

Index of audiotaped interview with Leo Ellison, retired Wake Forest University faculty member for 49 years; swimming coach
Interviewed by Anne R. Phillips on September 11, 2008
Index by Anne R. Phillips

Tape 1 of 1
Side 1

Interview in the home of Betty and Leo Ellison in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Mr. Ellison came to Wake Forest on the Winston-Salem campus just after completing his master's degree at Northwestern State in Natchitoches, Louisiana.

A professor of Ellison's in Louisiana suggested that Ellison apply to Wake Forest; Ellison's application at first turned down. So Ellison accepted another job in Alexandria, Louisiana. Wake Forest then called Ellison's department head, who relayed the information to Ellison: "They want you now." Ellison had given his word to accept the other job, but Ellison's department head told him to make the job decision. Tough choice. "I'm going to up to Wake Forest, if they'll have me."

His professor smiled and told him, "I would have done the same thing."

Mr. Ellison learned that Wake Forest was moving ninety miles to a new campus. Was married at the time; they visited their relatives in Shreveport before they left and headed to Winston-Salem in 1948 Plymouth. Stayed in a motel on Reynolda Road. Fellow at the desk asked for a "good place to eat. "A little place up the road," they were told. Ellison said they were grubby and tired. The little place up the road turned out to be Staley's, which Ellison described as "swanky." People dressed up, but the Ellisons coped. The lights were turned down: "I think they were trying to hide us."

Lived in Faculty Apartments. New boss was Dr. Harold Barrow. Ellison was impressed that everyone spoke to everyone on campus. Lived in the faculty apartments for six years. Close neighbors were Dick Clay, Marge Crisp and Dot Casey, "two great women." Little money. For recreation, Betty and Leo Ellison went to open houses. Got lay of the land.

Hired as head swim coach and instructor, "lowest level." Enjoyed the first year, but apprehensive that his one-year contract was coming to a close. Dr. Barrow offered a second year. Ellison told Barrow that he would talk things over with Mrs. Ellison. She and Mr. Ellison agreed they were "close to the coast and close to the mountains." For the first ten years at Wake Forest, Mr. Ellison was on a one-year contract. "They don't do that anymore."

The swimming team won two meets the first year, 1957-1958. Second year: team lost ten meets in a row. Swimmers mostly from North Carolina, "just walk-on's." Fellows

worked hard for Ellison. Took Ellison ten years to get a winning season. Not to national meets, but Eastern championships at Yale. All male swimmers at first. Later coached women—two women at first. Women “took a lot of heat, but they swam.” A co-ed swim team, not separate men’s and women’s teams.

Women wore raincoats over their swim suits to make a dash for their dorms. Ellison coached water ballet until special coach came years later. Much hard work on part of the swimmers: “they were pretty good!” State convention shows. Quote about Marge Crisp: “Those girls will never put that

“I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.” He described pool in the William Neal Reynolds gymnasium, later setting for the ACC championships.

Competitors from Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). “As we got better,” some of them [dropped off.] Wake Forest began to give swimming scholarships. One swimmer was an Hungarian male—a Freedom Fighter, Eugene Petras, who escaped from Hungary and came to North Carolina. Petras now a dentist; married a North American woman.

Ellison took his swim team to Cairo, Egypt, in 1966, sponsored by the State Department. “Red hot with the Russians and Americans, with the Russians trying to influence them [Egypt.]” Coached five different sporting clubs there over three months. Scheduled to go back, but the Six Day War made a return impossible.

Gezira Swimming Team, a sporting club, coached by Ellison. Beautiful tray given to Ellison and engraved: “To their most beloved coach, Leo Ellison, Cairo, 1966.”

His travels in Egypt, including Luxor.

For three years, roughly 1978, 1979, 1980, coaching trips to Mexico: Mexico City, with two East Coast coaches and two West Coast coaches. Then to Guadalajara the next year. Then to the Yucatan, including Vera Cruz. Treated “royally.” Coached college-age students, with a few adults, in Mexico. Olympic complex in Mexico City.

Resigned as full-time swimming coach at Wake Forest and did teaching as tenured professor.

Reflections on coming to Winston-Salem in 1957. North Carolina red mud, wonderful gymnasium.

End of Tape 1, Side 1

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

Mr. Ellison’s early interest in swimming. In Shreveport, grew up in “tough” neighborhood. His father sent him to the YMCA, and Ellison learned to swim at the age of 9. Started teaching. Then sent to an aquatic school at Black Mountain, NC, at age of

14. Fellow from Shreveport YMCA went, too. Ellison returned by bus to Shreveport by himself, at end of WW II, Fall of 1944 or 1945. Changed buses five times. Taught for the Y for several years before he finished high school. High school basketball coach told Ellison to talk with Dr. Guy Neesom, head of physical education program at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana. Ellison entered and was on the swim team.

Enlisted in the Air Force; served four years. Indiana for technical school, then Manchester, New Hampshire. Cape Cod, where there was a radar site, for three months. Then Syracuse, NY. Snow festival on campus of Syracuse University. Offered place in OCS, but he declined another four years. Finished undergraduate degree in physical education with emphasis in aquatics.

Associates at Wake Forest: Dr. Barrow, Marjorie Crisp and Dot Casey, Gene Hooks, “a group tough to beat: we did our jobs, we all worked hard.” Wake Forest had a “very good reputation.” Professionals. He was one of the first to teach women in athletics. Weight training.

Admiration for his colleagues: “I owe a lot to all those people—the Caseys, Marge Crisp—a lot have come and a lot have gone.”

Talk about the Wake Forest spirit--mind, body, and spirit.
How athletics was important.

Taught at aquatic school at Brevard; another stint at Hendersonville camp for children. Harold Barrow’s idea to have summer camp for children on WF campus. Bill Jordan, the track coach, also involved. “We had a closeness—everybody on the faculty and staff knew each other. None of us had money enough to get off campus, so we did [a lot of things on campus.]”

Ellison’s early life influenced by participation in sports, so his teaching career came naturally. Father encouraged Ellison to make the decision about life career. Ellison was better at swimming than at any other sport.

Air of informality and respect on Wake Forest campus. Physical education faculty met for morning coffee in dining hall: you always “wore a coat and tie if you went out of that gym. Harold Barrow expected you to be a professional.”

Talk re: Bones McKinney, with two Pepsi’s in side pockets of his jacket and one in his hand. “He was a great guy.” Got along very well with Ellison. Very warm welcome to Ellison when Ellison set to return to faculty for second year.

Another basketball coach who wanted faculty to meet for coffee later in the morning came to the campus dining room in his pajamas and robe.

Ellison liked both coaching and teaching. “I got to do what I wanted to do.” Teaching children, elderly people. Talk about Dr. Herman Preseren, 95 years old, retired from the Education Department, still swimming. Encouraged by Ellison to begin swimming after Preseren had had automobile accident. Ellison offered to teach Preseren to swim—for a while, Preseren swam a mile a day.

Other students of Ellison’s have been accomplished as teachers of community groups. Their praise of Ellison.

Accomplishments: teaching competitive swimmers at Wake Forest—men and women.

Talk of Dr. Tom Hearn—“he swam with us some--” was out in Napa Valley, California, and met former swimmer of Ellison’s, Tom Shelton, nicknamed “Flipper.”

Photojournalist in Vietnam, just died, Roy Ashcraft, was on Ellison’s swimming team. Later in business of building houses in Massachusetts.

Another team captain, Blacksburg, VPI coach, has died.

Mr. Ellison still swims. He and Mrs. Ellison go to the North Carolina mountains, to the beach. Took students to the Florida Keys when he was on the faculty. Certified in scuba diving.

Father worked for Kansas City Southern Railroad, from New Orleans north, so Ellison could get free passes on the trains in Louisiana. “Nobody had a good car.” Swim meets in Texas.

End of Tape 1, End of Side 2.

End of Interview

N.B.

After the interview Mr. Ellison showed me many trophies and framed photographs from his life’s work and travels in Egypt and in Mexico. It is clear that he was a natural at his job, that he took his coaching and teaching seriously, that he and Mrs. Ellison have been happy to choose to stay in North Carolina for retirement.

A.R.P.