

**Interviewee:** Simmons, John  
**Interviewer:** Robin Sellers  
**Date of interview:** November 22, 2005  
**Category:** FSU  
**Status:** Open  
**Tape location:** Box #51

**Sellers:** Dr. Simmons, why don't we just start out with a little bit of where you were born and where you grew up.

**Simmons:** I was raised in a little town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, about forty miles north of Boston, where I attend the public schools, and I then went to Boston University, graduating in 1953, a classmate of Martin Luther King, by the way. And on that day in June, I received my degree in English literature, my commission as a 2nd lieutenant in the army, and my orders to Fort Benning, all within about a five hour period. I really did. The Korean War was on, and I went to Fort Benning and then spent time at Fort Jackson and then a year in Korea as a platoon leader in infantry. Came home in 1955, and wanted to go to the Midwest. That was my great kind of Carl Sandburg romanticism about the world.

**Sellers:** Because of your English lit.?

**Simmons:** Well, the Big Ten institutions had great English departments, and there was something really else. I always felt that life in New England was very socially stratified. I was an orphan, the people who adopted me were illiterate, Portuguese immigrants, had to learn to write their name to get their citizenship. I worked my way through Boston University. And I just felt, having worked at the golf club in Gloucester, that you had to be an Ivy League person, really, to gain stature, and I just wanted to do something – I wanted to have a new life. I had been accepted at Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Minnesota gave me a residence counselorship in a fraternity house. And that plus the GI Bill pulled me through. I got my master's in '57. I taught at the university high school at Minnesota, which was one of my first big breaks. I taught high school English and reading (reading was strong second field at the doctoral level) and wrote my dissertation in that area. During that time, I became involved in the work of the National Council of Teachers of English, one of whose prominent figures was a man named Dwight Burton, who was a professor of English Education at Florida State University. He also was a Minnesota graduate, and one of his closest friends was my doctoral advisor, so it was all rather clubby. And in 1962, when I finished my doctorate, I had already accepted a position here. And I came here in September of 1962, and never left.

**Sellers:** You said you'd already accepted the position. What were the mechanics of that? Did your major professor contact Burton?

**Simmons:** I actually met him at one of these national conferences in Denver and we became

friends. He had offered the job the year before; I said I wanted to finish my doctorate before I came. I was midway through my dissertation in the fall of 1961, when he offered the job and I accepted it. So I came here, I had the degree in hand and I had the assistant professorship.

**Sellers:** And the English department that you came into was located —

**Simmons:** The College of Education.

**Sellers:** Oh, you came into the College of Education?

**Simmons:** Yeah. See, that's an interesting reflection, really. I just had a book accepted by the Heritage Council here, which is the history of English Education at Florida State. It's set against the backdrop of what I call the shifting tides of teacher education in America since World War II. And one of those shifts in teacher education was a movement away from what I would call general methodology to content-specific methodology. Really, until the mid-'50s there were no subject matter degrees in education (and notice I got my degree in English Education). Florida State was one of the schools (I make a big point of this in the book) that the subject matter programs under then-Dean Mode Stone flourished. We had math education, interestingly, science education, which was created by Dr. Marshall, who later became president of FSU. We had a strong program in social studies, and English, which my boss created and he was then the editor of the *English Journal* which was the number one professional journal in the field. And so I really came at the time when there was this transition going on in the field of teacher education, and one of the things that I had always been proud of as a member of the FSU faculty was that we had a very close working relationship with the English Department, primarily because of Burton's leadership. There was a man named Kellogg Hunt, for instance, who had been a professor of Victorian literature and Dwight got him interested in linguistics, and when I came he was the senior linguistics faculty member here. In 1964, he won an NCTE Distinguished Researcher Award for research he did in the syntax of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, which became internationally known, and that was because of Dwight Burton's influence. Later, Dwight recruited a man named Jim McCrimmon, whose book, *Writing with a Purpose*, sold first in American freshmen college English texts for thirty-five years. He was writer-in-residence at the University of Illinois and then at Houghton Mifflin when he came down here in his latter years to teach rhetoric and composition with us. Again, a man who is known throughout the world for his pioneering work in the teaching of writing. So those kinds of people who truly had a foot in both camps were the kinds of people that I knew and associated with throughout my career. And as I say, there are places where (being honest) education is a kind of second-class citizenship, but never at Florida State, because we had a man named Gene Nichols, who was again internationally known in math, Dr. Marshall, himself, who brought in millions of dollars in NSF money to promote the teaching of science; and it was really the strength of those subject matter areas that was one of the early visible signs of Florida State's emergence from the late '50s, really, to the present day.

**Sellers:** Now, as I recall, Kelly Hunt was one of the '49ers.

**Simmons:** Yes, he was. And as I say, he came here as a student of nineteenth century British literature. He also had a freshmen English text, Hunt and Stoakes' *Our Living Language*. Paul Stoakes (long since gone) was director of freshmen English when I came here, and he and Kelly hit it off. And he was a literature rhetoric guy, he really wasn't in linguistics. But those are the kinds of people that really helped us. And then of course, in the '60s, again through Dwight's leadership, we were able to accrue a number of federal grants. We had a Project English Curriculum Study Center. We were one of the twenty-two that was awarded that. It was a seven year study which we did experimental approaches to junior high school English. We also had an Experienced Teacher Fellowship program here. We were the only university in the country that had that for three years, where we brought in twenty-five experienced teachers from Florida, gave them a year of residence towards their masters or PhD, and provided them with cutting edge scholarship in both English and English Ed. Kelly taught in the program; McCrimmon taught in the program. Fred Standley taught in the program. It was a distinguished — I was very flattered to be a part of that group actually. And with that and our individual NDEA fellowships, and then I had an NDEA fellowship program called — it was the trainers of English teachers in the summer of '68 which we were proud of. We brought in teacher educators from all over the South, largely small schools where their training in the pedagogy which was rather limited and they did an intensive summer with us and four of them stayed on to do their PhD eventually. Those were exciting years; that's chapter two of my book, which I call "A Flurry of Activity."

At that time also, in fact in the spring of 1963, the National Council of Teachers of English founded a new subgroup called the Conference on English Education. The fall before my first year here, fall of '62, there was a meeting at Allerton Park, which is a conference center on University of Illinois campus, of the Association of Department English members, or English chairpersons of major universities in America. There were three "education" people in attendance at that meeting; one of them was Dwight Burton. And so, through his leadership and a man named J. N. Hook, who had been an executive secretary in NCTE, and had been professor of English at Illinois, they *founded* the Conference on English Education. Basically, at that conference the English chairs say: "Look, our job is scholarship. We really are not comfortable with teacher education. You guys do it," which really gave a tremendous impetus to English as a pedagogical content as well as the scholarship of linguistics, literature, and rhetoric. And if you look back, we truly were in the beginning phases of the national movement which has been called English Education. Dwight was the co-chair of that conference.

**Sellers:** So English Education is teaching teachers to teach English?

**Simmons:** Teaching teachers to teach English. Well, at the undergraduate level, we prepared teachers for the upper grades. Previously, 7 through 9 and 10 through 12, currently 6 through 8 (middle school) and 9 through 12. Also, we developed here (I think it's fair to say) a lot of the ancillary program materials, such as Literature for Adolescents, now called Young Adult Literature; Applied Linguistics; technology for teachers we began — not here — but everyone was doing it back in the mid-late '70s; Composition for Teachers. And these were both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We developed a kind of concept of middle school English curricula that we pioneered back in the '80s. And so, the undergraduate program, really, became

specific and more expanded during those years. Typically, there is one course, Teaching English in Secondary Schools, and that has to cover the whole waterfront. You've got to do linguistics, you've got to do composition, you've got to do literature, you've got to do reading, you've got to do organizational elements. And then there's that bugaboo, classroom management. You know, how to tell a kid to shut up, which you don't necessarily learn in a linguistics or literature course. I taught the course, called Classroom Management and Planning, which was, of course, the main course in our program, for twenty-five years, I guess.

**Sellers:** When you first came here, Mode Stone was your dean?

**Simmons:** He was the dean, yes.

**Sellers:** How long did he stay and what effect do you think he had on the programs?

**Simmons:** Let's take it back one step, if I may. When Florida State became a university after being a women's college for a long time, the president, Doak Campbell, made, I thought, a very ambitious decision to go in to the Big Ten institutions and get outstanding scientists. He got people in meteorology, in geology, in physics, and chemistry, and biology. And these young doctoral people came and formed what I felt to be the major thrust of our reputation in the early years. At the same time, he went out and — he was a close personal friend of Mode Stone's, First Baptist Church and all that — and Mode went out and hired these people both in the content area (methodology people), but also in research and testing. There were F. J. King, Russ Kropp, Hazen Curtis; these were all names that became major figures in research testing and learning systems. Later, we hired Robert Gagne, whose book, *The Conditions of Learning*, for many years was the number one text in the field of behavioristic approaches to learning theory.

**Sellers:** And psychology.

**Simmons:** Yeah, yeah. Mode was dean from about 1955 or '56 until he retired in '67. See, I'm really — I like history.

**Sellers:** Good, that helps me a lot.

**Simmons:** Then Stanley Marshall, who had moved from the chair of Science Ed to Associate Dean, became the Dean of Education. And he was dean for two years and then he became the acting and then permanent president of Florida State in 1969. And then we had a guy named Phil Fordyce, who had been Stan's right hand man in Science Ed who took over as dean. And because he was a science educator and a member of the AAAS group, the Academy of Science Teachers, was very determined to continue this. But he also — that was the time Gagne and Les Briggs came here and really took the whole notion of curricula development in a somewhat different direction. We had to adjust from some of the more academic approaches to English, which the Hunts and the McCrimmons had contributed to, to, frankly, curricula more related to kids of lower ability, kids who are non-college bound. And that's really where my work in

reading became valuable.

**Sellers:** So was it almost remedial?

**Simmons:** Oh yeah. Yeah. We called it, you know, it was a number of names. There was developmental, corrective, remedial. I wasn't a clinical person. Most of my work was in reading curriculum, but I originated the course here called Teaching Reading in the Secondary Schools. When I retired, it was both an undergraduate and graduate course, required for the master's degree, and eventually when the state passed some accountability law rules and regulations in 1972, that meant something about reading was required of all teacher education students from K-12. That waned in the '80s, if you remember. That's what I call the cultural literacy era of Hirsch and Bennet and Lynn Chaney and those people, and came back more recently. Torgeson, for instance, Joe Torgeson is still a major figure, and he's a reading guy. And everybody today who is being certified legitimately to teach in our schools has to have work in reading. But that's waxed and waned. I just stuck with reading. I have sixteen books now, probably six or seven have been about reading in one way or another.

**Sellers:** What happened to grammar?

**Simmons:** Interesting. Grammar, I wrote a lot about that. Grammar has had a very kind of rough road in American schools. When we were kids, we learned grammar probably through Warriner's *English Grammar and Composition*, which at one time was the number one selling textbook in the world.

**Sellers:** I still have my copy.

**Simmons:** Oh yeah, I have copies here. My wife who was an editor for Harcourt Brace, did all the writing assignments for the sixth grade Warriner's in 1987, which was the first sixth grade book they had. So we have Warriners upstairs. And what really happened, though, was that the linguists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – English linguistics – began to look at different conceptual frameworks for grammar: one was called structural or descriptive linguistics, which grew in the '30s, '40s, and '50s. And then a man named Noam Chomsky, in 1957, published a book called *Syntactic Structures*, which was the beginning of a movement called transformational generative grammar. That, by the way, was when Hunt was just getting into the teaching of linguistics, and Hunt used Chomsky's successive texts as the basic texts in his graduate course in English syntax. The problem with the later grammars was that they had no traditional base, that public school teachers were very wary of them, and the attempt to translate them from theory into working paradigms for use in the secondary schools – and elementary – never came off. There was a man named Paul Roberts who in the '50s and '60s wrote a number of books: first, about how to teach structural linguistics, and then how to teach transformational grammar in the schools. He had a series called the *Roberts' Linguistics Series*, published by Harcourt Brace. He had gone through grades 3 through 11. When that series (this is one of the ironic twists of fate) when that series was accepted in California, which is a magical, you can imagine, a magical adoption (it made him a millionaire), he was working on the

eleventh and twelfth grade books, finishing the eleventh and doing the twelfth, in a villa in Rome that Harcourt had rented for him. He fell in a bathtub, fractured his skull, and died. And that ended *Roberts' Linguistics*. Roberts was a genius. He was a friend of Hunt's, Kelly Hunt's, by the way; lectured here on a couple of occasions. He was a genius at translating the very complex and mathematically oriented syntax theories and transformational generative grammar into teachable commodities. After he died, that movement died.

**Sellers:** Nobody else could do it?

**Simmons:** Yeah, his wife tried. Harcourt had editors who all failed. And within five years, those books, by the way, have been state adopted in Florida, were sitting on warehouse shelves all over the state, and the *Warriner's* came back in 1977. They set records in text books sales in American schools, 1977. They came (I have a book with Harcourt, so I kind of knew about this) — in the mid '70s, they came within one vote of completely jettisoning *Warriner's* in 1973. One vote in the editorial group. They decided we'll keep one edition just in reserve, which, you know, Roberts died, they tried to do — and all the major publishing companies that tried to translate, if you will, transformational theory into public school textbooks all vanished.

**Sellers:** I didn't realize that *Warriner's* had such a long history. I used it in the early '80s in my English degree.

**Simmons:** 1946 it was published. Yeah, that's a very interesting story. John Warriner was a high school English teacher in a high school in Long Island, and he was 4-F during the war, couldn't get into military service. And he used to keep notebooks of errors his students made in writing. During the latter years of the war he was the only male in this particular faculty, and the young female members used to come and ask him to look at his notebooks to help them with their teaching of syntax. So one day he got the bright idea that maybe there was a book here, and he took a train into Manhattan and met with the Harcourt editors in 1945, and the rest is history. It's how that all transpired. Another thing that really happened in the teaching of language was what I call the social and cultural dimensions of language began to emerge as particularly, I think, because of the social mobility that became part of the American culture after World War II, hand-in-hand with the Civil Rights Movement, with the emergence of the GI Bill, etcetera, where poorer people were going to college. And their language became part of the social fabric.

**Sellers:** Not only that, but the different soldiers, New Englanders, they were ending in the South for Air Corps training and things like that, and they were bringing speech characteristics and mingling things, too.

**Simmons:** The Southerners, yep. Sure. Served in Georgia, and Fort Jackson, South Carolina, you're looking at him. But, oh yeah, and therefore studies like usage and American dialectics and semantics, which one of my heroes S. I. Hayakawa, you know, probing at the meaning and how meaning is developed and produced in language. Those expanded the linguistics scope, it seems to me, beyond just learning how to diagram sentences and memorizing parts of speech. So the whole linguistics spectrum grew and expanded in my early years of the

profession, and Kelly, of course, was in the vanguard of that. There was a man the University of Florida named Harry Warfell, Lloyd and Warfell, *American English in its Cultural Settings*, which I've always thought was one of the important influential books on getting real about the English language in its American dialect.

**Sellers:** What affect, if any, did the Gordon Rule have?

**Simmons:** Well, to give you one, again, a good piece of what I guess would be called trivia: in 1982, the National Council of Teachers of English gave Jack Gordon an award for his contributions to the profession. So that's how widely Gordon's influence — what it did was, as I see it, in Florida and probably the rest of the country, was to try to achieve the impossible dream. What Gordon said basically was, in his legislation, "Give these teachers small classrooms. Give them an opportunity to teach and evaluate writing, really evaluate it. Give them a chance to experiment with the kinds of approaches that contemporary research and scholarship aren't developing, and we'll get a better product." Obviously, if you are going to have small class sizes, part of the puzzle is to hire more teachers. The other part of puzzle, of course, was to train the teachers in writing. One of the problems, it seems to me, that has beset the development of English teaching throughout the curriculum, all the way into the senior college years, is that the graduate students in English, who teach freshmen English, are literature majors trying to teach rhetoric. We had here for about four or five years under the direction of Dwight Burton and a guy named Francis Townsend who had been the head, we taught a methods course. We did, the English Ed people, for the freshmen English teachers at Florida State. I thought that was a step forward. And then, to be candid with you, their naivete about the writing process, et cetera, was astounding. But once we got used to it and once we became comfortable with each other, I think you'd find people who were just working on their masters and doctorate in English back in those days who look back at that as vital to not their scholarship, obviously, but their identity as teachers.

But getting back to Gordon, part of it, as I say, was the small class size. That created a problem though, because here the science teachers and some of the big schools (don't forget Florida is a state which has been growth state for a very long time), so the schools get bigger, and the class size, there's not enough money to pay for it. So the science and social studies and math teachers are teaching class with thirty and forty and more, and the English teachers are teaching classes of twenty. And the jealousy became a tangible thing, because I at one time was president of the Florida Council of Teachers of English, and I have spent time in public schools in Florida throughout my entire career. In fact, I just finished supervising a student teacher in Pensacola this week. I really, of course, was committed to going out into the field and seeing what our kids were doing in their fledgling experiences, and what I heard in those days was a lot antagonism.

**Sellers:** Towards?

**Simmons:** With your small classes. You got the small classes, and of course the other classes had to get to be a little bigger. And then when hiring came, you hired the English teachers first, because of the small class size mandate, and the other teachers second. And there

was animosity. It was kind of like the bonuses they were giving a few years ago. But Gordon, while I feel that some of his theories were inconsistent with contemporary research and scholarship, his belief in smaller class sizes and getting kids to write – they had to write every week and their teachers had to evaluate – and as long as you have small class sizes and time to work with papers, I mean, I think the difference between a math teacher who brings home a set papers and just looks for an answer and a teacher who brings home a stack of papers (and I did that, after all, for forty-five years) and to do to it what Aristotle called “a just reading,” you had to do something more than just make a red pencil mark. Anyway, so those things created problems while they, at least in one sense, were creating visibility and I think were steps in the right direction. And of course, there was those pride awards in the early ‘80s and one of them was — they gave one in math, science, social studies, and writing. Not English, writing. And that was part of Gordon. I think all of that was a step in the right direction. I think that it made us highly visible nationally. But of course, all good things must come to an end, and eventually a number of things transpired and the Gordon Rule went down the drain. That is no longer what is done. There were English classes at Lincoln High School that I visited in the last decade that would start at fifty. Can’t do much teaching or evaluating writing when you’ve got fifty kids.

**Sellers:** Of course, even in the History Department, when I first came up here, the 1000-level history courses, the Gordon Rule was part of them. So we had teaching assistants who were expected to do the Gordon Rule for 250 students.

**Simmons:** Yeah, and really not with enough training and evaluation in writing.

**Sellers:** No, no training at all.

**Simmons:** This is where — and I think this is inevitability, where we are a society that tries to educate everybody and tries to give everybody at least a taste of excellence, and that’s a problem, particularly when you balance that with the fact that we open our doors to such a broad range of cultural identities. It’s just a damn hard thing to do.

**Sellers:** And not everybody is able, regardless of how much we want them all to be.

**Simmons:** Of course not. No, that’s the political dimension. By the way, before we go too much farther, I would like to mention one other thing I did in my life here that’s not mentioned. When I taught high school at the lab school at Minnesota, the head of the Athletic Department came to me and asked me if I’d coach swimming. And I had never even seen a swimming meet. I could swim; I swam in the Atlantic Ocean – which maybe isn’t swimming, but I didn’t know anything about it. So to make a long story short, I began coaching them for \$175 a year.

**Sellers:** That much? I’m sure that was what enticed you to do it. [chuckles]

**Simmons:** No, it was do you want to work with kids? And I had no choice, really. Morally, they needed — see, they had a small Physical Education Department. They had three sports in

the winter: basketball, wrestling, and swimming; three in the spring: baseball, track and tennis. So the coaches of swimming and tennis were guys like me. Guys, I say, because there was no female sports at that time. Anyway, so I got involved and there was a head coach at the University of Minnesota (one of my heroes in life, really) named Bill Heusner who had been magna cum laude in electrical engineering at Northwestern University, a Big Ten champion in his three events as a swimmer, athlete-scholar of the year in his senior year at Northwestern when they won the Rose Bowl, and then switched into Exercise Physiology. Did his degree at Illinois, and came to Minnesota as the head coach and professor my first year. And we became close friends. He taught me a lot, and really gave me the inspiration. So when I came to Florida State, I said to then coach Bim Stults, who had been there since the university became the university, "I'm not real good, but I'm cheap." And so I was a volunteer assistant here at Florida State for twenty years, and I ran the home meets; I took the team on the road some of the times; I helped with recruiting; just did a lot of things. And I stopped that in 1982. It just got to be too much. But for twenty years, I was an assistant coach here.

**Sellers:** Follow up a little bit with me. Of course, Bim Stults was dead when we started doing interviews here, so we were unable to get any of that. So if you don't mind —

**Simmons:** I knew him very well, of course.

**Sellers:** I'd like to know a little bit about him and the building of the pool and things like that, if you don't mind.

**Simmons:** I have no problem. Bim was from Ohio, did his undergraduate degree at Washington and Lee, but then went to graduate school after the Navy, World War II, and worked on the master's degree in Physical Education at Ohio State and was the assistant coach to a man named Mike Pepe, who at the time was developing some of the greatest divers in the world, then came here in 1947 to begin the aquatic program here at Florida State. Came here with people like Don Veller and, oh, numbers of people.

**Sellers:** Vaughn Mancha —

**Simmons:** Yeah. He was in that group. We were swimming when I first came here in '62 in Montgomery Gym: five lanes, a diving board that went out into the pool; we had to lift it to have practice. The divers and the swimmers couldn't practice at the same time. Freshman, varsity had to swim, we had eighty guys in the pool. It was nuts. But Bim Stults built this program to the point that we were the number one team in the deep South from the mid-'50s til the mid-'60s. We annually beat the University of Florida, who was annually the Southeast Conference champion. He coached a guy named Curt Gender in 1961, who was the first national champion that Florida State University saw in any sport;; he was a diver. Curt won the NCAA championship in one meter in 1961, and the amazing thing is, he took fourth in the three meter board – we didn't *have* a three meter board.

**Sellers:** He was learning somewhere else?

**Simmons:** If you ever looked at Montgomery, they couldn't have a high board and the pool wasn't deep enough. I think that was one of the most amazing feats that a man ever accomplished.

**Sellers:** Surely, he had been practicing somewhere. Perhaps at the Reservation.

**Simmons:** Sure. Yeah, but see, Bim's forte was diving. Ten years later, he coaches a guy named Phil Boggs, who won NCAA championships in his junior and senior year, won the Olympic three-meter championship in 1976, was Diver of the Decade in the '70s, followed by a man named Greg Louganis, and the rest is, again, history. And Phil died, unfortunately, of a brain tumor at age 43. But truly one of the great athletes that ever came to Florida State – the most visible athletes. He also coached swimming All-Americans. There was a guy named Bucky Hiles, who is now a vice-president of Sears; a guy named Paul Thompson – the ones I knew – and they, Bucky Hiles, and I can't think of this other guys name, he had another student – two student athletes in 1960, through Student Government got the student body at Florida State to earmark part of the student activity fee to the building of a new pool. Bucky Hiles – Paul Hiles, and then there was another guy. He was from Mississippi. I just can't think of his name right now. But those two guys, they were in the Student Government, and they ram-rodged that through. And as a result, in the fall of 1964, we held our first intercollegiate meet in the outdoor pool. I was the referee and clerk of course that day. And it was a wonderful facility, but it was sponsored primarily by student money. Athletic Department made a very small contribution. And of course, that created a problem because the students wanted a piece of the action and we had to adjust our practice times to legitimate requests of the students. So that became, in a way, it was kind of a political flip-flop.

**Sellers:** What was the feeling when it was terminated?

**Simmons:** When the pool was closed? I was out of there by then.

**Sellers:** No, but I mean were you aware of any remorse?

**Simmons:** No, because towards the end, see Bim retired from coaching in 1972. A guy named Terry (oh boy, I'm so terrible) — a guy came from the University of Tennessee and took over as head coach. He lasted until 1977, and then a guy named John Stafford, who had swum for us, came from Bolles Academy and he was coach until '82, which was when I quit. But in any event, what was happening during those years from the late '60s on was that the southern schools, Southeast Conference schools, that didn't even have swimming, began to get involved in the sport. For instance, University of Tennessee never had a team until 1968. They built an outdoor and indoor pool, side-by-side. Three years later, they won the NCAA Championship, mostly by the way of Florida, because Auburn University had this tiny pool which they expanded and they became – they finished in the top five national poll for —oh, for the last

twenty-five years or thirty years, they've been in the top five. But they didn't *have* a team until 1967. The University of Alabama had a very limited program and then they expanded in the '70s and they were national contenders, with a whole new facility; they call it the Paul B. Bryant facility. LSU didn't have a team. But you see, during those years those large Southeast Conference institutions began the sport with brand new *indoor* facilities. And so the problem with the competitive dimension of swimming *here* from the late '60s onward was we couldn't compete in recruiting. I mean, our scholarship budget was limited to begin with, but what the wise guys would say, "Don't go to Florida State, you'll get sick during the season." And they did, because they had to swim outdoors. So you see, that spelled the downfall of competitive swimming here. Now we have the Leach Center, which has been open for the last six or seven years and they're back doing well. But I'm saying, don't forget, that time marked the end of Bim's reign here, and I think he was rather bitter and disillusioned because he wanted competing facilities. At the same time, the University of Florida built the O'Connell Center, which opened in 1982, and you've seen that. You know about it, anyway. I mean, it's a magnificent facility. We didn't quite have that. We had the outdoor pool and Tully gym.

**Sellers:** And unfortunately, we didn't have the alumni swimmers that were willing to put forth that money.

**Simmons:** By the way, the guy's name was Terry Carlisle. I remember now. Terry Carlisle. He lasted here from '73 to '77, and then went back to University of Cincinnati. But anyway, it was sad, and to tell you the truth, as I saw what was happening — and Katie and I got married in '82. We had a blended family of eight, the youngest of whom was two years old and then we had an eleven year old who came to live with us from Panama City. We just had too much on our plate and something had to give, and so I stopped. It was twenty years, and I wouldn't trade those twenty years for anything in the world. It was my bowling, or hunting, or fishing.

**Sellers:** And it kept you at home, I mean, in town most of the time, probably.

**Simmons:** Yeah. Well, see that was the problem, because my work in the schools and work in national organizations kept me away, too, and doing an awful lot of in service work. I counted it up the other day. I did teacher workshops in thirty-five states over my years.

**Sellers:** What was the relationship between what you all were doing and the Dem school? Were your students going to the Dem school at all?

**Simmons:** No, that was frankly one of my great disappointments. One of the things that attracted me to Florida State was that they did have a lab school, and it's decent. You know, a lot of schools don't have that. And at the very time I left Minnesota, they were closing them down. They closed one down at Minnesota and at Wisconsin, Ohio State. They closed a lot of them down. The legislatures thought that they were not getting their money's worth. But the whole idea of those lab schools was that the teachers there were graduate students who were learning to — they were aspiring to leadership in the field, while they learned the realities of classroom teaching. And those were busy days, believe me. We were involved in any research

project that came down the pike. But it didn't happen in Florida. Because that wasn't the way of the world here. They had a permanent faculty. Their faculty, they could go as high as associate professor in the faculty there. They could be there forever. At Minnesota, you'd be there seven years, and were gone. But there were people at the lab school, they had been there thirty years when I came. There was no pressure to produce scholarship. There was no pressure to produce research. In fact, they resented it.

**Sellers:** So it technically had gone from being a training institution to simply being a regular old school.

**Simmons:** I think it was another public school. And another thing, they were very reluctant to take student teachers there.

**Sellers:** But that's what it was created for!

**Simmons:** I'm not sure that I want you to quote me on this, but as far as I'm concerned, one of the problems is that the lab school has been and is a political football. One of the reasons they took it in Southwood was the people there — now they're promising things they can't deliver. But I'm saying, you see that we had to beg to put kids down there. We used to have a pre-student teaching course during the, I think, eleven years we were in the quarter system. The last thing they did on the methods sequence was to have a practicum, and we used the local schools but we also had to place student teachers. And we gave preference to married kids, and we had permanent Tallahassee residents, so we'd use up our quota of placements in the local schools. We needed Florida High. And so for the pre-student teaching course, which is a quarter-long course, they worked one hour a week, we would use the lab school. But that was the closest we ever came to real involvement. There was never an integration of the subject matter areas in the College of Education and the subject matter areas in the lab school. And that was true across the board.

**Sellers:** That's a shame.

**Simmons:** Yeah, it was. And I was quickly disillusioned with that, because I really saw — in fact, I taught at the lab school. My first four years, here I taught at least one class there. I mean, and I'd bring my methods students down and they'd sit in the back and watch what was going on, but that was because I asked for it. I mean, I wasn't paid for that. I did that as an addition to my teaching. I'm not complaining about that, I'm just saying that there wasn't the linkage, and for all the wonderful things that Burton did, he was not interested in that, in that aspect. Nor was Nichols, nor was Marshall. They didn't see the lab school as an extension of what they were doing. They were into building graduate programs, building the scholarship in their disciplines, and something had to give, and I think that was that. They really were very uninterested in what was going on at the lab school.

**Sellers:** Over the years, who do you think has been — not necessarily one person — who

other than Burton had the —

[End Side A]

**Simmons:** As I said before, one of the things that really was appealing to me in coming here was the close association between us and the English Department. We had Francis Townsend, and then we had a guy by the name of George Harper, who was an eminent Yeats scholar, one of the great scholars of William Butler Yeats in the world. The Yeats family donated their papers to him and to Harper at a certain point. He also was a very accomplished department head at North Carolina. He was kind of later in his career. He was very committed to keeping this bond. Fred Standley, who was one of my closest friends, then became department head, and for ten years we kind of had this — then John Fenstermaker, who followed Fred, was a guy who really believed in the teacher education part of the mission that the English department was committed to. Anne Rowe, who followed John Fenstermaker, was again committed. She was on our committees. I mean, we did a lot of stuff with them. When I created the Applied Linguistics for Teachers course in 1994, the first person I went to before I ever presented a syllabus to the curriculum committee, was Anne Rowe. I said, “Does the English department accept the possibility that this course could be an alternative to the Introduction to the Study of Language course that you’re offering?” She said, “Absolutely.” See, that was symbolic. So you’re talking about people, every one — and today (you know I’ve been retired now this is my fifth year) — gosh, why can’t I think of his name — Hawkins! Hunt Hawkins is now head of the English department, and he was extremely cooperative. Whenever there have been questions of Southern Association Accreditation evaluations, NCATE evaluations, any kind of evaluations that involved teacher education in English, those people have been most accommodating. So those were then. Now, I’ve already mentioned Mode. See, Stan Marshall’s tenure as dean was too short. Two years! And he was onward and upward.

**Sellers:** And he was science based. Not that there’s anything wrong with being science based.

**Simmons:** Yeah. No no. No, of course that’s fortunate because the NSF gave more money to public education than almost any other federal grant organization in the world. You know, I mean that’s where the money comes from is NSF, and that goes all the way back to 1958 and the National Defense Education Act. You know, that’s been a long time. That was passed in 1958, and then we got our nose in the trough, so to speak. But if you remember, the NDEA specified math, science, and foreign language. Now what happened to foreign language, I’m not enough of an historian to know. But certainly science and math have really benefitted from that. We have a guy here from the late ‘70s for science by the name of Ken Tobin, who brought in a lot — you know, at one of the New York City institutions — but he brought in a tremendous amount of federal money to the Center for Science Ed. So there’s been a long tradition. A guy named George Dawson, who retired when I did, was very much involved in some of these curriculum development programs that were sponsored by NSF. They’re teaching all over the world. They were running a program in Saudi Arabia and in Turkey for a long time.

**Sellers:** What was your average student count that you felt was optimal?

**Simmons:** How do you mean?

**Sellers:** You have a number of graduate students that you come in, you try to recruit them. Did you ever get an overload of them and find that you had bitten off more than you should be chewing?

**Simmons:** Well, back in the late '60s, when we had that Experienced Teacher Fellowship program, that was a starting group, cohort, of twenty-five students. Then we had people coming in from other places. We had those individual NDEA fellowships. We had a dinner which I'll never forget, at one of the local hotels because we had a guest speaker, a guy named Steve Dunning, who had been Burton's second PhD and had risen to prominence in teaching literature. He was at the University of Michigan at the time. He came and spoke to the group. We had sixty graduate students all under some kind of subsidy at that meeting, at that dinner. That was a lot. It also meant that — I can remember one day reading master's exams while I was having dental work. [Laughter] Yeah, really, having some kind of partial put in. I'm reading exams while the thing is hardening. And we never had many tenured or tenure-earning track. Four was about the highest we ever got, and so we taught a lot of grad students. But by in large, the graduate students we got would come to us with some teaching experience. They'd go out in the field and teach a couple of years, get a fellowship, get an assistantship, somehow support themselves, and sometimes their counties would support them, and they'd come back. And so (a) they were very easy to advise; they were self-motivating. And (b) they could fill in, the doctoral students teaching some of the undergraduate course and supervise them. So they were extremely valuable. I had numbers of students back in the '70s and '80s, large numbers of students, grad students, when I was advising. I finished thirty-five doctoral students, now.

**Sellers:** That's a handful.

**Simmons:** Yeah, but that's spread over many years.

**Sellers:** You said you would meet the capacity to place the student teachers locally and had problems getting them. Did you place them outside of Leon County?

**Simmons:** Historically (and this was true before I came here), Florida State was the only one of the what — now ten or eleven universities — that allowed its student teachers to be placed throughout the state.

**Sellers:** Is that, do you think, and this is just surmise on my part, because we started out possibly as a normal school?

**Simmons:** Yeah, I think that we were the teacher ed school. And I think we were that while the University of Florida had other fish to fry. But then when we became FSU, and soon after

that Mode took over, and with his commitment and his political contacts — see, Mode Stone was the consummate politician. He knew the Porkchop Gang like we know our neighbors, and he got a lot for us. But his ambition was to make Florida State visible throughout the state of Florida. And one of the ways we did that was to place kids all the way from Miami to Pensacola. I think that was a mistake eventually, because the shrinking budgets, we lost the capacity to supervise. One of the things that I am proud of, I guess you could say, was that I supervised kids in the field every year that I've taught.

**Sellers:** But as you say, you traveled to do it.

**Simmons:** I had to. I remember one semester, ten years ago, I had twenty-five student teachers, plus teaching three courses. None of my student teachers were in the city of Tallahassee.

**Sellers:** How did you supervise them? Just once a month?

**Simmons:** No, no. We'd maybe visit three or four times, that was the best we could do. However, it was nothing for me to teach a class in the afternoon, jump in my car, drive to Daytona Beach, see a kid teach the next day, come back and teach an evening class the next day. I did that a lot.

**Sellers:** That takes a lot out of you, though.

**Simmons:** Loved it. I wouldn't change it for the world.

**Sellers:** Did you? You wouldn't have done it if you didn't love it.

**Simmons:** But I did. To me, following our kids into the field and seeing the results of our work was most satisfying thing I ever did. More than the doctoral students, more than the publications. I lectured at Oxford and Cambridge. I taught in England four different times. But all of that, none of that was important to me as watching a kid that I had in class performing. That to me was the whole theory of what we did was to move from theory to practice. We were the transitional entity, and that was the greatest — in fact, that's why I still do it. I mean, this kid in Pensacola this year, nobody would supervise her because she's outside of the — we've established some enclaves. And she, because she could live at home cheaply, was able to have her appeal granted and they gave her a supervisor, and I did it. I did it in Jacksonville last year and Jacksonville the year before.

**Sellers:** So do they know when you are coming?

**Simmons:** Yeah.

**Sellers:** They were able to prepare?

**Simmons:** And of course one of the great advantages now is email. One of the problems, of course, when you've got a kid, let's say, in Sarasota. Well, as you know, that's 325 miles door-to-door. You see them three times. You put a lot of faith in the cooperating teacher. That's why as I learned the state, I was able to develop a kind of list of dependable people, and of course we had our alums who gradually populated these schools and people with whom we had good contact. But still in all, the distance and, of course, the expense, were formidable. And so, eventually we did limit our placements largely in the big population centers, but still we were strung out. But the email thing has really helped.

**Sellers:** How so?

**Simmons:** Well, because if a kid is having a problem and his or her cooperating teacher wants some help, I know about it momentarily.

**Sellers:** So just the constant contact?

**Simmons:** Yeah, before it was snail mail, and then, of course, I'd get a phone call at night and the cooperating teacher would say "So-and-so isn't doing well and I don't know what to do." And then I'd go to the department head and say, "Could I go to Sarasota and see this kid?"

**Sellers:** But then there's still a delay.

**Simmons:** Sure, and maybe there's no money in the budget, so we just have to hope that things work out. But it's such a people-intensive kind of activity. It isn't teaching a lecture of fifteen or fifty kids. It's one-on-one. And people who I thought, based on their course work, were going to be dynamite teachers, have not been, and people who were very mediocre academically went out and did a great job in the classroom. I learned that from my very first year here.

**Sellers:** I've seen that in graduate students in our department.

**Simmons:** There's a human dimension there that is incalculable.

**Sellers:** So it's almost a mentoring, one-on-one, rather than an instructor —

**Simmons:** Yeah, and if I may say this, one of the things I am, because you don't let go — well, I've never let go.

**Sellers:** Well, you haven't yet! [chuckles]

**Simmons:** No, no. Because, well, I think it was an important thing to do. I think literacy is important and I think educating young people is important. And just because it is frustrating and difficult does not diminish its importance and the obstacles we face. To me, that was almost a

challenge. Yeah, it made you work a little harder. But what I want to say is that in the school that I visited this year, a middle school in Escambia County (in an affluent area, by the way), they hired eight people with no experience, no certification, no nothing.

**Sellers:** Why?

**Simmons:** Because they had to have more bodies. Well, here it is. Here's the thing. In fact, I just completed, co-authored an article with one of our current faculty about one of the emerging problems: the teacher shortage. Sure, you've got to find them, but what about the experienced teachers who have to mentor these people? And in the case that I just finished, here's a person, a cooperating teacher, who was excellent. Dynamic, well-prepared, enthusiastic, real good at doing setting up book clubs and participating in AP teacher training on the side. And this is a woman who is married with children – a top flight person. She now is mentoring three people, besides supervising my student teacher. The second time I visited there, I wanted to talk to her – I got there early. Those three people were lined up. Two of them were in tears explaining the problems they were having. Now how many experienced teachers are gonna last, particularly when they are not being paid anything? They're getting zilch.

**Sellers:** And that's one of the reasons that they can't get anything other than warm bodies.

**Simmons:** You see what's going to happen is eventually these good teachers who were called upon to do all kinds of — they're writing the reports, they're doing the after-school workshops, they're being called upon to do so damn much; and if you add this mentorship and give them no compensation (because of the tight budgets), where are they gonna go? And there's some research coming out of California to show that these ersatz people they're hiring are quitting after two years.

**Sellers:** Sure, they were only in it because they couldn't find anything else to do.

**Simmons:** Yeah, and they thought maybe this would be easy. Well, I got news for you.

**Sellers:** No, it's not.

**Simmons:** But anyway, see that's one of the ominous things I see down the road. And this young woman, I mean, she was grateful for my help, let me put it that way. Of course, luckily the student teacher she's got is top-flight, I mean, she was kind of helping her out, if you want the truth. They were team teaching. Yeah, and that's okay, because they need experience.

**Sellers:** Experience is experience, no matter how you get it.

**Simmons:** Yes, but you see there was this added burden. The day I was over there, Thursday, as I was walking out the door, I saw one of these people crying on her shoulder, literally crying on her shoulder.

**Sellers:** Well, I don't know anybody in their right mind that would willingly walk into a classroom nowadays. I'm sure an awful lot of dedicated people would, but I surely wouldn't, and I wouldn't advise anybody to.

**Simmons:** Well, it's difficult. And as I say, this teacher shortage, to me, is looming as one of the great problems. And how to handle it, I don't know. I'm not an economist, I'm not a geologist, I just know that that experience I had over there was awfully revealing.

**Sellers:** We just have to reorganize our priorities. What do you think is one of the high points of your career at FSU?

**Simmons:** Okay. 1968, I was the program chairman of the Conference on English Education which met at Boulder, Colorado, and those were the days when there was federal travel money. My chief speaker was from Exeter University in England, et cetera, et cetera. Second one, when we received a report from a committee of the National Council of Teachers of English and Modern Language Association in 1970, identifying Florida State, NYU, and Stanford as having the best English Education doctoral student programs in the country. That's something I was very proud of. I had a doctoral student named Frank O'Hare who won an NCTE research award in 1972, was a pioneer in a concept called sentence combining, which was used widely. He was my doctoral student; I'm proud of his work.

**Sellers:** What is sentence combining?

**Simmons:** Well, the idea that you take a small sentence — well, it begins with the transformational concept. Within a, let's say, complex sentence — a subordinate clause, main clause, maybe a couple of prepositional phrases — that within this structure beginning with a capital letter, ending with a period, there are ideas imbedded, and we need to be sure that the ideas which are imbedded exist in proper relationship. So sentence combining, you take the little pieces, which Chomsky called "kernels," and you combine them in some way to (a) express the idea, because as we get older we talk in longer, more complex syntactic forms, to express these new ideas which are expanded into syntax; (2) which doesn't destroy any of the information we want, or does not misplace any of the information; and (3) preserve the grammaticality. That was sentence combining, and there's been a lot of. And Frank O'Hare, as I say. Well, I won the Florida Council of Teachers of English honors award in 1972. In 1974, I taught a class at Oxford for a group of armed forces-dependent teachers. I think this book, which is the history of English Ed, I think that's something I'm very proud of, because I did it all by myself, you know.

**Sellers:** No co-authors?

**Simmons:** No, just me. A lot of it's living history, you know. But I did the documentation. I went to the archives.

**Sellers:** I'm not questioning you.

**Simmons:** No, but I'm just saying that. So much of it I lived through, you know.

**Sellers:** Well, that's the best way to write it.

**Simmons:** I mean, a good example is this Allerton Park Conference. When Burton got back from that, I picked him up at the airport. We went back and had a drink at his house, and he told me about these things that went on and next thing I knew we had the Conference on English Education. I was program chairman, on the executive committee. It was a great ride.

**Sellers:** We definitely need documentation of things like that, so you've saved somebody a tremendous amount — of course, you've also negated somebody's ability to write a dissertation. [chuckles]

**Simmons:** They can carve some things out of that. I did have — this is an unusual thing — I had a master's student in the mid-'70s named Brother Bernard Couvillion.

**Sellers:** Was the "brother" a title?

**Simmons:** No, he was a Christian brother, who was teaching at Brother Martin High School in New Orleans, a large Catholic school, and Brother Bernard finished his degree with me, his master's degree. Today, he is the Director of Education of the Christian Brotherhood Education in the Vatican. You don't start a new school, you don't get accredited, until Brother Bernard says so.

**Sellers:** Brother Bernard went far.

**Simmons:** Great guy. We were such close friends, he and I. I used to be Catholic, by the way.

**Sellers:** I have friends who are recovering Catholics, as they refer to themselves.

**Simmons:** Well, I'm an Episcopalian now, fighting that fight.

**Sellers:** I went to high school with a Lutheran who became an Episcopalian minister, and I asked him, I said, "How did you make that leap?" I can see the Catholic to the Episcopalian.

**Simmons:** Well, and of course the Episcopal Church is going through such a gut-wrenching thing. We belong to one of the churches in town that is staying with them, not joining the Holy Comforter. We had been at St. John's, but we left there because of what I feel to be the homophobic direction. I think Jesus loved us all.

[some religious commentary not transcribed]

And then I must say there's another person that I've got to talk about. Her name, her full

name, Helen O'Hara Moran Rosenblum Connell. Rosenblum, with a U, Connell, C-O-N-N-E-L-L, who is now head of the, I think it's the English Department, at Barry University in Miami. Helen came here from Syracuse the year I came to Florida State. She was working on her PhD with Burton, Phi Beta Kappa from Syracuse, and did her master's degree with a woman named Margaret Early, who was later President of NCTE and, you know, a major leader in the field. Anyway, Helen was with us for three years, got married, went with her husband to New Orleans where she taught at Dillard, then to Palo Alto, where he was in the San Francisco Bay area. Then, she got divorced and she came back. I mean, she's lived a checkered career and has physical problems. But Helen finally got her PhD in 1994, and has published pieces of her dissertation in many journals. Did a study on six novels about the teachability of six novels of the initiation experience, starting with *Huck Finn*, through *Catcher in the Rye*, and so forth. Brilliant piece of work, been quoted a lot. And I mean, it isn't just the work, she came in and went out of my life, and came back into my life. A brilliant, hardworking — who's just had a lot of very difficult times in life. But here she is with her PhD, teaching at Barry, and she was part of some major committee of the College English Association and still in there fighting. And we started here together.

**Sellers:** She's come a long way.

**Simmons:** Yeah, she sure has, and through tremendous adversity. Never gave up.

**Sellers:** I admire people like that.

**Simmons:** I'm very proud of her.

**Sellers:** What about low points? Anything you want to mention?

**Simmons:** Yeah. One of the areas that I have been very much involved in, really since I began teaching, was the issue of academic and intellectual freedom. I have two books on censorship. I have been disappointed in the degree to which teachers have deferred in many places to pressures that were unfair and that really, in the final analysis, inhibited them in doing a quality job with teaching, both in the areas of literature and writing.

**Sellers:** Is that Florida State or nationally?

**Simmons:** Nationally. No, the most recent book — I mean before this one, which is of course still in print, was called *School Censorship in the Twenty-first Century*, which I did with a colleague from the Information Studies School named Eliza Dresang. That book did well. The book has gotten good reviews and it was published by the International Reading Association. It's a book of national —. So the war stories — in fact, tomorrow night, I am speaking to a group for the separation of Church and State about — I did an Op-ed piece (you may not have seen it), in *Democrat* about three weeks ago, talking about the problems that some of the devoted Christians have in the public schools.

**Sellers:** I hadn't heard from you at that point, so I didn't recognize your name.

**Simmons:** And the people in this group asked me to speak and I'm speaking to them tomorrow night. But the unwillingness of the public, certain segments of the public, to give teachers a break has always been very frustrating to me. And I've stood by and watched it, I've written things here and there.

**Sellers:** What kind of a break do you mean?

**Simmons:** Well, let me tell you the little by-line that I ended most of my censorship speeches with. In fact, do you know who Fred Standley is, by the way?

**Sellers:** Yes.

**Simmons:** He used to teach a course called Banned Books for the last couple of years. He's retired, too, and he always invites me in to do —. If the faculty of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Medical School adopted a textbook that had a chapter which contained thirty-five pictures of a vagina in living color, and certain segments of the population thought that that was a dirty book and challenged it, the results would be predictable. I think that they'd bring the experts from all over the country, the med school would, and they'd defend the book because it has redeeming scientific value. I think these challenges would get laughed out of court. But see, when the teacher tries to present a kid, and I don't mean prurient stuff, I don't mean "fuck," if I may — I mean about a kid's difficulties in becoming, of moving through adolescence in an honest — not *Catcher in the Rye* necessarily, but any book that has to do with the complexities, the frustrations, the difficulties of adolescence and parenting during it, and somebody sees something that they don't like and goes to some authority figure, that teacher's professional life's in jeopardy now. And the point I make is until the teaching profession has the same level of respect as the medical profession, the problem of censorship will go on and on. I believe that teachers, who are well trained now, and who are dedicated to what they do, are people of good will. They're not trying to sabotage the morals of the youth. They're trying to show them what experience is all about, broadly conceived. Well, to give you the example, (I could go on forever about this) in Green Cove Springs in 1989, a teacher wanted *My Friend Flicka* banned. You know why? Because the word "hell" was used once and the word "bitch" appeared three times having to do with a female dog. And that book was removed from the schools. And the profession was not able to mount an effective response.

**Sellers:** And that's what puzzles me so, is they can't fight back or they don't fight back.

**Simmons:** Well, you remember Pogo — we have met the enemy, and it is us! But, see, if you want to know what the low point is, I guess it is the fact that that's a problem without a solution. And because we do have local control of the schools, and because, well, look what happened at Dover, Pennsylvania, just this year. There were eight school board members who wanted intelligent design; they got beat, and intelligent design is out. What's going to happen next year?

See, it's a problem; what's the solution? I'm just saying that teachers who want to do an honest job, are presenting kids with viable dimensions of life as they move towards adulthood, are being frustrated by forces beyond their control and forces which I do not think have the best interests of our youthful people at heart.

**Sellers:** We're maybe too much at the mercy of cultural fringes.

**Simmons:** Of all kinds. Because the NAACP made — one of their great achievements in the mid-'60s was getting Huck Finn banned in all Illinois schools. Imagine, the Land of Lincoln.

**Sellers:** Because of "Nigger Jim". Anything else?

**Simmons:** Nah, what else? This has been fun.

End