

Interview of Herman King by Leonard Wedel

This is August 25, and this is Leonard Wedel talking to Herman King, and Herman, I am so glad that you decided to come in today to have this brief conversation. You've been here such a long time for so many years, and your life has been so fruitful here that I thought it would be very, very fine for us to just have a chat here about you. And by the way, I'd like to start by asking you, when did you come to the Sunday School Board?

King: Thank you, Leonard, it's a real pleasure for me to have this opportunity of chatting with you. These have been real happy years for me at the Sunday School Board. I came here on January 1, 1939. I came here at . . . I really never expected to work at the Board. I was practicing law in Nashville at the time, and Mary Alice Barbe one time several months before I came to the Board said to me, "You ought to be at the Board, and I said, "Miss Barbe, I don't have any desire to be at the Board. I'm practicing law. I'm associational Training Union direction here in the Nashville Association doing a lot of Sunday School work and church work and why should I come to the Board. But I did come on January 1 at Miss Barbe's insistence and Mr. William G. Phillips who is the man who approached me to come to work in his department.

Wedel: Herman, that's very, very interesting. Do you know that it was Mary Alice Barbe who told Jerry Landrum about me when I was associational Training Union director in Oklahoma in Oklahoma Association. Well that is very interesting.

King: Miss Marbe was a teacher in the Intermediate Department where I was working with Intermediate boys and girls at the Judson Memorial Baptist Church and she heard me one morning in a devotional, and that clicked with her and so she couldn't let up after that time.

Wedel: Is that right. Well I'm glad she didn't. Herman, when you came to the Board what was your first job? What did they assign you?

King: My first job was superintendent of the Extension Department in what was then called the Young People's and Adult Sunday School Department.

Wedel: Who was head of that?

King: Mr. William P. Phillips was head of what we called the YPA Department. A. V. Washburn worked in it. Florida Weight, Alpha Smith, Mrs. Martha Wolfe, and that was the staff at that time in that department.

Wedel: Who are some of the other people you worked with especially your peers, your other consultants or just tell us who were some of the people in the Sunday School Department at that time.

King: When I first came to the Sunday School Board there was not really a Sunday School Department as such. You had the Sunday School Administration Department. They had the Intermediate Department. They had the YPA Department. We had the Junior Department, and the Elementary Department. It did not become the Sunday School Department for many years later. But the men at that time working in it were Dr. Harold E. Ingraham and Mr. J. N. Barnett, and A. V. Washburn and Miss Florida Weight and William P. Phillips and men and women in that group.

Wedel: Was Homer Grice here at that time?

King: Dr. Homer Grice was here at that time and he was in the Vacation Bible School working with Sibley Burnett at that time.

Wedel: Were these various departments organized into a division? Was there a division at that time or was there a division head?

King: There was a division head at that time, but they worked independently. There was no real overall supervision coordination. They worked somewhat individually until later on and Mr. Barnett, J. N. Barnett became head of the Sunday School Department. I think Dr. J. O. Williams was the director of the division at the time it was set up as a department.

Wedel: Do you remember something about your facilities? IN what building were you located?

King: I was in the Frost Building at that time on the second floor. I started off on the second floor of the Frost Building at the front there with open windows and an air-cooled building at that time. And then when I went to the Navy and came back, I was demoted to the first floor in the back end, and I remember one of the funny experiences in that office I never knew what my desk would look like the next morning because we had this new type air conditioning that was just water, and it would blow in and I would have to put on my desk I would have to put a waste basket to collect water coming out of the air conditioner. So that was my first experience, and I was back in the basement there in the back side of the Frost Building.

Wedel: Herman, you must have had some real happy and maybe unusual experiences in your early field work with the Sunday School Department and with the Sunday School Board. I wonder what were some of your impressions and what especially as it related to travel and your accommodations and so forth.

King: First, let me just say or mention some of the other people who were outstanding at that time who did field work with us at the same time. People like: Meadow C. Leatherwood, Alene Bryant, Lillian Moore Rice, Mrs. Will S. McCraw, and Helen Young and Dr. Allen B. Comish and John T. Sisemore. Those were the men who worked with A. V. Washburn, J. N. Barnett, and myself on the field.

We had lots of funny experiences in those days. We traveled by car most of the time and train. Mr. Phillips, head of our department liked to travel by car and we would travel in the car most of the time. I think that some of the funny experiences we had was that you stayed in the homes a great deal of the time in your field work and you got to sleep with the children and sleep upstairs in the bed. I remember one night I was on a bed that was high in the middle and I rolled off during the night and the people downstairs ran upstairs to see what happened to me and I was somewhat embarrassed there having rolled off the bed in the middle of the night. And one experience we had we were flying, I believe, from Hobbs to Albuquerque that was in the early days of the flight, and I think Polly Hargass was in field work at that time and I were traveling together and we were part time upside down in that plane because as we were coming into Albuquerque we had an upsweep of wind and turned our plane over. But we had so many happy experiences the people were gracious, and I think one of the hardest things I ever tried to do was to eat breakfast one morning in the home out in the country where I had stayed. The lady had cooked the chicken the night and it was chicken, too, the night before and didn't have any refrigeration except her icebox and she put the chicken on the table next morning and ants were crawling all over it. She didn't see it but I did, and that was the hardest piece of chicken I ever tried to eat. Maybe that's why I've turned against chicken through the years. But she was a gracious hostess and I never said anything about it, but I had a hard time eating breakfast that morning.

Wedel: Well Hermon, I can understand that I'll tell you. But if we had had work performance or records at that time, maybe you would have gotten a high grade for eating chicken with ants all over it.

King: And we stayed in hotels. Motels were not very much available at that time, and many days of travel when you'd get on a plane you'd have to weigh yourself. You'd have to stand on the scales and weigh. If you weighed too much, you didn't get to go or somebody didn't get to go or maybe your bags didn't. I remember sometimes we would stay in a hotel that was called the one of them I remember, the New Hobsy in Mexico, Missouri and you know, really, if that were a new hotel they had really forgotten to take the sign down. It looked like it had been weatherbeaten over the years. But you know, Leonard, in those days people, when you came from the Sunday School Board, you had to almost keep people from worshipping you.

Wedel: This is right. This is rightht.

King: They thought you were something from out of space, and when they realized you were a human being and laughed with them and had a good time with them and rubbed shoulders with them, they loved you and appreciated you even more. They thought you were something if you came from the Sunday School Board.

Wedel: Well Herman, during these thirty-three years you've had several jobs here at the Sunday School Board. You've been promoted several times.

Sort of carry us through here just a minute. What are the jobs have you had here at the Sunday School Board?

King: When I first came, I came as superintendent of the Extension Department work and then I went into the Navy for about twenty months, and when I came back I came back as a general associate. And then my responsibility included the enlargement as well as Sunday School records with the record system, the Six-point records system. I helped to redevelop the Six point Record System after I came back out of the Navy and then after a few years I became superintendent of adult work in the Sunday School Department for about five years I was superintendent of adult work. Then I became superintendent of Sunday School administration which had the supervision of all of the age group workers in the Sunday School department at that time on the administrative side of it. Dr. Howard P. Colson was in charge of the editorial side of it at that time. And after that time I came into the executive office in 1958 as executive assistant to Dr. Sullivan. Served there about three years, and when they set up the Publishing Division I became director of the Publishing Division and served there from 1961 until 1971. So this is the gamut that I've run and I've had unusual opportunities through the years. Dr. Sullivan and Dr. Crow have been exceedingly gracious in giving me opportunities even beyond my wildest dreams to serve my Lord and at the same time earn a living.

Wedel: Well Herman, that's interesting and you have had these promotions and they have been very, very deserving promotions for you. I've been here much of this time, also, Herman, and I can appreciate your work. You've seen a number of changes around the Sunday School Board facilities, properties and so forth. Just tell us a little about it.

King: You know, you talk about the good old days. I don't care for the good old days frankly. I rejoiced in those times the progress we made then, but you know with air conditioned offices and things that go along with it now and travel by plane now when you traveled by train and had to grab your bag and jump off the train and now you're in a hurry to your engagements and frankly the good old days were all right, but I like the present days and the future.

Wedel: In fact, I heard one time, Herman, that Alene Bryant spent most of one night in a railroad station because there was no place for her anywhere. She couldn't find a room anywhere.

King: Well oftentimes field workers had to do that. They had to stay anywhere they could. I've spent nights in hotel lobbies especially during the war days the hotel lobby I just couldn't get in. Of course you have a lot of funny experiences like that sleeping in hotel lobbies and sometimes I think you are not the right kind of a person, but you finally convince them that you are. And then in those days those earlier days it was sort of a family type organization. You knew everybody, in fact, everybody by name with their comings and their goings. But you know we've come along now to a well-managed topflight organization.

And I like the present day. I like anything to be run on a business-like basis with job descriptions and policies and procedures and a salary plan and a wonderful retirement program we have. I've seen it move from a loosely-federated organization, family type, where you knew everybody to where you do not know everybody now, but to where actually it's run on a business-like fashion. You know, I've rejoiced through the years that the Lord called Dr. James L. Sullivan as executive secretary because he's a high type Christian gentleman, a denominational statesman, and a good business administrator. And that's the type of thing that I rejoice in today for I've seen it come from a family type, loose-knot organization to a real high type business administration.

Weden: You've also seen it come, Herman, from a central type of operation to a decentralized type of operation which I think has really helped to make the Board what it is today.

King: Yes, I've had the privilege in this last year of doing some research and study and some writing and I've traced the development of the organization. Back in the early days when Dr. Frost came, he came and brought him an editor and they got a secretary and then they got a field worker and he had a secretary and then it began to expand from an organization of individuals to a department organization to a division structure and now to a super division in which you have groups within the division. So it's become a tremendous organization in these brief thirty-four years I've been here.

Wedel: Herman, which of these changes which you have enumerated seem to be the most significant from your point of view?

King: I think the most significant is of the department organization and division organization where people know what their jobs are and to whom they are responsible. There was a period when I was here that I did not know exactly to whom I was responsible for my work. And I think this is a tremendous change. And then I think having job descriptions so you'll know exactly what your work is and what you're supposed to achieve. And I think that oftentimes we are criticized for having a big organization, but you can't operate in a big organization like you did in the early days when everybody did his own thing. And so I think that has been one of the tremendous things that I have seen. I am happy now that we seem to be in the trend of going back into the churches to reaching people and let the people know us. There has been a period of time where we've sort of lost contact with the churches and with the people. But I'm happy now that the trend is back in that direction and I foresee in the days ahead a real upsurge in the popularity of the Board workers in the churches. When the people know them, they'll love them. And I'm glad to see our real concern about people in this emphasis "People to People," and I believe that the secret of the work of this Board is getting back out into the churches and in the homes of the people that they will know that we love them, that we have a program to try to help them, and this trend, I think, is one of the finest things I've seen on the horizon at the moment.

Wedel: Thank you, Herman. You know, I would agree with you. I have, as you know, spent several years in field work, and I have seen this turn made in recent years, and this is going to be, I think, one of the most significant programs and changes that we have had at the Sunday School Board for many years. Herman, . . . .

King: I think we ought to say that we needed time to tool up and get our curriculum right, but I think we maybe cut a little too far away from the people and we've got to work hard now to get back into their favor for them to see that we love them and have a program to try to help them.

Wedel: I think that's exactly right. Herman, if you had to do this all over, would you again accept work at the Sunday School Board? Would you let them talk you into coming from a lawyer's bench to a superintendent's bench?

King: Leonard, I certainly would. When I left the practice of law, some of my lawyer friends thought I was crazy. Said here you are, you've served through the most difficult years the first seven years of law practice is the poor man's area, and you're facing maybe a lucrative practice and why would you leave? But you know, I felt the Lord call me into this work and I've never felt one moment that He didn't want me here. And He called me here and He's kept me here because I've had some opportunities to leave and He's kept me here, and I certainly would. I think the Board is a wonderful place to work. It gives you tremendous opportunities with the worldwide opportunity to have your influence shown and represent Christ. And I've even had some of those same lawyers come back to me and say well I think you've chosen the right choice, and since I've seen what you've done through the years. And so I felt the Lord call me here, and the Lord has kept me here, and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

Wedel: Herman, what are your plans in the next few years ahead?

King: I don't plan to retire. I'm just going to change jobs. I'm going to do some Sunday School work, as much as my health will permit, and the people in Florida have been gracious and offered me the opportunity to come spend a whole year doing field work, but my physical condition will not permit. My doctor won't permit me to do that on a sustained basis. But I am going to do as much Sunday School work as I can. I have some engagements elsewhere and so I do plan to do Sunday School work. You know, I have a different, difficult feeling. I came here to the Board to do Sunday School work in the educational field and I loved that tremendously. And when I came into the management field or the business end of it I loved that tremendously. I'd have a hard time knowing which I got the most enjoyment out of, but I am going to be able to do some Sunday School work and I plan to do that.

Then, I'm going to do some law practice that I want to do. I'm not going to take any heavy assignments, but I'm going to do some law practice. A real estate firm has offered me the opportunity to sell real estate and I think I'll sell some real estate, too. But I'm just going to do what I want to do, actually if my wife will permit me to do it.

Wedel: Herman, are you going to have any time to be at home?

King: Well, I'm thinking about that. My wife has raised that serious question, also. But you know I'm keenly anticipating this retirement. You know, you approach it with mixed emotions, always do, but you know, I think I'm happy for this year of transition in which I've been able to do some research and some study and some work that I hope will be fruitful for the Board in the days ahead. But you know, it's helped me a great deal. People ought to plan for retirement. If you don't plan for it, you're in trouble. I have a friend who was a banker and I'd meet with him in the Exchange Club, and this poor fellow did not make any plans, and he's the most bored person in all the world, and I'll spell B O R E D. And I'm saying to you that you ought to plan a long time ahead for your retirement and enjoy it. Really, I may work harder or as hard, better not say work harder because I'm getting paid for this now, but I may work herder in the days ahead because I'm just going to change work that's what I'm going to do.

Wedel: Herman, I just want to say to you how much I appreciate you personally as a friend and a co-worker here at the Sunday School Board these 29 years that I've been here with you. Missed the first four years you were here and I appreciate your wife, Hazel and your son, Wayne. I think you have a very, very lovely family. And whenever you retire this September 30, 1972, you'll know that the many friends here at the Sunday School Board will follow you with appreciation and love and interest. And I just want you to know again how much I have enjoyed this brief conference here with you this morning on this 25th day of August. May your life in the future be a very prosperous and happy one, Herman.

King: Thank you, Leonard. My every experience with you has been a joyful experience and always full of fun and humor even though you've served me chicken on so many occasions. I really do appreciate you, Leonard, and all of this you know. And I'll just say that I am delighted to have had this opportunity. The happiest years of my life have been spent here at the Board, and I'm looking forward to many years of happy retirement and I'll always treasure the friends and the workers here at the Board and you and Dr. Sullivan and all the others here at the Board.

Wedel: You feel free to come back and visit us now any time you want to. OK?

King: I'll do that if you'll serve me some chicken.

Wedel: OK, thank you!