

John Henry Crabtree, Jr.

Interviewee: John Henry Crabtree, Jr.

Interviewer: Myles Surrent and Georgianne ??

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Transcript

Myles: What years were you at the old campus?

Dr. Crabtree: I was there just one year, as I told Georgianne. I came to Furman in 1957, September. That was the last year that Furman was located on the old – the old men’s campus, you know. There were two campuses, did you know that?

Myles: Umm hmm.

Dr. Crabtree: One was women, the other men. And I came in ’57 and I was there one year before we moved out to the new campus. I never taught a course on the women’s campus. So, I don’t know whether you’re interested in the women’s campus, or not, but If you are, I could tell you somebody who could tell you all about it. So I had only one year on the old campus.

Myles: Yeah, we’re focusing more on the men’s campus.

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah.

Myles: What did you teach on the old campus and what building were you in?

Dr. Crabtree: I taught English, freshman English, sophomore English. I taught a course in Eighteenth Century Literature that first year. And I taught in two buildings: I taught in what they called “Old Main,” which is the building that had the Bell Tower on it. And I taught in a building called “West” which was an Army barracks with floors that had holes and you could look down through the holes and see the dirt underneath, and you either froze or you burned up. But I taught classes there, they’re the only two buildings that I taught in. And I had an office in Old Main which I shared with just about everybody else in the English department. We didn’t have private offices. We had a great big room and each of us had a certain amount of space allocated to us. And so that was it.

Myles: I know West Hall was, like, a pre-fab building that was over, I guess, on the western end of the campus, but what were the conditions like in Old Main the year you were there.

Dr. Crabtree: Old Main, let me say this, Old Main was an extraordinarily beautiful building. Just the architectural beauty of the building was extraordinary, but it was in very bad shape. As a matter of fact, knowing... I mean while they were in the process

of building that new campus, the maintenance of the old campus became an absolute minimum effort. And one thing I remember specifically about Old Main is that the men's room was so icy cold that unless you were forced to use it you never did. Instead, we walked across the street to the administration building and used the men's room over there. And I say men because we were all men though there were a few women who taught on that campus but... At least I say a few, but I really can't, I don't remember a one who did. The women of the faculty taught on the women's campus. And there was some going back and forth of students, that is, men took classes on the women's campus and women took classes on the men's campus. Primarily, however, it was women coming to the men's campus to take classes in science and men going to the women's campus to take classes in the humanities and music. But the rooms were big. They had dais in front – you know what I mean? – had raised platforms in front. Professors desk sat on a raised platform so you had this, you know, sense of being ensconced before the class. I seem to remember that one of the classrooms that I taught in had, actually had raised steps, the desks were arraigned on tiers. But I have to be honest with you, that might be, that might be a false memory. And our office was very poorly lighted. It was lighted, actually, by lightbulbs hanging from cords from the ceiling. But as I say, they were building the new campus. When I came here, I came here for the first time ever in February of 1957. The dean had called me and offered me a job and I thanked him and told him that I planned to stay in graduate school until I had finished everything and I still had a dissertation to write. And then he wrote me twice more and urged me to come down and see what they were doing. And one of my professors at [University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill found out about it and told me I should come. And I think the fact that I was married and we had two children and one on the way had something to do with it. I needed a job. So I came down and I saw only the new campus except for about one... I was impressed by the fact that they tried to keep me off the campus as much as possible. They took me out to the new campus, showed me the buildings under construction and so forth. But in order to meet some of the English faculty I had, they had to show me around the old campus. But in 1957-58 the old campus, old men's campus, was in pretty bad shape. It was very beautiful. I mean, beautiful huge trees and Old Main was a beautiful building and so it had a lot of charm but... They'd outgrown the library, for example, and you could have put the whole library in that main section that you go into of the Duke Library. But I was very happy that I had taken the job, I'll put it that way. I liked it. I was very happy, I have been, that I had that one year on the old campus. I made very good friends that first year that lasted me until – well almost all of them are now dead.

Myles: Where did you live when you were teaching on the old campus?

Dr. Crabtree: I lived in a cul-de-sac just off of North Main Street. I was very lucky, we were very lucky. We came down here in May and by that time our baby had been born so we had a baby with us. We left the two boys in Chapel Hill but we had to bring the baby. And a Physics professor had taken a job at Clemson and he didn't want to sell his house in Greenville so he rented it to us. So it was very

conveniently located. It was out North Main Street. Do you know North Main? You go north across Stone Avenue and up beyond Earle Street and pretty far out so I had good access to the new campus which was where we were going to be the next year. Whereas most of the faculty were still living over near the new [old] campus which meant they had to drive from the Augusta Road area of Greenville to the campus. But we were lucky, this was a nice house we tried to buy, as a matter of fact, three years after we moved in there. But we didn't, we bought another house. It's a quiet, one-block neighborhood with lots of kids. Our next door neighbor became our family doctor. The man who owned the automotive shop lived down the street so he took care of my car. (laughs)

Myles: There's a little bit of confusion, at least from what I can tell, on – at least with just a couple of people I've talked to – about what the, sort of the main road on campus was. And I know the way that, like, the County Square area is currently laid out. But one person I talked to said the road that is currently called, and was then called University Ridge, was the main part of campus, like right where Block F was located. And then someone else I talked to said that University Street was that main road. Do you recall?

Dr. Crabtree: Block F was located directly in front of the library. It was one of those Carnegie Libraries – Andrew Carnegie gave money for them all over the country. And Block F was right in front of the library and, as far as I was concerned, whatever the street was that you went through – there were stone pillars marking the entrance to the campus – and you cut in there. I was thinking about this the other day because, if you look at University Square, I mean, you're totally thrown off because after we moved, the property was sold and they came and bulldozed everything. You get the impression sometimes, and I think it's a false impression, that you entered Furman where you enter the Governor's School for the Arts and I don't think that's right. I don't remember well enough, but the main street onto the campus was the street that ran by the library where the Block F is. So if you know where that is, that, I would say, the main street. Then I think it divided somewhere along there and you had Old Main, which was located behind the library, and the administration building. I remember a couple of dormitories, I remember where they were, and the athletic facilities which were in very bad shape, very bad shape. The football players had a tendency to "recreate" the interior of the buildings. It was more convenient to go from your room through the wall to the next room than – to kick out the wall – rather than go out in the hall. It was a terrible old place.

Myles: Do you recall... One of the things that we originally set out to try to do is to figure out, before the County Square – because you may or may not know this – but the County Square, that huge concrete complex is about to be torn down and it's gonna be replaced, I would presume, with smaller buildings serving pretty much the same purpose. But we set out to try to find out... The generally accepted theory is that along Howe Street there are a lot of older homes or homes that have been remodeled into, there's a French restaurant there and I think a realtor of some sort... But do you recall anyone that you knew living in a home along that area?

Dr. Crabtree: I know that somewhere along there were some two-story Army barracks that were turned into apartments for faculty and I can tell you someone who lived there and who'd be happy to talk to you about it. That's Dr. Robert Crapps who came the same year I did and he taught Religion.

Myles: Is he still in the Greenville area?

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah. As a matter of fact, he's nearer to the campus than I am. He's right out the back gate, you know, the Duncan Chapel gate. But Bob and his wife lived there and I remember going there to a party. I think that... I'm trying to locate in my mind the president's home.

Myles: I have the impression that the president's home – and this came from a source that is not entirely reliable – but I have the impression that the president's home is kind of, or was, located essentially directly where Church Street is now.

Dr. Crabtree: I think you're right, I think you're right. Right in there... I see Mrs. Plyler [Mrs. John (Beatrice) Plyler] rather frequently and she talks about that house. And there were other faculty who lived in there but I was new and I didn't get to know them very well. And, of course... Dean [Albert Elias] Tibbs must have lived somewhere in there because after we moved out here, he bought a house over on Clarendon Avenue which is pretty much out here. There's a section of Greenville called Sans Souci, and Clarendon Avenue is where the people who made a lot of money out of those mills in the Sans Souci area, that's where they lived – great big houses. And it's still pretty much intact, if you, as historians get that interested, if you will drive out Old Buncombe Road, you know where that is?

Georgianne: Mmm hmm.

Dr. Crabtree: Drive out Old Buncombe Road and stay on it. When you pass... Going toward town you will pass what was the Union Bleachery – which is now in pretty bad shape – and you'll see a mill village up behind it. But there is a stop light right at the bottom of this area. You go by a school, I think it's Lakeview, and then the Bleachery and there's a stop light. If you turn left there and then bear up to the right up Clarendon Avenue you go up into an old section. And I know at some time the Tibbs [Albert Elias and Annie Wyatt Tibbs] lived in there and I think Dr. R.C. Blackwell, he was chairman of the Math department, lived in there. But I don't know... If I say... The people I made friends with, Winston Babb, who was the chairman of the History department or became chairman of the History department, he lived on Cureton Street which is off the Augusta Road. If you go out Augusta Street to where Faris crosses it and turn down and you'll finally see it in there somewhere. But it's very hard for me – and I warned Georgianne that I wasn't a mine of information – because my first year here I was trying to write a dissertation, establish a reputation as a teacher, and we had a new baby. (laughs) So I didn't have much time. I would go home nearly every day by two o'clock and settle in my study and work away on that dissertation. So I don't

have a clear notion of all that layout that County Square totally erased.

Myles: Yeah, it's a pretty... 'Cause I was trying to go back through and kind of visually – at least in my head – and then try and get it down in some sort of map form what the old campus looked like. Because there's only, as far as we know, only one map that is intact of what the old campus looked like right... And I think I have actually been able to date it to 1949. But there's only one map and it seems to be, at least... I talked with Dr. Ed Jones [Edward B. Jones] a couple weeks ago, I guess, and he thinks that there's a couple of things on the map that are seemingly incorrect. So it's very confusing just trying to get a layout of... There's also, I guess, a good bit of confusion on exactly where Church Street came in and intersected the campus.

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah, I don't remember that. I was thinking about it, 'cause after you called me, I began to run a lot of things through my head and all of a sudden I thought Church Street – what we know of Church Street – just wasn't there because you could walk from the campus to Sistine Stadium without crossing anything like Church Street. And to get there you went through a really dismal block-and-a-half or so of houses that housed black people, I mean, you know, the worst kinds of places. And, of course, Sistine Stadium didn't look anything like it looks now, I can tell you that. I tell you somebody that – maybe somebody's already recommended it – there is a lady here. Her name is Ellett, her first name Ted, Ted Ellett. Ted is 96 years old but Ted's head is as clear as a bell and she taught at Furman. She taught mainly on the women's campus but her husband [Joseph Carlyle Ellett] was an Economics professor and ultimately became a legendary chairman of the whole Business Administration and Economics department, back in those days you didn't have two. And she knows. I bet she could answer any, come as close as anybody to telling you what the layout... And she lives over there in that area still. I think she's still lives in the house that they were living in then. Her husband died a number of years ago. Al [Albert Neely] Sanders lived over there, right across the street from them. Al was chairman of the History department for a good while. But Al's dead and his wife is dead. So if you can make contact with Ted Ellett, and I can tell you right now, her mind is clear and she's still an active deacon in the First Baptist Church. You'll see her taking up collection. But I'm just not clear on that because I never got to know the campus that well, being there just one year. Now Ed Jones would be a thoroughly reliable person and Ed was there – I think Ed graduated – wasn't he a Furman student? So he saw it as a student.

Myles: He graduated in '53 and he came back and started teaching in the History department in '56.

Dr. Crabtree: I tell you somebody else is currently on the faculty is – who graduated in, I think he graduated in '58 or '59 – and that's Dr. [C.A. "Tony"] Arrington in the Chemistry department. So Arrington would have clear memories of what the campus was like for at least two or three years that he lived there and took classes. I think he graduated... I don't know whether he graduated in '58 or '59. He graduated, I remember, because he tied somebody else for the Scholarship

Cup – two chemistry majors with straight 'A's. (laughs) Rare items even in those days.

Georgianne: Did you figure out the amphitheater?

Myles: We've been looking around and have... There is, some speak, that there is some remains of the old amphitheater left?

Dr. Crabtree: Mmm hmm.

Myles: Do you recall, perhaps, where that was in the context of how downtown is laid out now? Because the problem we've run into is, on the other side of Church Street there is what looks like could potentially be an amphitheater, and there's some brick and concrete kind of laid into a hill. But that seems like it – at least from the map that I've seen and from what Ed Jones says – that sounds like it's too far from campus.

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah, I would agree. My memory is that the amphitheater – and I do remember going to a ceremony there related to commencement – it was quite elaborate. Back in those days I don't know whether they called it Class Day Exercise, or what, and the women were prominent.

Myles: With the daisy chain?

Georgianne: Yeah, the court?

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah, they had this huge chain of daisies out in the court and they had these white dresses and, you know, it was really a marvelous... And my memory was that the... Somehow or another, that amphitheater, in my mind, was built on that hill. If you found it right now you'd be looking down over the park, you know, where the Liberty Bridge is and that sort of thing. That is if you were in the amphitheater you were aware of the river, it seemed to me. That's my memory of it.

Georgianne: 'Cause it went down to the river, right?

Myles: There was a pool at the bottom that I guess they had kind of dammed or, perhaps, maybe irrigated some water into that general direction.

Dr. Crabtree: I have some of those gray stones – well I did – on this property. Because when we built this house, Winston Babb and I went over and he helped me load them into the back of the station wagon and I made a little low wall out of them. But they're all gone now because when we put the pool in... They may be under the pool somewhere. (laughs) But they were gone. But that's... My impression is that's too far away, that it was much more up on the campus.

Georgianne: And was it all stone? Or was it brick at all, do you remember?

Dr. Crabtree: My memory is that it was stone, but there could have been. There is a... Have you seen a photograph of that amphitheater?

Myles: We've seen several.

Dr. Crabtree: There's one in, I think, Dean [Robert Norman] Daniel's old *History of Furman [Furman University. A History]*.

Georgianne: Yeah, it's a picture of the Class Day.

Dr. Crabtree: Yeah. They had a lot of ceremonies of that sort particularly as related to the Woman's College. They had a very elaborate Hanging of the Greens on the women's campus in early December. Which I... And I never saw it. I regret that I didn't but I didn't teach on the women's campus and I didn't go over there except for parties or concerts because the building on the women's campus in those days was where Greenville went to hear the Greenville symphony play.

Myles: Was that the Ramsay Fine Arts Building [Center]?

Dr. Crabtree: Ramsay Fine Arts Building [Center]. Had a very nice auditorium and had beautiful limestone columns which I heard were saved and were gonna become a part of the amphitheater on the new campus. But I haven't been to the amphitheater since they did their last work there. But I don't think they're there.

Georgianne: There are columns.

Myles: There are columns but I don't think they're... I think the outside of it actually sounds kind of like plastic or something.

Georgianne: I don't remember being struck by them as being anything special.

Myles: There was a fine arts building on the men's campus or something of that nature – or maybe not. What was the... Do you remember the function of the building called Fletcher Hall was?

Dr. Crabtree: Is that where we had chapel?

Myles: I think chapel was at Judson Alumni Hall, I think was the official name of that building, but everyone just called it the chapel, with the dome on the top.

Dr. Crabtree: No, I don't. I'm sorry. I don't. My memories of the buildings, as I said, I remember the library because I was trying to finish my degree and I had to establish myself with the library staff immediately so they'd get books for me. And I'd go to the library and I made friends with the librarians and a lady named Alice Adams who helped me a great deal. And Old Main and West. And I was in one of the dormitories, one of the nice ones, once. I remember the

administration building and I remember the building in which we had chapel but only vaguely. And I remember that it had stained glass windows around it. And it was a matter of some concern to me, some years after we moved out, I began to wonder what had happened to those windows. And, of course, now we know what happened to them and now they have been brought... They've been discovered and they're all around the new campus. But I don't, I'm sorry.

Myles: Oh no. That's ok. I think that's all that I have.

Dr. Crabtree: You're good. You're good at your job. (laughs)

Georgianne: Thank you.