

## **Interview with Roland Dille**

**Interviewed by Larry Burnt  
for the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center**

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**Roland Dille: RD**

**Larry Burnt: LB**

LB: First, I'd like to ask some general information about your current family situation - grandchildren, children, and so on. Where are you at this point in life?

RD: Past child bearing. My wife and I have four children. The oldest, Debbie, is 34 this summer, next week as a matter of fact. She and her husband live in Oakland, California. They have three children. Amy is 13, Anne is five, and Stuart is just one. Amy is the child of my son-in-law's first marriage, now adopted by his wife. My second daughter, Martha, the poet in the family, and who is a graduate of the University of Montana with a B.A. in philosophy has now gone back to school and is working on a counseling degree at Mankato State. Our third daughter, Sarah, a graduate of St. Olaf College and Luther Seminary is now a Lutheran Pastor in Vulga South Dakota. Martha is 30 and Sarah is 29. Ben, who is 25 this summer, is just about to start his final year of law school at the University of Minnesota. He's a graduate of MacAllister College. I didn't mention Debbie's school. She's a graduate of the University of Minnesota.

LB: Going back, your own family background as a child, you made frequent reference on numerous occasions to Dassel and the impact of Dassel on your life and others and you share with us as you look back at where you were born and your family background and the influence that might have had on where you are?

RD: Well my grandparents came to the Dassel neighborhood in the 1860's and 1870's from Sweden. My father's parents lived about eight miles south of Dassel and my mother's parents about nine miles north of Dassel. Both families were members of the Swedish Covent Church which was a pietistic offshoot of the Lutheran Church. It was a church in both Sweden and in the United States. And my parents first knew each other when they were in confirmation together in Dassel itself. Well they were married and moved to a farm two miles north of Dassel which is where my brother, who is three years than I am, was born in 1921. I was born there in 1924 on September 16<sup>th</sup> and my sister was born in February a year and a quarter later. So that was the family of five. We grew up on the edge of a country school district, part of that country school district which was about a mile and a half north of us. When my brother was old enough to go to school, my father petitioned to move into the Dassel town district. That increased taxes but it also meant that there would be bus service and it meant that my brother wouldn't have to be taken to school over country roads every morning. There's also that we always went to town school. In those days, of course, there were a great number of country schools, some had closed already, but our class of 18 to 20, 22, which we had through grade school, increased to about 40 when all the kids from the

country schools came in. That gives you a picture of the kind of town it was, a town of the population then of about 800; population now of about 1,100. I was a country kid but I hadn't gone to a country school, so I was between country and town as it were.

LB: Do you recall anything about the physical structure of the building, or the class room, or what went on as a child in that school?

RD: I recall everything that went on. A few years ago, when I was in Dassel because of the funeral of one of my aunts, I came walking to the cemetery to where my parents lived then, having moved into town. My mother, as a matter of fact lived, but my father had died the year before, and as I came along I saw that the old school was being torn down. It was three story school built about 1919 and I was able to look in the ends of the school, including the lower floor where I started Kindergarten. You started Kindergarten and then you sort of moved down the hallway. It didn't quite work that way because we moved around the corner for the first grade and then back to second, third, and fourth grades. Fifth and sixth grades were on the second floor, and the junior high school as well. And I could look in from that vantage point with the wall torn off into that second floor room which had been the home room for ninth grade, and then up to, naturally, the English room on the third floor, which is where the study hall for the high school was and where on the one end History and on the other end English. History combined with Math and then the rest of the classes spread all around. It was a school that had been added on to school building that had been built about, I think about 1880, and that building was now being torn down as well. And that building lay between them, the 1919 edition and gymnasium that was built in 1935 with WPA funds: a gymnasium and auditorium. It was a marvelous edition to the life of my home town to have that building there. As years went on, after I left, and I did graduate in 1942 and I came back to teach in 1949-50. After I left the baby boom hit and a grade school was built in addition to the rooms we had. So there was a single story row of very well done row of classrooms that extended across the front and lit down the sides. So when that center core was pulled out, it left room to do a little more building, but it still has basically, I think now, a court yard in the middle and the elementary school all the way around. The high school had disappeared by that time, in 1970 it combined with the high school at the town of Cokato six miles away and a very modern high school was built between the two, three miles out of each town, which was the only way they could get agreement to build the two districts. That's a longer answer than you wanted.

LB: No, that's most detailed. You have at least two distinctions amongst the many you've received over the year: one is 'A Scholar of Dassel' and the other is a 'Dassel Scholar.' Your keen interest in English Literature over the years and your almost zeal for that, can you trace any of that back to your early education days: a teacher, a scene, or a....?

RD: I don't know. Sometimes I think that my interest in literature basically just an interest in reading and that the main reason for it is that I read so much when I was young. I had no playmates: my brother three years older than me and my sister had friends in the neighborhood, but there were no boys within walking distance when I was young. I would sometimes play with my bother and his friends, but my parents were kind of easy going. We had a farm of 100 acres, we rented another 40 and we always had a hired man, so my brother and I never had to work as hard as a lot of farm kids. We did most things and could do most

things. That left us, especially when I was very young with a lot of time to read, and when I was 12 years old electricity came and the possibility of reading with electric lights was marvelous, although I always figured the first 1,000 books I read I read by sunlight or kerosene lamp. But the reading itself became important. I think now as I look at my reading and realize I spent an awful lot of time reading mystery novels for instance, that there may have been something else involved. Mystery novels, after all, are not so very different from the boys books I was so fond of and it may mean that I required some kind of fantasy life and then that probably too because of some isolation and the inability to play much with other kids. On the other hand, who knows what kinds of interest are developed. My parents both read a good deal. They read to us, we read early, we read a lot. I've always thought that the extraordinary luck I had in English teachers, beginning in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, had something to do with my wanting to be an English teacher because I really did have three remarkable English teachers for those six years of school.

LB: You said you graduated in 42 and came back in 49. What transpired in those years?

RD: Well as soon as I graduated, I spent the summer on the farm and working in a canning factory. There were lots of jobs in '42 because so many in school were six months away from Pearl Harbor (unclear) and already about 200 young men had gone out of the Dassel area into the Army. I went to the University of Minnesota with four friends from Dassel, three of us lived in the same room, the other two nearby, and I almost finished that year. I got all my credits for that year but I was drafted before the end of the year and off I went into the army. Well this month, on July 8<sup>th</sup>, I saw in *The New York Times* a couple of days ago, my freshman English teacher died, a really remarkable teacher, and to him I think I owe some of the interest in the English literature. We read a couple of novels from the turn of the century: "The Return of the Native", which was earlier than that but Hardy was very much a turn of the century poet and Somerset's "Of Human Bondage." Now those books really stayed with me and I have a life long interest of literature in that period and the literature of Thomas Hardy. I wouldn't make so much of that except for the fact that in that same class there was a young man who is probably America's leading scholar of that period of literature and it may be that that freshman English teacher did all that. But anyway, I went off to the army having been admitted before I was drafted to something called the "Army Specialized Training Program" which proposed to make engineers out of a great number of us and after basic training I went off to the university of Nebraska where for two quarters I took Mathematics and Science at which point the army, with an optimism that later on we learned was justified but didn't seem then to be justified, had made the decision that the war would be over with long before we graduated. In addition to that, the invasion of Europe was very close at hand. They assumed a great number of casualties. The invasion of Japan lay somewhere ahead. They had emptied out some of the divisions, some of the training divisions, of all their privates and sent them overseas, and so they simply closed down those programs and shipped us all into the infantry. I went into the 66th division, the black panther division, went overseas with it, was overseas for a year and a half, and part of the time in combat, not long enough in combat to get very many points so the war ended then on September 2<sup>nd</sup> and I left Europe on March 12<sup>th</sup> having put in a really remarkably interesting number of months, which I would have liked a lot more if I hadn't been so homesick. But I spent two months at a university which had been set up by the Army, the (unclear) Army

University, and there I had, as I had in Nebraska, some really very interesting teaching. At Nebraska though we were pre-engineers I got to know two English teachers who were very much interested in something more than just the official communications we were working at. One of them later became Chairman of the department at the University of Nebraska and the other one joined the University of Minnesota Staff as a professor of Humanities and finished his career there. At (unclear) American University I took ancient history and advanced composition and the history of theatre, all courses that by this time ought to have told me what I was going to wander into. As a freshman before the war, I had started out in pre-journalism. I wrote with some ease and had a great deal of interest in news, sports, that sort of thing. I came back after the war and decided to major in Composition, what is now called Creative Writing. It was a program that was in many ways like the English Program, I minored in French and then when I was a senior I decided that in addition to the writing degree I would get an English degree as well, and so I graduated with that double degree in English and Composition and a minor in French and I had not taken anything in the Education Department. My wife, who I had met in Dassel had taught there for two years before we were married, which is the year before I graduated from college and the Superintendent of Schools came to see if he could talk her into coming back and he figured he had a good chance because he offered me a job as well. It was sad for him to discover that I wasn't qualified, but a few months later he came back and said, 'Listen, we have got to have a home-economic teacher who is fully qualified and we'll take you even if you aren't qualified.' That being of course what one thought of English. Well he knew I had been a good student and thought I could pick it up so I became a High School English teacher on a temporary certificate, not a temporary certificate...really I was simply a fill-in teacher that lasted the whole year and then I had the job of making myself a teacher, which turned out to be not as easy as one would think. There are some things about testing, about homework, about assignments, about reading, about motivation, that you know, I didn't get anywhere along the way. And it was about Christmas time before I really pulled myself back and started over again thinking I would be pretty good teacher, and I think I was a pretty good teacher. I had a good relationship with the students, and I worked them hard. I worked them hard often at things that weren't very well worth their time. That's what happens when you don't exactly know what you're doing. But it was the kind of experience that determined I was going to be a teacher. There was no turning back after that year, although there were a few times I thought of turning back as the graduate school got longer and longer.

LB: So it wasn't one of those you wanted to be a teacher since you were a child, you just sort of...?

RD: No, yet most of the people I thought were great were teachers.

LB: That first job, do you recall the physical setting or any particular instances that stick out in your mind or students that you met?

RD: Oh yes, all of it again. Between the time I graduated and the time I came back the English room had switched from the north end of the building to the south end so that was a room that I knew very well from high school because it was where the coach taught Mathematics and a couple other subjects he taught. And it's where we spent a lot of time

when we should have been in study hall planning programs and whatever. We had gone through high school, I and about six or ten of my mates pretty much enjoying every minute and laughing all the way and thinking we were terribly talented. We weren't really terribly talented, but who notices. When kids get up on the stage they put up with it. We'd sit in there and write plays and whatnot. It was kind of a coming home for me in many ways. I remember coming into one of my classes, it was a small class, I taught four sections of English: 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and two sections of 12<sup>th</sup> and speech, which was giving me a great deal of trouble because I'd never had a speech course. And because speech is always difficult to teach because you have to provide time for students to get up in front and give speeches and that time needs to be spent usefully, and when you're teaching high school you've got a lot of kids there who've got a hard time sitting still when they aren't about to be called on. And besides that, the football team had gotten into, had been told that they were going to have to work very hard by the typing teacher so they all transferred into speech the first day. Plus it was a six man football team and I made them agree that they would behave themselves if I let them in. And though they had a hard time doing that, 'cause they were full of high spirits, for most of the year my reminding them of the promise was enough to quiet them down at least enough so that I could manage to stay in the same room with them. The small class I had, the small section I had I came into it one day and they said, 'you know we just figured out that everybody in this room is related to you, except for one person.' So you see, going back to teaching in your home town provides some interest and maybe some difficulties. Fortunately, to the four years of college I had, I had had three years of the army so it wasn't as though I had just come back, but my wife was teaching, I was teaching, and I knew a lot of people in town. I played on the basketball team, the town basketball team. We liked our colleagues; it was a time we look back to with a great deal of pleasure. And the greater value is to me because I really do have very strong feelings about my home town. The fact that my wife spent three years there as a teacher makes it a lot easier to be interested in because she knows most of the people I know too.

LB: During that time, you mentioned football. One of the things that teachers have talked about for years are the interrupters: whether that be collecting money, or intercoms, or lending people out for football and debate, all those instructional interrupters of the referred to. Was there much of that in the high school?

RD: We didn't fool around with anything like that. We had an activity period in the morning, which is when the band practiced, the chorus, and all the rest of it. When the school was out we had football and basketball and baseball practice. There were no sports during the regular school hour. Now and then a team would have to leave early to get someplace, but not very often. There weren't interrupters in those times. Kids came into class, we ran the class for as long as we had something to teach them, and then we gave them homework which they did. The interrupters might have been better than the assignments we gave them, I don't know. But, at least we knew where we were everyday, and every student came almost every day. The town's small enough so that it had its expectations of young people and they lived up to them.

LB: Over the years teachers have come to rely a great deal on audiovisual equipment and all sorts of materials external to their own making. What did you have to work with as an English teacher, as a speech teacher at the time?

RD: Well, we did have a tape recorder for the speech department mostly that was used by students trying to be funny so it never got much use out of it. I never used any slides or an overhead projector. I used a film projector once to show "Pride and Prejudice." I may have used it to show movies made from three novels I used for the three classes, that's the only use I made of audiovisual. Well, I used the book. I'm a book person.

LB: Did you have to chaperone dances or any of those other things?

RD: Dances? I'm talking about Dassel, Minnesota. We didn't have dancing until quite a bit later as a matter of fact. We chaperoned parties, my wife as the home-economics teacher, got caught with an awful lot of extra activities. She began to draw rather carefully a line between things she would do and things she wouldn't do. Whether you did them or not didn't make any difference as far as money was concerned because you never got paid an overload for anything of that sort, and she felt that in general she ought not to work an awful lot more than other teachers. Football coaches and band people got paid more than the rest of us because their activities were more formal and more relentless. They simply had to do those things all the time.

LB: Teachers, certainly in earlier years were expected to conform quite closely with some community behavior standards and modes of dressing and so on. Was that evident when you were there, that your behavior, your lifestyle was to conform to what people perceived as a model?

RD: Oh I'm sure it was. As a matter of fact though, we were mostly conformers to begin with. I had come back to my home town, how was I going to act? But, there were some things that you didn't do. No teacher, man or woman would smoke in public. No teacher, man or woman would drink in public or be seen bringing liquor into the house. And as a matter of fact, I suspect most of them didn't drink. Nobody would, well, that's about it. It was thought nice if you went to church but I don't think there was any particular pressure for you to go to church. I think that people disapproved very much of, see we were 50 miles from Minneapolis, a teacher taking a bus into Minneapolis shopping all day and coming home with an armful of packages. That was not thought to be a good thing to do. As far as sex is concerned, it was beyond anybody's comprehension that teachers would be interested in it I think.

LB: Generally, support for public education has waxed and waned, some claim gone in cycles certainly in terms of parents supporting schools or in the public attitude. At the time you were teaching, did you feel that you got strong parental support and strong community support for what you did?

RD: Well yes and no. There I was, I was a home-town boy, I had been in a sense a basketball star, I had been as constant a church going as you could imagine. I had got into no trouble, I had been an honor student, I had gone to the University of Minnesota, the

Dassel Dispatch, the Local Paper kept track of me there. I had graduated with honors there. I came back to my home town. One of my friends, two years older than me, a local dentist, a member of the school board, said something to me which I can't remember, which was more or less, 'Even you teachers must be smart enough to something or...' In other words, what he showed me was a kind of unconscious contempt for the profession that I have never forgot. I mean I was shocked to think that everybody in the world didn't respect me for the job I was doing. Now, I don't say that that is common, but perhaps at a time when fewer people had graduated from college, but more had graduated in the past. In the '30s practically everybody in town who had graduated from college was a teacher. More and more people are graduated from college, dentists always had of course, and I think that people began to believe that those people who were teachers who were kind of not living up to their college degrees were branching off someplace and do something else that was more important, by which I suppose one might say 'make more money.' Now, except for that experience, it does seem to me that parents were really very supportive. You must remember that something like half the students in our class came from country, from farms. That meant they all drove and a great many of them drove to school. That gave a certain kind of freedom which at that time was fairly unusual in larger towns and suburbs and maybe in the large cities themselves. But parents by and large knew where their kids were and they knew they were at school for all kinds of activities. They supported those activities; they came out for things. People came to see plays they weren't interested in an music they couldn't enjoy and basketball that bored them because that a part of the community activity. I don't think that parents ever, well, I'm trying to think of this very carefully, but not very often did parents ally themselves with students against the teacher. Yeah, the community was supportive in a lot of ways, I just don't like it to be reviewed as a time of paradise. Some of the same problems about respect for the job we are doing still exist, but the fact is that the people really a teacher. There's going to have be those people who knows what the teacher's up to and that tends to be people who teach or who have taught, which is one of the reasons its important for administrators to have taught really quite a bit so they know what's going on there.

LB: Is corporal punishment an issue?

RD: That's why I hesitated a moment ago. I slapped one kid, I slapped him because he swore at me, he swore at me because he was cheating and I caught him at it. And his father came to see me, now his father was not nasty, was not aggressive. We went down and sat with the superintendent of the school and it was an experience that I suspect was not very useful to the kid but was very useful to me. The superintendent of the school was a very wise man. He'd been my teacher, he'd been a man who had slapped a kid or two around in his time, in fact he was very handy with his fists: grabbing kids around the neck and pounding their heads against the wall. But that was a long time before that. That pretty well disappeared by the time I got to know him when i was in high school. He taught me chemistry, he taught me physics, he was principal, and then he was superintendent of the school. And I taught for him. He was one of the people I respected. He died six years ago and I really respected. And he kind of sat me down and we just talked about hitting kids. And I supposed he was all the more impressive because I knew he had used his fists at one time too and I don't know if I needed that because I felt so bad after I hit the kid it probably was the lesson itself. What struck me about it is this: I really kind of think that a cold

blooded whipping is better than an impulsive slap. There is something so destructive to a person's sense of himself for being hit. I should have known that. In that very same building I was slapped by a teacher once. Well, you know, I was a straight A student, all the rest of it, but it was hard on me. But we're talking about a kid who wasn't doing very well in school and who didn't have any money, his parents didn't have any money, and I slapped him. After all these years, we're talking about 35 years, it still bothers me quite a bit. But, you know, a lot of things I learned. I learned you couldn't flunk anybody out of school in that town. I had three boys who were heading for flunking out. They were nice kids but weren't very good students. And I said to the superintendent, I said you know I'm bringing up six weeks grades now and if each of these kids gets an F, which is what each of these kids has earned, then will flunk out of school and they will have to repeat next year. And he said, now you explain to me what good that's going to do them. I said, well, it won't do them any good because a lesson in discipline isn't really what we're after here, but it will mean that we hold up our standards. He said, you can't think of any other way to do that? He said, you know, go ahead, flunk them out, and then explained how after they spend the year being embarrassed and on the streets and who knows what, what we have done for them. He said, you know we're a small town and we're a school that does some pretty good work and we kind of have to be all things to all people, but you know that includes people who aren't very good either. You think keeping kids in school and giving them D's they deserve, F's, is going to hurt your class, he said, it's wrong, it's wrong, you're wrong unless you just don't know how to deal with a class. And I believed him.

LB: How long did you stay in that position?

RD: Just one year. I wanted to stay on but I had no certificate so I couldn't.

LB: What happened in subsequent years?

RD: Well, then I got a graduate assistantship at the University of Minnesota. So, we went back to the University of Minnesota and I worked as a graduate assistant grading papers from '50-'51. My wife did substitute teaching in Minneapolis schools, then our daughter was born in August of that fall year: that took my wife out of the work market. We moved into student housing in St. Paul and I looked around for other jobs because the assistantship wasn't going to take care of me. And then I began a long period of teaching because by that time I was teaching as a graduate assistant. From '51 to '56 I taught most years full time and I moonlighted with two or three jobs and my work suffered a good deal. Well I got good grades when I finished my work but I finished up then with 13 incompletes. In 1956 it was seven years since I had graduated from college. We had by that time three children. We were surviving in fairly good fashion and I began to think about what I ought to do. Because of the incompletes, because the lack of progress toward my degree, it was clear I wasn't going to be kept on in the University of Minnesota. My father-in-law, who lived in Moorhead, died in February of that year, end of January. When I came to Moorhead for the funeral I began to wonder if I ought not to do something else. What I really intended to do is take over his paint and materials supply at his supply store. I really had no qualifications for that and nobody suggested it and I didn't want to just myself. My sister-in-law suggested I take a look at the Forum and I was indeed offered a job at what was then called the Fargo



Forum, in their advertising department. But I decided that that wasn't really what I wanted to do. If they had offered me a job in the editorial department I would have taken it. So I came, walked over the day before the funeral and the loose ends, to Moorhead State and I applied for a job but there was no job. That summer the president, Habla (unclear), called me and offered me a job in the English Department here but by that time I had signed a contract at St. Olaf College. So I taught at St. Olaf for five years, just about caught up, I did get caught up on my incompletes, passed my prelims but obviously time was running out on me, on my degree. The idea you're always going to get a degree, always going to get a degree, you never get a degree. So when the opportunity came to go to California to start a new college, that coincided with the fact that I couldn't stay on at St. Olaf any longer. So I went to California with some colleagues and gosh we'd been there 24 hours and my wife said, 'I guess we won't be staying here very long' since it was quite clear I wasn't going to get along with the president, so I decided I had better get my degree started working on my dissertation. We were only 50 miles away from the UCLA library so I was able to do my research and in spring quarter then I wrote my dissertation and got my degree then in '62, stayed on. By that time we had managed to get rid of the president. The misunderstanding with the board was very complete, the second president....well its a long story and I shouldn't even hint at its length, but simple to say he lasted one day. He was hired without anybody considering the faculty's views on the matter. And then another president came in and he had a stroke and about that time it was clear I had to look for another job. I had been the leader of the faculty opposition and I may say after all these years its not a matter that causes me any embarrassment. The situation was intolerable and we objected to it. I went in to the meeting of the college Composition and Communications Committee. I got those words in the wrong order but its one of the major organizations of English teachers and there I came across a fellow from Moorhead State, Joe Satton, who told me they're looking for someone to teach at Moorhead State. Moorhead was one of the places I wanted to teach because I had heard a good deal about the president, John Neumier, and I thought he'd be, you know if I had to chose my president's rather than my school from here on it was quite clear. So I applied for the job right there, Joe Satton said, 'you're hired.' He said I really can't hire you but I'm going to be chairman next year and really you are hired. He went back, and that and I turned down the five other jobs I had been offered. You know I had my degree then, there were a lot of jobs, all in California which is not a place I was very wild about. He let me know then he would not be chairmen next year, he'd taken a job somewhere else, would be leaving Moorhead, and so I should call Dr. Glasrud who I had talked to in 1956 and talked to now, then the president called me and offered me the job, which is how I got to Moorhead. As a matter of fact, with Joe Satton leaving, he decided to sell me his house which I bought by telephone and still live in, and which I mortgaged by telephone which very favorably disposed me to Moorhead as a place to live. My wife knew the house; she had walked by it enough times when she was a kid having grown up three blocks away. We had my sister-in-law take a look at it, but when we arrived in town on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 1963, the first thing to do was to drive by the house we now owned, and at 18,400 dollars it turned out to be a pretty good deal.

LB: Arriving in Moorhead as a professor in the ensuing years, you have made frequent reference to not only to the positions that you held here and certainly and your rise to the presidency but also to the number of events that impacted the campus, more specifically the

Tree of Life is one example of something. You had mentioned World War II. Any other state-wide, regional-wide, or national wide events, circumstances that had an impact on your perception of Moorhead, or your perception of your career?

RD: Well I settled in as an assistant professor of English in 1963 and discovered something which I might as well put on the recording, which kind of amazed me. And that was that this is a very much more sophisticated and live place than St. Olaf college, which I had left two years before, was and where there was a great deal of pride about the quality of the college, but a great deal of stodginess. And here I came and it was a very exciting place, with exciting people. The English department was fine. I enjoyed myself. I was a good teacher, if I don't say so, who will after all these years. Well I think I was an affective teacher, I worked students hard. I worked them hard and graded them easy I guess, something of that sort I guess. I really wasn't involved in very much in the town in those three years I was on the faculty. I was on the faculty only a little less than three years and then it was decided, I was on a lot of things at school, lot of committees. I was very active in something called Religion and Life Week, which was essentially a three college sort of thing. The community was involved in that as well. I was being asked to give talks here and there and the Dean, who we now call Vice President, decided that he would recommend that I would become the Associate Dean. There had never been one of those. The president went to the senate and asked them. I was a member of the senate, and it seemed alright with the senate. So I became Associate Dean then in April of 1966. In May the Dean told me he was leaving in June and he left in June and I became acting Dean of the College. A process to find a new Dean began but somehow it never got under way. It was not my responsibility. And so the searches closed down without candidates sometime after Christmas and I became the Dean and the following November the president told me he was leaving at the end of the year and it really shook me up but I had a candidate in mind: a friend of mine, who was a Vice-President at Luther College. When it became clear that some of the faculty had me in mind I lost interest in John Lenell and became a candidate myself. It was a search that was conducted really very badly since there was no chancellor, and when the new chancellor came the first thing he wanted to do was to fill this job, and the job at Bemidji. And so I was appointed by the board and became president then in September of 1968. By this time we had seen in Higher Education more than the beginnings of activism. It was the fall after the student rebellion, because that's what it was, at Colombia. Its one of the high points, high and serious points of that whole thing. And so of course the campus here became very active. We were the most active campus in the area. In Minnesota only the University of Minnesota had the kind of activism we had. Our problem in 1968 was made somewhat more difficult because we had determined that the recommendation of the previous president with my approval to go ahead and engage in a very very full effort to bring minority students on campus. We ended up bringing 50 black students, 50 Hispanic student, 50 American Indian students to the campus. We didn't hit that number, but we got a lot of minority students here. The move was not very popular in the community. Not that unpopular, but there was a good deal of sniping at us for inviting into the community what could be divisive elements, because we're not very far from those long hot summers when the ghettos in the cities exploded. And people were worried that something of the same kind would happen here. Now the students were very much aware of those long hot summers too and we went through a period when the black students were extraordinarily edgy about their experience here. We finally hit some fairly

serious trouble, though not nearly as serious as the newspaper made it out to be in April, which included under circumstances no one's ever quite understood the firing of a gun at a black student's car. I held a convocation that said that would be all of that. And they settled down. The students under that program called Project Equality, and that program consisted mostly of Black students, and looking back at it, that kind of effort we made, which we didn't keep on for very long, because it seemed we were wrong but it didn't seem as though at some point we would be able to move away from special programs and still have a lot of minority students coming. That didn't work out that way as a matter of fact. But as one looks back at the students who came under Project Equality, one is struck by a couple of things. One is that a larger percentage of them finished than of our normal students, and a larger percentage went on to graduate school or professional school than our regular students. One looks back and says it was a project which gave to quite a number of students an opportunity they wouldn't have had. And they took it and they achieved through it.

LB: In the community and the media, perhaps the reaction to the project has built to some of the events during the '60s. Over the years as president have you noticed a change in town relations?

RD: Yes I have and I think probably I need to speak very very frankly here. As I said, I came here because of what I heard about the president. After working for him for five years my admiration for him was even greater than when I came. So what I'm saying now is not really very critical. But there is to be said that he had a little bit of a tendency to lecture the community, and the community did not respond terribly to that. Now John Neumier was Jewish. I never saw any open opposition to him because he was Jewish, but it did make him an outsider. It did really make him an outsider. He did run into difficulties because when the Jewish (tape stops)...with his wife and the two were divorced. And frankly people really thought that he was terribly liberal. He wasn't and he was very careful what he said, but once he had resigned he took a very open lead in county politics in an attempt to get the delegates votes for Andrew McCarthy instead of for Hubert Humphrey. That antagonized a lot of people. And a lot of people were further antagonized by his very early claim that it was our responsibility to educate minority people. Now most of the things that I have found to object to him are things that I find praiseworthy. But take them all together and the effect on a community is to make it feel as though the president of Moorhead State was not really one of them. And when to that you add a kind of activism that horrified a lot of people. I mean there was a good deal of it. And all sorts of people saying how come you don't stop it. My popularity was about as high after two years as John Neumier's had been. But I did go out to talk to people a lot. I gave speeches explaining why students were upset by the Vietnam War and why we followed it our responsibility to make an effort to bring minority students here. And the speeches really did work. There were a certain number of people who were persuaded by what I said. The great danger I saw was not that I would antagonize people but that I might sell something out in order not to antagonize them. I was always much aware of that. Of course from time to time I was accused of doing that. The fact is that I fit very well into this community and my little foibles such as preferring books to television and really believing that poetry is one of the most important things in the world, those are recognized, those little foibles that don't really hurt me and my relationship to my community. And I have spent 17 years as president preaching the value of the humanities to

a community that takes it in pretty good humor. I worked hard at a number of projects in the community. I like people in this community. I like the students they send us. It turns out that I haven't changed anything about myself in order to get along with the community, and the community has been generous enough to think that, you know, that's pretty good I think, who knows.

LB: I'll open on that relationship. Recently there was considerable debate and much media coverage on the question of censorship in the playboy magazine in the book store, and so on. As you look over the 17 years and those kind of influences, does that stand out as a unique incident in your relationship to that sort of thing or does that occur periodically over the years.

RD: Oh it occurs periodically. Every time I'm asked to speak at Rotary, for instance, I always start it the same way saying you know you must think there's something really wrong down there because you asked me to come up and explain it, which is what they always do. No they ask me to speak every year. But, year after year they'd say hey, there's excitement down at the college, better have the president explain what's going on. This one is not unique, well its unique in a way and that I can't really get serious about it. It's a very serious issue, I know, but in some ways I find it amusing in part because the people who are urging the protest do keep looking over their shoulders to see if television is nearby. Now I haven't had a call for almost two hours from a television station, well more than that, two and a half hours from a television station asking when I'm going to have the report and I say it will be ready the day I leave town for Washington, next week. But I promised I'd be around. Well, I'm really surprised. I might even say I'm a little shocked to find it a headline in the Forum. I simply do not think its an issue that's worth that kind of attention. But then the media in Fargo-Moorhead are not famous for making judgments about that sort of thing.

LB: (unclear)... in this community that many presidents do not face or encounter three institutions when in very close proximity and that has seemed to shape the nature of the relationship not only amongst and between the universities but in terms of allegiances within the community. Has that changed noticeably over the 17 years or has that as a factor in a relationship with the community stayed with you in terms of...is that a factor that one must always consider as president amongst the three institutions?

RD: Well I don't think about it very much anymore. We're very different institutions. North Dakota State is a whole station. Its important to us statewide. It plays the kind of football and basketball schedules that in the Forum sound like big-league and has got that monopoly. Its the only college in a large city. We're one of two colleges in a small city. Its best programs are programs that we don't have. There's no problem there. Concordia is a college where the emotional relationship between it and community are very strong because of the, basically because of the church relationship. People say well how you get to be such a strong alumnus at Concordia. I think basically because people go out from Concordia into Lutheran congregations all over the state and they see each other a good deal. It's a good institution. At one time it was better than we were. At one time it was thought to be much better than we were. The community, I guess, will always underrate us a bit compared to Concordia, but since I feel absolutely no hesitation about telling people how good we are, its not something that's going to bother me a great deal. There was a time...well, Hard Binford,

who is the editor of the Binford Guide, and graduated from Moorhead State and who taught here for seven years has become an important fundraiser for Concordia college. Now it's quite clear to me that he made the judgment that if he's going to get a head in this town he ought to associate himself with Concordia. Some people still do that, but not many. It's no longer necessary, an association with Moorhead State is good enough, which is not to say that an association with Concordia hurts you. It may be the only key to Heaven, but it's not the only key to the Chamber of Commerce.

LB: One of the things that Moorhead State has become noted for, it seems to me, is a bit of frivolity in an institution that has a very good academic reputation among the State Universities. Frivolity in the sense of the non-commencement commencement, your role as Santa Claus going throughout the community as well as the University, the July 4<sup>th</sup> picnic which is not frivolity, but an all-community activity which has become a standard bearer for that day. Is all that by design or by intent to enhance relationships with the community, or is it one of those things that just erupts when someone has an idea?

RD: Well the only things that really is there that enhances our relationship to the community is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and that started kind of accidentally with a program that was going to last one summer. We were going to do the past, and I don't exactly how it was going to be done, special courses and summer sessions and so on. And so we were going to celebrate an old-fashioned 4<sup>th</sup>. And then I suggested we keep doing that until the bi-centennial, which was three years away, and it just kept going after that. We do say to ourselves that it is, and we always advertised it as a way of saying thank-you to the community, and it is a way of getting onto the campus a great many people who wouldn't get there otherwise. So I think we very consciously see it as a public relations sort of thing, all the more so because we wouldn't do it if nobody came. It just wouldn't do to do that for the few people who are here. So I'm never quite sure whether we are PRing the college or the event. The others, well, you said frivolity in a good institution. That's the only places that ever are frivolous it seems to me, for the simple reason that not taking yourself too seriously and having the kind of awareness that comes from being smart is likely to make for humor. The Santa Claus, another thing that happened by accident. Somebody asked me to do it and I said fine and I had a suit made for me by my wife that I used for kids in the neighborhood and our own kids, and so I decided to buy a suit and of course it was such a flashy suit that I got asked to do it over and over again, and I do encourage it because it gives me a chance to talk to 1,500 students over a two-week period, which not really very many college presidents of the country have a chance to do. For the rest, I would like to think that if there is a sense of play here, some of it has to do with me, since I do enjoy a joke, but these things really never developed by a department.

(break)

Just in case that didn't get on the tape, let me say that I know I didn't make the school what it is, but I think I had something to do with it and that's a very pleasing thought.

LB: After your long career in education which hasn't ended yet at this point, and the prospects for teaching jobs once again being available, would you advise young people to go into education generally and teaching specifically?

RD: I think I would. Five years ago I would not have. Maybe two years ago I would not have, but I'm probably being terribly optimistic right now. I think that there is a good chance that on the simplest level, simple but terribly important level, the salaries are going to go up for public school teachers so that it will be possible to teach without moonlighting or not being able to have some of the things in the world. Secondly, think that this country may be about ready to support education. Not only with the money that will allow salaries to be paid, but will have certain expectations, not so much of the schools, well of the schools, but of the kids that go to school. So that it may very well be possible to alter this great wealth, now being called the great bargain that's been struck between teachers who want peace and students who don't want to learn. I think that might change. If it doesn't, being a teacher is not going to be very satisfying. If it does it will again be a very satisfying thing. I am not very qualified to speak about teaching in the public school. I taught in almost ideal circumstances. How come it's always an ideal circumstance? I don't understand that. But I taught in Dassel which is to say I taught in ideal circumstances and I taught for one year. It was a joy from beginning to end and I was terribly sorry when I left. But five years, ten years, who knows. It's got to be satisfying on one level above all: a sense that you are getting something done, and I think most teachers have been robbed of that because it forces the stand between success and the teacher are very very powerful. But I think maybe societies ready to cut some of those down so that a teacher can see over them. I hope so.

LB: One final question. If you could put your wish hat on, and looking in perspective at all the commissions of the task forces and the committees that have looked at higher education as well as K-12 in the last few years who maybe from the education at risk report on, carting tuition and so on. If you had your druthers, stick with higher education, any changes you'd like to see in higher education?

RD: Well I think there's one change I'd like to see above all. I would like to see a great number of students reading a lot more than they now do. In college they do read, but I think that students come here, nowadays, without reading being as easy a job as it once was. I think if we ever got to the point where students would read a good deal, more than they just simply need to for the assignment, and more assignments could get big. I think I wouldn't worry about much else besides that. I know this is very much an attitude of somebody out of my background, but it is not possible, in a quarters work, to assign any longer, let's say, the four greatest English novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By which I suppose I mean *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch* and we can argue over the Dickens's *Bleak House*, because they are too long. You can do *Pride and Prejudice*. You can do...I said *Jane Eyre*, I meant *Wuthering Heights*. But you can't really have them in the same quarter read both *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*, they are too long. There was a time when they weren't too long. So students are being robbed of a chance to engage themselves fully with one rather important aspect of learning in my field. And I would say of course that those four novels ought to be read by everybody who reads, so you see what my next step would be. That is to take the material of the humanities of history, of literature especially, and maybe a little bit of philosophy and make it what, more popular. Find the ways so the students will respond to it in an exciting way. That means, I think, that students will have to review their occupational, what, expectations? They will have to learn that the occupations they seek to find for themselves will serve them better if they are something more than simply

technicians. Which brings me to the third thing, I would like to be certain that in an institution of higher learning we recognize clearly the kind of liberalizing and liberating elements in the really technical courses. It really isn't possible, it seems to me, to teach a methods course, name the discipline, anyone you want, or a business administration course, or a course in construction industry or nursing or social work without dealing in that class with some of those things that we claim for the humanities. That is, liberalizing and liberating, basically I think learning how to use the mind in a rigorous way and to recognize nonsense when it is there. I think maybe we haven't emphasized that part. I'm not saying we should emphasize in defense of those programs, but to enrich those programs by focusing on those things. You know, education goes on in lots of ways and somebody once said, you know, you can make teaching them horse shoeing, about black smithing, or making horse shoes, there it was, as a liberalized course. Well of course, but not everybody can do it.

LB: Thank you President Dille.

RD: Thank you.