

TEMPE HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #: OH-277
NARRATOR: J. Russell Nelson
INTERVIEWER: Aaron Monson
DATE: June 26, 2008

JRN = J. Russell Nelson
INT = Interviewer
_____ = Unintelligible
(*Italics*) = Transcriber's notes

Side A

INT: Today is June 26, 2008. This is the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with former ASU President, J. Russell Nelson. Let's begin.

Can you tell me when you first came to ASU, and what made you choose ASU as an employer?

JRN: Well, they invited me, and of the ones that I'd been talking with, it seemed like the most attractive place, given the situation at the time we came and the expectations about what the future would be. We came on July 1, 1981.

INT: And since you arrived at ASU, what are some of the changes that you've seen happen there?

JRN: The Board of Regents indicated that they wanted greater progress on becoming a major research university, and that was a principal charge to me, to try to determine what was needed to make that happen, and then to set about to achieve what had been identified. So the first thing we did was to look at the situation, and then to try to judge what we would need to do to become a major research university.

INT: And since you arrived at ASU, how would you describe the effects of growth there?

JRN: Almost overwhelming. The university's development, for many years, was unable to keep up with the pace of increase in the number of students. When the war (*World War II*) ended, I think they had 500 students; when I got there, I think they had somewhere around 45,000, not fulltime, but 45,000 people. And it has continued to grow.

But the pace of development in buildings and in faculty members hadn't kept up, and the reason was that there wasn't money to do that. We never got more money than the University of Arizona—never got as much money as the University of Arizona. They had a smaller student body, and for us to catch up, with lesser appropriations, was extremely difficult and, I suppose, natural, since essentially all the members of the Board of Regents were graduates of the University of Arizona.

INT: Was there anything specific that you had to do during your tenure to increase that amount of funding?

JRN: Well, yes. We worked very hard to persuade members of the legislature—particularly those from the Phoenix metropolitan area, because they would have a natural interest in the enhancement of the university—that we needed to change in order to meet the needs of students who were coming to the university and to be able to accommodate them with housing, with classrooms, with laboratories, and with other facilities. And I would say that we had some success in that.

Probably the most significant item was the year in which the legislature decided to give each of the universities, the University of Arizona and Arizona State University, relatively large amounts of money, to be obtained over a period of time, for building facilities that we needed. And so we undertook a major developmental program on the campus during that time.

INT: Do you remember a year, or a date?

JRN: No, not particularly. It would have been within the first couple of years, and we came in 1981, so it would have been '82 or '83 that we started getting the money.

And we undertook then a major development program, bringing in people to help us decide what we needed most, and to design buildings that would be of a higher quality than many of the buildings that were built in the earlier years. And the reason for that is a feeling that many of the earlier buildings had not been sufficiently supported and, as a result, were not fully meeting the needs of the programs that were taught in those buildings. And I think we had some considerable success in doing that, with many of the newer buildings being larger, more accommodating to the needs of the students and of the faculty, and with classrooms that worked better.

INT: What would you say was the biggest challenge that you faced as President of the university?

JRN: It's hard to pick one out. Persuading members of the legislature who were predominantly affiliated with the University of Arizona to recognize the importance of what was going on at Arizona State University, to obtain enough money to be able to build the faculty.

When I arrived, there was a very large number of faculty members who had reached the point of retirement. And what we wanted to do was to replace them as they left with

people drawn from first-rate universities, which was rarer than it had been in the past, because in the past, the number of people who were coming out of universities was smaller, and the best people were going to more fully recognized universities than ASU. And so, as we began having an opportunity to replace people who were retiring, we wanted to get new faculty from what I would call first-class universities, where possible. And that meant more money, it meant providing them with the facilities for doing their work, and it was a challenge because they had opportunities to go to other places. And I would say, on the whole, we were fairly successful at bringing in people from higher-level universities than had been true in the past.

In no way is that a criticism of what was going on before; it's simply a recognition of the change in the expectations that the Regents had announced for the university and their requirement that we become a first-rate university. And so we embarked on a very aggressive program of finding people at what I would call first-rate universities to come here and help us make what the Regents had said we should become. And I would say, on the whole, that was quite successful.

INT: Keeping in line with that, I'd like to also ask you what was one accomplishment from your ASU tenure that you're most proud of? It can certainly be the same thing you just told me . . .

JRN: Well, that's certainly one of them. Another one is that we had a very fine collection of materials in the Museum, and we had no place for them to be dealt with properly. And we had a very fine Theater program, and as a result of the good fortune of bringing in some really able people for the future of those programs, we expected a much higher level of performance than had been possible in the facilities and with the kinds of programs that had been able to be mounted in the limited facilities that were available. So one of the major ones was the Museum, the Dance program, and the Theater program. There were several others, but that was one.

And there were several buildings that were started, that were completed after I left, but had been approved and were under construction. And that includes the building for Architecture, some Science buildings, and the like, that really enabled a dramatic change in the quality of the programs. And we also built a major addition to the School of Business.

INT: What was the biggest innovation that came out of your tenure at ASU?

JRN: I don't know that I'm in a position to answer that. I would say that the most important thing was that we were able to attract people of—this is not a criticism of the people that had come before—but I think we ended up with the successful hiring of stronger faculty members and, overall, more accomplished leaders in some of the programs.

The Law School had always been a very good program, and we were able to sustain that, and to raise the caliber of leadership in some of the other programs, to match that more closely than it had in the past.

INT: Tell me about one thing that you wish you could have accomplished as the President of the university but, for whatever reason, couldn't?

JRN: Well, you'd always like to do more. Hmm.

Well, it would be very nice to have more space, and it's very hard to acquire space where it is. We were successful in increasing the amount of property owned by the university, and I think that was a good thing, but there were several more parcels that would have been very nice to acquire, but it's difficult when the city is built up right around the university, and that inhibits your ability to acquire all the land you'd like to have. But we did fill in some spaces when land became available, and I think that was useful.

We certainly ended up with important facilities for students across the street, where the large new residence hall was at the time, and some additional property there was acquired, but it took awhile for it to be vacated, and it's now building up. So that was a good thing.

INT: What would you say today that ASU excels the most at?

JRN: I think it does a very good job of handling large volumes of students in what is still a small campus with comparatively-limited facilities. And that's partly because the school runs from early in the morning until late at night.

I went to UCLA for my advanced work, and the thing I remember there is that they had what must be six times the space, most of which was in grass at the time, so they have space to add additional facilities as they need to do so. And to do that here requires real care, because you either have to tear down something or you have to find a way to augment it. An example: when we enlarged the Library, we added much of it underground. And underground buildings have advantages, but they also have disadvantages, one of which is it's easy for them to leak. And so you'd like to build above ground, but if you haven't got space, then you go somewhere else, and that's probably down.

INT: Similarly, what do you see as weaknesses at ASU today?

JRN: I think the major limitation is that the growth of population here, and the ability to attract students here, always has ASU working very hard to provide what those students need in the relatively-limited space that we have. We don't have skyscrapers. If you go to, for example, City University of New York, they have twenty-story buildings. I think the highest building on our campus is nine stories, and that one was taller than anybody expected; at the last minute, they added two more levels to it, which was a good thing. But we have not built tall buildings, partly because we're close to the air way, partly because it would be out of character with the rest of the community. And that means that there are limitations on the use of the space that we have that can be inhibiting, or it makes it more complex. Certainly parking is a problem.

INT: Yes, undoubtedly. How did ASU change as an organization during your tenure?

JRN: You mean what was the structure of the changes?

INT: Yes, correct.

JRN: I think we placed more responsibility on the Deans, and I think we expected quite a lot of them.

I think another one was that we engaged members of the faculty in the concerns of the university more aggressively than, it appeared to me at least, they had been in the past. And the rationale for that, I had come from other universities where we didn't do anything without extensive consultation and involvement of the faculty, and I had found that working that way made them happy about what happened and provided a wealth of insight and ideas about what was going on, that would improve the university rather than simply change it.

My impression had been that the university was more top-down run here than the other places I had worked. And I think the faculty responded very positively to the opportunity to become involved, and really worked very hard to be helpful in the changes that came about. They helped develop those changes, they helped make them work, and I think they had the feeling that they were part of the institution in a way that they hadn't been before.

INT: Looking ahead, about fifty years or so, where do you see ASU in the future?

JRN: I don't think about that. (laughter) That's not my job anymore. I think about what I'm gonna be doing now.

INT: Okay. But if you feel so inclined, you can always chime in with your best guess, based on where you see the university today.

JRN: I have really worked very hard since leaving the university not to be involved, because I learned when I was involved that there was an enormous amount of chatter available to me that I didn't find particularly helpful or interesting; it was mostly time-consuming. And I came away with the feeling, having worked at three universities, that the best thing you could do when you weren't involved in administration was to leave it alone, unless they ask for help.

INT: Fair enough. Can you relate a funny story from your time in office? Maybe a public address faux pas, or a funny meeting, or an interesting encounter with somebody?

JRN: Oh, yeah. Probably the most amusing one, we had been in Japan on a visit, no, China, we had been in China, we were looking at opportunities for outreach into China. And we

came back, got back around midnight, and I had to preside at commencement the next morning. And I welcomed them to the wrong school.

INT: And which school was that?

JRN: I welcomed them to the University of Colorado. (laughter)

INT: I can certainly see how that would be a sticky situation. How did they respond?

JRN: Laughter.

INT: Did they know where you had been previously?

JRN: Oh, yes; everybody knew that. And Bruce Babbitt (*Governor of Arizona at the time*) made a couple of faux pas purposely to add to my embarrassment. He's a funny man.

INT: I'd like ask you a few specific questions about what you accomplished while you were President of the university, just to wrap up the interview. Can you tell me why ASU expanded to branch campuses?

JRN: Yes—we couldn't accommodate everybody on this campus. And you've got two choices: You can either have other universities come in, or you can find a way to meet the needs. And we had limited outposts, and we concluded that the thing to do was to develop semi-independent outposts around the city. Our major responsibility is the city and the accompanying areas around it, and we set out to dominate it. We, frankly, didn't particularly relish the idea of the University of Arizona coming in here to do what we didn't do. And so we set out to run programs around the city and the area that would meet the needs of the people, so that they would not be under anxiety that they were under-served and seek it from other places. I think that has been the goal of all of the people since, and I'm sure it was a goal of the people previously, to as long as they had this territory, to try to respond to the needs in the territory to the extent that they could.

INT: Which branches popped up first, and _____

JRN: There was one in the east Valley, and one on the west side.

Somebody gave us the land. I don't remember whether we got the land free on the east side; we certainly got it free on the west side.

INT: And today there's also a downtown campus?

JRN: Yes. We had a downtown outpost that has developed into a campus.

INT: And based on your experience at the university, can you say just a little bit about the specific strengths of each outpost? Obviously, the idea was to branch out into the Valley

and keep the University of Arizona and other universities from providing services there, but . . .

JRN: The branches farther out were becoming established, but they weren't in full operation. I would say that the one in the west Valley—I'm sorry, the east Valley—has become a very good practical program in, the major program in Engineering is on this campus. But that one has become a very fruitful post for what I would call the support of Engineering. Now, they may have done other things; I have really stayed out of the university. But my impression was that what they had done on the east campus was a very good thing. And the man who ran that was a creative person who saw the need for what I would call assistant engineers; I think they probably are called engineers, but they're different from the leading engineers, but they are valuable in that kind of work. And I think that's a very good program out there.

The west campus was more of a challenge, because the west campus wanted to do everything the main campus did. But that campus built up, it's a beautiful campus, I don't know if you've been out there. I sent out to run that program a member of the Architecture faculty, and he put together a beautiful design for the campus and then saw it through. And then they set out to hire people who were interested in the kinds of things that were going to go on there, and I think that's been a very successful development.

The downtown campus was really evening programs at the time, and everything that's happened there is new, so I don't really know much about it.

INT: Fair enough. Is ASU now a major research university?

JRN: Yes. It's become reasonably well-positioned within the group of major research universities. I would say that when I first came here, I think we had about \$13 million a year in external research dollars. When I left, we were a little over \$100 million, or around \$100 million. And I think they are competitive at a much higher level now than they were then. And they're bringing in, continuing to bring in, people who have the credentials and the reputations to be able to enlarge the support, although it's much more difficult to get the money today. All those years ago, we weren't fighting wars so much, so money was available, because of the importance of research, and now it's much more limited.

I guess the other thing that we started was the Research Park, and we probably mentioned that earlier.

INT: I'm not sure that we did; can you go into just a little bit of detail about it?

JRN: The ASU Research Park had been the university farm. And since the charter to do farming was with the University of Arizona, when I came, the Regents said that they wanted the farm that we had closed. Well, that struck me as reasonable, and we closed the farm. And then the question was, what do we do with this space? We owned a

valuable piece of ground in a favorable location. And we decided to try to create a research park, and that was dedicated just before I left.

It has been slower-growing than we had hoped, partly because the Regents dragged their feet in the timing in which we could move. They made us spend two years, from the time we proposed it until they let us go ahead. And so when we got into it, we opened it just at the time there was a downturn of the economy, and so it attracted organizations that wanted to do research on that campus in a smaller number than we had hoped it would. But over the years, it has developed quite nicely and has been, overall, a successful unit. And there is still quite a lot of space there available, as the economy develops and people want to come in and build buildings and do work on that site.

INT: And where is the Research Park located?

JRN: Oh, goodness. I probably can't tell you how to get there. Do you have a map of the university? I think the map shows where it is.

INT: I don't. Is it on or near the main campus itself?

JRN: No. It's about four miles away, it's south and east.

INT: Okay, southeast of the campus, that should be good enough.
(*ASU Research Park is bounded by Eliot Road and Warner Road, between Price Road/Loop 101 and McClintock in south Tempe*)

During your tenure at ASU, what were the pinnacle research projects that were going on, some of the best and most important?

JRN: There was some very good work going on in Chemistry. One of the people who was an important researcher is an expert on developing medicinal material from animals and materials that he finds in the deep sea, and that flourished. Chemistry certainly flourished. Engineering probably developed as much as anything on the campus, because it was the right time, a lot of people were retiring and we were able to replace them with new Engineering people, with the most up-to-date work, and that department flourished. What else? Well, the Goldwater building houses a lot of research activities that have proven to be quite important to the university.

INT: Can you tell me any interesting stories about the relationship between the City of Tempe itself and the university during your time as President, and specifically as the university started to branch out to other cities besides Tempe?

JRN: I would say that the City was very supportive of the development of the university. I'm trying to think of the name of the man who was the Mayor; he's now in Congress, and he was extremely helpful. He was a graduate of ASU, he taught here at the high school, and was an important man in town. And as he rose in the organization of the town and finally

became its Mayor, he was a very important figure in helping us achieve the things that we wanted to. But I can't tell you his name. He just lived down the street, too. Let me go ask Bonita (*wife*), she'll know his name.

(pause in recording)

INT: Can you say his name one more time, while we're on the record?

JRN: Harry Mitchell. And he was an important figure in the recent developments, say since 1970, of the City, and was a strong supporter of the university.

I'm gonna have to change seats. We've reached that moment in the day (*when the sun is in his eyes*).

He went on to Congress eventually, and has become a continuing supporter and an important supporter of the university.

INT: I don't have any further questions for you. Is there anything that you'd like to say on the record as a final remark about your time as ASU or your relationship with the university or the City of Tempe?

JRN: I would just say I had a very good time here, and I think we accomplished a number of things, and it was a very stimulating experience to serve as President here.

INT: I believe that will wrap it up. This will conclude the Tempe Historical Museum's interview with J. Russell Nelson, former President of ASU, on June 26, 2008.

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Transcribed by Susan Jensen

February 2013

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