Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Univervity of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, 1988); the Academic/Research Librarian of the Year Award (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1988); and the Beta Phi Mu Award (1992). Holley was named William Rand Kenan, Jr., Professor in 1989 and held that distinguished professorship until his retirement at the end of 1995. In 1994 he was honored with a festschrift, *For the Good of the Order: Essays in Honor of Edward G. Holley*, the title bearing witness to his tireless professional devotion. (For an eminently readable and perceptive overview of Holley's life and career, See James V. Carmichael's essay, "Richer for his Honesty," in the above-mentioned volume.)

Although now retired, Dr. Holley is currently hard at work on a history of UNC-Chapel Hill which seeks to explain UNC's emergence from a small college to a major American university. Once more, on this date — " For the Good of the Order" — he graciously consented to take time out from his busy schedule to be interviewed for this oral history project.

This is an interview conducted with professor emeritus Dr. Edward G. Holley under the auspices of the North Carolina Library Association. We're in Dr. Holley's office in the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. The date is Monday, April 27. The interviewer is Tommy Nixon, a former pupil of Dr. Holley's and currently a reference librarian in Davis Library.

NCL: I'm interested in how you became a librarian. What events or persons were instrumental in your decision to pursue a career in librarianship and what made you choose library science as your doctoral discipline at a time when most library directors probably had Ph.D.s in areas other than library science?

EH: Perhaps we need to go back to when I started out in the Giles County Public Library. The librarian was Frances Hampton Moose who had her library science degree from Columbia. Now imagine, this is a town of 3,000 - 3,500 people and that was very rare in those days to have a public library in a county, in a small town like that. And, this just opened up whole worlds to me. I spent a lot of Sunday afternoons there — it was open on Sunday afternoons. Mrs. Moose noticed me and she said, "You know," she said. "Edward," (everybody called me Edward in those days). "You're here a lot on Sunday afternoon. How would like you like to keep the library open for me?" It was open I think from 1 to 5, or 2 to 5, or something like that. I thought that would be all right. She showed me how to do things, and she paid me with the money from the fines

she collected.

When I went away to David Lipscomb, I had intended to be an English teacher because I loved English literature, American literature. I thought I was going to be an English teacher. Well, they didn't have a librarian at this college, and it was right after the war. The dean was the titular head of the library, but that first year I worked in the library, and there was an elderly woman who was finishing her degree and she was sort of the supervisor. She had no training in librarianship whatever. Well, I really actually ran that library for about three years.

Meanwhile, when I graduated in 1949, I had by that time decided that I wanted to be a librarian. So Peabody College, which is also in Nashville, had a good program and had some marvelous people there — the famous Frances Neel Cheney being one of the major ones. Wonderful woman, magnificent woman.... she knew everything!

NCL: Connections with agrarians?

EH: Oh, she knew, yes, she knew all the agrarians and all that. So I took my degree there and I think I got a pretty good degree for the time. It became very clear to me, by that time, that I wanted to be an academic librarian. But then it also became clear to me that if you wanted to be in academia, it would be very much to your advantage to have a doctorate. So I decided that I would explore the options. I remember Fannie Cheney, when I told her that I was going off to Illinois. She said, "Why don't you get an honest-to-God doctorate in English or history! Why do you want to go and get a degree in library science?" And I said, "Well, I thought that people who were hopefully going to be administrators and so forth in the library world really needed to know a good deal more in-depth about librarianship." I got a graduate assistantship [at Illinois]. But it was really a revelation to me, too. There was this magnificent library with its millions of volumes and, it was just a kid turned loose in a candy shop for me.

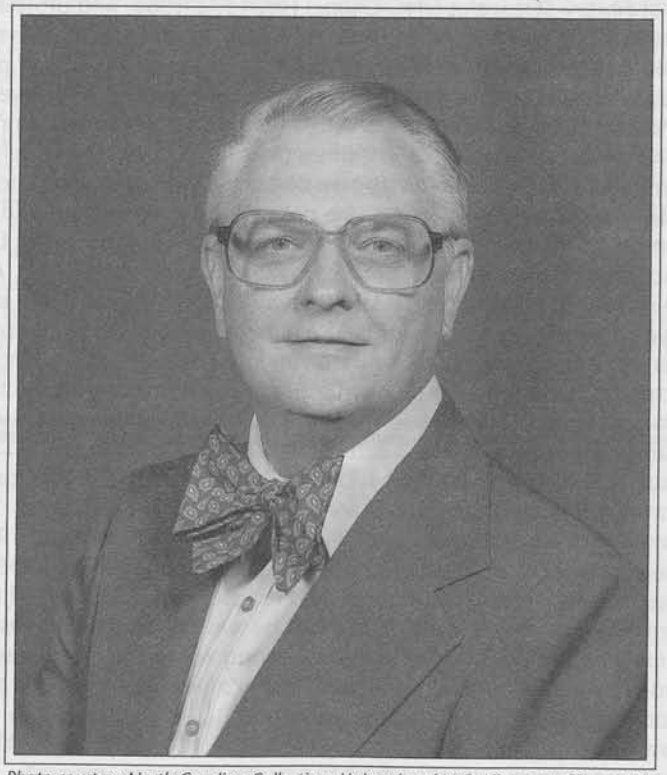

Photo courtesy North Carolina Collection, University of N.C. Library at Chapel Hill.

I also ran the photographic reproduction laboratory. I was a half-time graduate assistant.

Meanwhile, I was pursuing both librarianship and American history. I did a minor in American history under some wonderful people .... So I was pursuing that. By that time I had pretty well decided that I wanted to be not only a librarian, but also a library administrator. It seemed to me that a doctorate was a good thing if you wanted to do that so you could be like all the rest of the faculty. I was going to do a dissertation on plantation libraries. But I was interrupted. I had to go on active duty toward the end of the Korean War....

So I took three years off to do that and in the process to marry. Then when we came back from Washington, D.C., in 1956, I went back to finish the course work and take the preliminary exams. I was planning to go ahead, now that I had the G.I. bill, you see, which was very lucrative in those days. So we went back to Urbana, and I finished, took the preliminary exam, and was ready to barrel along on the dissertation. I found out that this other fellow was going to study plantation libraries, and my advisor, Les Dunlap, who was associate librarian at the time but also on the faculty, said, "Oh, don't worry about that. There are a lot of topics. You know, have you ever read Charles Evans' introduction to his bibliography?" Well, I hardly knew Charles Evans, period. And his bibliography? He said, "Now there was an interesting man! You ought to go down and read that preface. You should do that. " He was so dogmatic. "You know, his papers must be around somewhere." I looked at it and thought, "Well, this is not a bad idea." I wrote to the family, the Evans family, they were in Chicago, and got some encouraging words. Then Les called me up to his office and said, "Ed, we need a new librarian for the educational philosophy and psychology library," which was one of the big libraries in the main building.

NCL: They have a fairly decentralized system as I remember.

EH: And he said, "I'd like for you to go down and take a look around at that library. You can work on your dissertation at the same time you know." Well, I did that. And it was a lot of work. We had kids during that period and I did that for five years and enjoyed it immensely! Enjoyed working with the faculty and the graduate students and so forth. Had a great time! Wouldn't take anything for that experience.

When I did finish my Charles Evans biography and defended it, I was then looking.... I really wanted to be an administrator somewhere. Meanwhile, I did a speech or two on Charles Evans to the Illinois Library Association and some other group, and the Evans family subsidized a trip that I made to the east to the American Antiquarian Society and places where Evans had lived and worked. I began looking around, and while there had been a lot of openings earlier, the ones that seemed to be available did not too much impress me.... So I thought, "Well, I'm probably going to be around here another year." Then the University of Houston asked me to come down and talk with them about their situation. That's when I went to Houston and stayed for almost 10 years. And had a wonderful time there! Finished up the revision of the biography for the Illinois Press...

NCL: For which you received the ALA Scarecrow Press Award.

EH: Right, right, that was a great scholarly success but it didn't make much money.

NCL: Seems to go hand-in-hand sometimes.

EH: It seems to do that. But I had a wonderful experience at Illinois. Bobbie Lee hated Illinois because it was this flat land, and we had all these little kids running around and all that. But it was a good time for us. Houston was different. I told Bobbie Lee, "I don't want to go to Houston." I never wanted to go to Texas! I mean, I just don't think they have anything down there that would interest me at all." Well, they brought me down there in the middle of April, or no, I guess it was in late March...

NCL: This was about 1962?

EH: This was in 1962, and they said they'd heard a lot about me and would like to invite me down.... Well, I did go down. There was snow and ice on the ground in Urbana. Houston, nobody told me about Houston summers, but Houston was just blossoming out all over the place. And I discovered that it was a pretty good staff. I had heard that these really first-rate people who had been so upset because they'd had 11 years of lack of leadership. They wanted somebody to come in who'd do something about that.

NCL: I know there was a big addition to the library, and also I think you probably doubled the size of the collection and got some rare books.

EH: Oh, it was a wonderful time to be there, and that experience was marvelous. A lot of people asked me to come and interview. And I think one or two just insisted that I did, but I didn't want to leave Houston .... At any rate, Houston was a great place for me. It was a place that was building. It was a place that I could handle and handle well. And that's probably a bad way to say that these days, but I don't mean, you know, that I was a dictatorial type. I was not. But they needed somebody who would give them leadership. And so we had a wonderful time in Houston. We spent almost a decade there. Then I got into the library education business.

NCL: Before we go to that, could you talk a little bit. I think it's fairly well known about the time in Houston that you had the expansion in the library and added to the collection. I don't think it's as well known about your efforts in terms of minority recruitment. I'm thinking specifically about the appointment of Charles Churchwell as assistant director for public services. How controversial an appointment was that, at the height of the civil rights movement in the Deep South?

EH: The associate director was retiring. When I went to Midwinter in New Orleans, I ran into Charlie Churchwell, whom I had known.... and I said, "Well Charlie, what are you up to?" He said, "Well, I just defended my dissertation and I'm looking to see what else I want to do. I could go into library education, but I don't think I want to do that," because he taught at Prairie View, which is one of the black schools in Texas. But he said, "I think I want to go into administration." Immediately light bulbs went off in my head. So I said, "Well, let's keep in touch." I thought that I needed to go back home and see what I could do. I went back home to the staff and said, "I think I've solved our problem." Now, mind you, these, except for one male, these were all Southern women.

NCL: In the mid 1960s ...

EH: '67 or something like that. So, they said, "Well, I don't know." Mrs. Wykoff said, "I don't care what color he is, is he competent?" And I said yes, I thought so and I knew that the Dean would write a nice letter for him and so on. I went over to the provost and said, "John, I think I've solved our problem." And I said, "I want you to know, he's Black." And he said, "Ed, you know we don't discriminate."

NCL: There were no Black administrators at Houston at the time though.

EH: There were no Blacks, period. Charlie was the first one. So, I knew no such thing. But they obviously were going to try to get other.... Because by that time affirmative action was really beginning...

NCL: So in that sense you did have administrative support.

EH: Oh, absolutely! And I had the support of the staff. They said, "Well, it will be different, but we'll try." You know, I was really very fortunate that we had people who were open to this kind of situation. And so Charlie came down for an interview, and of course just charmed everybody. I said, "Charlie, I'll make you associate director..." And he said, "Ed, I don't think I'm ready for that. Why don't you just make me assistant director for public services?"

NCL: Was there much violence in Houston at that time in terms of the civil rights movement?

EH: Not really until the death of Martin Luther King.

NCL: Which had its impact everywhere.

EH: Had its impact everywhere. Well, we had several Black faculty members by then, but Charlie was crucial in keeping things calmed down among the students.

NCL: That would be in the spring of '68.

EH: Right, right. But it was a wonderful time to be a librarian, at least where I was. Wouldn't take anything for it. And I had these wonderful women librarians who had been so frustrated by lack of leadership and wanted to do things.

NCL: And that and the confluence of funding was a wonderful solution.

EH: We brought in some bright young people as well. We had a great time. Of course, I got very much involved in the state and was on a lot of the committees, and I was on some boards. My book was published during that period. But Texas was good for us. In a lot of ways we left Houston reluctantly. But by that time I was beginning to think I wanted to do something else. I'd always had such a poor opinion of most-library schools in those days, and I thought, "Well, I'd like to try my hand at that." Unlike, I guess, most directors, I had proof of my scholarship; published articles that most of the faculty who were here at the time knew.

NCL: Turned down Columbia, thankfully for us.

EH: Yes, I did turn down Columbia. Everybody was aghast.

I guess it shook them. They couldn't conceive of anybody turning down Columbia. But, you know, we had children who were in junior high and in elementary school. There was no way I was going to take those kids to New York City. The UNC Associate Dean of Business, Claude George, had written and said that they had a position open here, and they would like to talk with me. I wrote back and said, "Well, I was going on leave." I had planned this leave. That was when I got the Council on Library Resources grant to chase around and look at urban university libraries. He said, "Well, what kind of excuse is this? Come on up and talk with us." And I said, "Well, you know if we get serious with each other, I will feel compelled to come back for a year, because I'm on leave." I came up here and talked with them anyway, and was impressed with the chancellor and the provost.

NCL: Was Sitterson chancellor in '72?

EH: Sitterson was chancellor. Actually, he quit chancelloring about the time I arrived. I didn't know any of the people on the faculty — zero. In fact, I knew nobody here, I'd just heard good things about the University of North Carolina. It became clear that what they wanted was some leadership in the school. You know, they had had either four deans or acting deans in a period of about 12 years. Charlie Morrow said, "Ed, you know when we wrote you, we had decided we should either go get leadership or we should close the place down."

NCL: This was 1971-72.

EH: Right, we came in January of '72. And I had said I wouldn't come. I'd go back [to Houston] for the full academic year. But Phil Hoffman, president, said, "Ed, don't worry about that. Your leave was for past favors, not future." "You know," he said, "I told you when Columbia was trying to get you that I didn't think it was a good idea for you to take Bobbie and the children off to New York City—but now, if you really want to do this, North Carolina is a good place to go." ....Well, what I did say was that we'd compromise. I'd come in January. And I'd come back and see that everything was in decent order before I took off. Which I think was the thing that one ought to do. So that's what I did. And, we were very impressed with the campus and the people. Bobbie Lee didn't really want to leave Houston and her friends and so forth. But she thought if we must go, that this was a good place to go....

NCL: Let me ask you, you came here, you hired a lot of folks, some really stellar faculty, you expanded the master's program to two years, and famously had the block as a core curriculum and I believe . . .

EH: Infamously sometimes.

NCL: Infamously or famously, depending on the perception of the student I guess, and also in '77 you established a doctoral program, which I believe was the second library doctoral program in the South, behind Florida State maybe.

EH: It was a good period. But I don't want you to think, and I wouldn't want anybody who subsequently hears this to think, that what I did here was done by myself. There were some good folks here. Dr. Gambee was a fine person and good teacher. Margaret Kalp was a good teacher. Doralyn Hickey, of course, was already creating a name for herself in cataloging and classification. But they needed some new people, clearly. And that first year, I was very fortunate. Haynes McMullen at Indiana, he had been at Indiana a very long time — 19 years I think — and he said that if at some point in the future I had an opening that he'd like to be considered for it. Well, I went to Charlie Morrow and said, "Charlie, we've got this opportunity with this marvelous man who is a full professor and a very distinguished writer in our field, but I don't know how I can manage it." And he said, "Well, let's see what we can figure out."

NCL: Charles Morrow was provost at that time?

EH: Yes, Charlie was provost during almost all of my tenure here, and he was a great support, let me tell you! Charlie and I had a wonderful relationship. When I would try to figure out how we were going to do things, I'd just go up and talk with Charlie. And I'd say, "Charlie, I've got this problem," and he would always come up with some type of solution. I enjoyed very much working with him. But he said, "You know, you've got money here and here and here. Put these pieces together." I wasn't quite sure what the salary should have been, but I put together as good a package as I thought I could manage, with Charlie's help. So we brought Haynes here. Just before '75, Charlie called me, and said they wanted to start a doctoral program here. Charlie knew and I knew that you couldn't do it with the faculty that were here, that you were going to have to have some high-powered stuff somehow. So Charlie called me one day and said, "Ed, how would you like to have a Kenan professorship at the school?" I said, "Charlie, I would love to try!" And he said, "Well, the trustees are unhappy because we're not spending enough of the Kenan money. We need to fill these positions. Mind you, it can't be you." And I said, "That's all right Charlie." He said, "It has to be somebody from outside."

NCL: The Kenan was used as an incentive to draw...

EH: That's right, to bring distinguished people. And so I went to the faculty and said, "We have this opportunity for a Kenan." I said, "Well, now, if you had to go get the best person in the country, whom would it be?" Doralyn Hickey said, "Well, Les Ashheim, of course, but he would never leave Chicago." And I said, "How do we know if we don't ask?"

I thought, well, she's probably right, but I never let that stand in the way of my attempting. I had never met Dr. Ashheim — his name, of course, I knew — so I brought him down here, and he talked with the people, and of course charmed everybody. I never will forget that last night; I took him out to dinner just before he was to catch the plane back to Chicago, and I said, "We would really like for you to come and occupy this distinguished chair." And he said, "Well, what could I really do for this school?" which I think was characteristic of Ashheim—he didn't put on airs or whatever. I said, "We're going to start a doctoral program. It's already in the works. You have had a long career in this area, and we really need somebody like you to come and help us with that program." This was before all this affirmative action and all the other candidates, so I could pretty much do what I wanted provided I had somebody to supply the money, and so I said, "I'll be writing you a letter." Wrote him a letter, he accepted, and I told him what the terms were, what the salary was. I don't

remember what the salary was, but it was very good. In fact, Charlie had asked me would it bother me if he made more money that I did. And I said, "Certainly not, if we get the kind of person we want. I will not worry about my salary." I thought I was being paid very well anyway.

NCL: The Kenan's a hefty supplement.

EH: Supplement, it was $10,000 on top of a full professorship and so, Les came, and of course he and Haynes together. Haynes had had lots of experience with the Indiana doctoral program. Very distinguished people. And we were also able to lure Bob Broadus the following year.

NCL: Where did he come from?

EH: He was in Chicago. I believe he came here from one of those major state universities in Northern Illinois. But he had published a lot of things and had taught and so forth.... So there, in the short space of four years, I was able to bring to the campus three first-rate, research-oriented faculty. They had an enormous impact on what was done. I never had a whole lot of interest in curriculum and stuff like that myself, but we did start committees to do the block. It was a very stodgy curriculum.

NCL: When you came?

EH: Yeah, we all knew it, I mean, it was no secret, and we decided that we would go for a two-year program, which everybody else thought was foolish. But, we decided that you could not provide all of the things that people needed in today's world on the 36 hours or whatever it was, so we went to 48. At that time, we were also re-forming the master's degree and introduced the block. I'd like the record to show that I had very little to do with the curriculum. I was not interested in such matters. We had a lot of people who were, and were very good at it, and I didn't see any reason why I should be. They didn't need it, a dean who did all of that. We had good people here who knew what they were doing.

I think the block was a really innovative thing. We owe that to Doralyn Hickey, we really do. Haynes McMullen worked on it a lot too. The students hated it and the faculty hated it, but it was a good program. It provided a basic core. It was the one place where everybody had to start off on the same level. I think it lasted, probably as long as most curriculum changes, and then we went back. I think it was too bad that we had to abandon that, or thought that we had to abandon that. But, that was done after my period, so I do not criticize because we've moved in a very different direction and needed to move in a very different direction. So I don't have any problem with that at all. Different times call for different strategies.

The key to having a first-rate program is having good people and letting them do their thing. I've known a lot of directors and deans of library schools who want to be the whole show, and I've never understood that. Why in the world would anybody, who has enough to do if he or she is an administrator, fiddle around with the curriculum and all this other stuff, when the job is to see that the place is running along in a good way and competent people are in charge and go out and find the money to help them do what they need to do?

NCL: Well, I'm just wondering what you're most proud of in terms of the deanship here because, one thing kind of led to another with the faculty and the doctoral program and expanding the master's program.

EH: You know, that's a hard one. We had a lot of accomplishments. We did really well. We had a lot of administrative support. That doesn't come casually, that's an effort. I'm happy that I was able, personally and with some of the faculty, to become more visible on campus so that the school was known on the campus for having a first-rate program. I'm very proud of that. I'm very proud of the faculty that we brought here. Like most people, most deans, we had one or two losers, but they didn't last long. You know, you don't win 'em all. But we always had great students, had an incredible campus, and working with the caliber of students we had here was just really wonderful. I loved teaching, and wish I could have done more of it; we just get unusually good students. I don't think I had anything to do with that — that was true before I came and that was certainly true after I quit dean-ing.

One of the things that I did that I think helped a lot, and one of the things I worry about today is now that we have so many students to deal with, I'm not sure that we relate to the state, the profession of the state as well as we did early on.

NCL: A lot of ground to cover ...

EH: Oh, it is. The state is growing, it's bigger. It is very important though, in a state university, that you not neglect the people in the state.

NCL: Was there anything that you would have especially wanted to happen for the school that did not happen? It

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seems like you would have realized most of the goals that you had set, I would think.

EH: I don't know that there was anything particularly that I had disappointments in. My real disappointments were the poor choices we made — as well as the great choices — but that's not something that anybody can ever, you know, there's nothing you can do about that. You just hope that you have brought people here who have a trial period, and then if they don't work, you can say "Thanks, but no thanks." And you do need to be just very tough about that, and I think I was tough about that.

NCL: You have to uphold the reputation.

EH: I think we've done very well on that score ... I can say honestly that I have enjoyed my whole career. I guess I've been fortunate. I think there are a lot of people who are brighter than I, who somehow didn't do that well in administrative positions. And I think that's so sad.

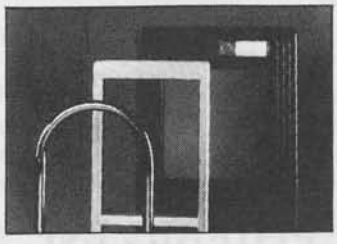
Back row: Gailon Holley, Eric Spiter (son-in-law), Ed Holley, daughter Beth
Front row: Julia and Joy (Gailon's friends, Julia, our prospective grand-daughter and her mother, Joy), Amy Holley (Eric's wife), Bobbie Lee, Mary Holley, our daughter-in-law, and son Jens Holley, the librarian.

NCL: Hard to say, but it was a propitious time in terms of after World War II and libraries expanding. Just a great time to be where you've been. I don't want you to give away too much on this, but you're working on a history of UNC. My understanding is it's trying to explain the emergence of UNC as a major national university. Is there anything that has greatly surprised you or challenged your initial historical assumptions about UNC's development?

EH: Oh, I think what I've learned in my research has just opened up a whole field for me. Of course I had heard that UNC was a great university and was prepared to believe it. But, when I came here, I did not really have any inkling of how far back it goes. I've studied enough higher education that I know who's on the top and who is on the bottom and all that, and I'm still interested in that, but as I've delved into it, it is very clear there's a progressive pattern that reveals itself. I've been fortunate to interview people in their 80s, one or two in their 90s, who still had their marbles and who could talk about right after the first World War and things like that. But, it's clear that this university, well, for one thing, it and Texas had more money than the other Southern states. Now that may be a surprise...

NCL: Than Virginia?

EH: Well, not more than Virginia, but Virginia's a special case, as Virginia's own historian says. So the thing that surprised me most was when I was looking at the Southern landscape and beginning to dig around in this, I was surprised that Virginia was not in there. But the first study of graduate study in the U.S. was in 1925, and in that particular study only we and Texas, Texas with three departments and we with two. Then, when the next one came in '34, Texas had 12 and we had 11 departments. And then I think Duke had 8. And, you know, that's when arose a saying in Yankeeland that North Carolina was the farthest South you could go and still get a decent education! So, it's been fun working on this, and I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I've just now got to get on with it. And one of these days, we're gonna have a book. I'm determined.



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