

ALUMNI- IN-ACTION ORAL HISTORY
N.R. RICHARDS, O.A.C.'38
Ontario Agricultural College, 1938
Interviewed by Ross Hay
October 8, 1991

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

- H This is an interview with N.R. (Rick) Richards, O.A.C.'38, conducted by Ross Hay, year '45, on October the 8th, 1991 for the University of Guelph, Alumni Association. I know Guelph isn't your original home, Rick. Where were you born?
- R Ross, my early beginnings were in Bruce County. I took my schooling in the town of Lucknow, and my father had a farm two and a half miles west of Lucknow on Highway 86.
- H Well, what events in your life brought you to study at O.A.C.?
- R Well, like many others I was a child of the depression, and material things as far as capital funds are concerned weren't too plentiful, so that was one very important reason, for coming to O.A.C., but there are others. I had cousins, who had graduated from the college, and the family had had association with the O.A.C. getting information on feed analysis for the cattle, and indeed myself – I was involved in debating once and I wrote to the English Department at O.A.C. for some assistance or materials to begin preparing for the debate.
- H You are now a PhD. Where were your Masters and Doctors taken?
- R Well, I'm a DSc, rather than a PhD and there's a background to that. After graduating from the O.A.C. in 1938, I went to Michigan State College for graduate work, and took my Masters of Science there, and then came back to the Agricultural College. And along the way, I had had a good deal of association with the Faculty of Agriculture at Laval University. And the Doctorate is an Honorary Doctor of Science Degree from Laval University in Quebec.
- H Doctor of Science. O.K. interesting. Now let us return to Guelph – to O.A.C. Did you live in residence there?
- R Yes. Yes, I can recall arriving on campus and having a room assigned to me in what is now Johnston Hall. I like to think of the morning that my brother brought me down from Lucknow, in a Model "A", 1929 Ford car. The trunk tied on the bumper at the back. And we arrived in campus and I was assigned a room on the fourth floor. It was then known as the Ad Building. The identity of Johnston Hall came later.

H Like it was in my time too – known as the Ad Building.
Was there any hazing in your first year?

R Yes.

H Can you tell us anything about it?

R We didn't have the flag pole skirmish or fight. I think that had been done away with a couple of years earlier, but we had the hazing, the early rising, and shining sophomores' boots and you know the things that happened to us coming out of Creelman Hall, knowing the Sophs would put the grapes and the peaches in your pockets, and then hold your hands over your heads, and they would squeeze the pockets. What a mess.

H I never heard tell of that. That's a good one. Did you have a favourite professor, when you were at Guelph?

R Yes. The favourite professors in my life seemed to come later, after I sort of got acclimatized to the campus. In the beginning there were so many new faces but personalities stood out and you remember them. Gander Howitt, and I think it was the way he lectured and his voice and his gestures. I remember Howitt in Botany and the fear of the Lord that they put into you if you didn't get at least a seven or better in the lab assignments, why you'd be leaving them at Christmas time. Of others, of course, early in those first two years, I remember the English Department – the lectures there. And when the time came to choose an area of specialization, Ruhnke in Chemistry had impressed me greatly, in my first year, and I had a great liking for him from early days on campus. And then, down in the Dairy Department, it really surprised me that anyone on campus would know about people from Lucknow a lad who was working in the Dairy Department- as an instructor – he had known my father when they were teenagers up in the Bruce County area. And you know that made a great impression upon me. Someone on campus knew who my father was.

H It sure would. Did O.A.C. prepare you for life after you left there? If it did, in what way?

R Yes. O.A.C. was very good to me. As I think it is to all the students who graduated from O.A.C. There was a great feeling of almost fraternity between the people on the campus and the student body. And that seems to me that they developed first, respect on the part of the students, for the campus, and then as you worked along, confidence and prepared you for accepting responsibility. And I think that really should be the purpose of any educational institution. They were very, very committed people.

H Yes. You came back to Guelph, after getting your DSc Degree, Doctor of Science. Did you come back to Guelph right after getting that degree?

R No. No. I'd interesting experiences for summer employment. After I finished my first year, I worked in a general store at Burnaby, and we sold everything from corsets to cheese. Everything. Hardware – and then in the second year, I worked for Silverwoods Creamery, in Lucknow and that was an interesting experience you know, working from seven in the morning to six each day and then we worked 'til ten p.m. on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Well, then in my third year, I was hired as a student assistant with the then Chemistry Department, which really was a precursor to the Soils Department, for “soil survey” work, and the funds for students working on soil survey were provided by Canada Agriculture. So, after I graduated I continued on the Soil Survey Staff, but as an employee of Agriculture Canada, located at Guelph. And I worked for them for thirteen years before coming on to staff at O.A.C.

H I didn't realize that. That's very interesting.

R Well, There was a small group – I think, of four or five, that were located in what was the Soils Division of the Chemistry Department, and we were located there – at Guelph.

H Now, what was your title then, before you became Dean of O.A.C.?

R Well, when I was with Agriculture Canada, in the beginning I was known as a Soil Surveyor, and this was an interesting kind of work, because it took you into a different county each year to prepare a soil map of the different counties to which we were assigned. Eventually that program expanded, I became Supervisor of Soil Surveys for Ontario, I think it was in 1950. A Soils Department had been established, separate from the Chemistry Department, and Professor Ruhnke was the first Chairman or Head of the Soils Department. We didn't recognize them as Chairpersons then, and illness forced him to retire from the Head of the Department, about a year and a half after it was formed. And then, a personality – well known in agricultural circles – Ford Stinson, who was the Director of the Tobacco Research Station at Delhi – he came back to Chair the Soils Department. And after about a year, Ford left to take a position in Northern Rhodesia – to Head up the Tobacco Research Station there, and I was appointed as Professor and Head of the Soils Department on the campus.

H Well, Ford Stinson eventually arrived in Kemptville.

R Yes. After Ford spent a number of years, and did excellent work in

Rhodesia, he returned to Canada and was appointed Principal of the Kemptville Agricultural College. Ford still lives in Perth. I guess it's in Lanark County, close to the Kemptville Agricultural Research Station.

H Oh. So, we knew him when we were in Kemptville.

R Yes, sure.

H We met him there, a very nice man.

R A very fine person. An excellent scientist. Ford Stinson made a great contribution to the Tobacco Industry, not only in Ontario, but in his foreign assignments as well.

H That's interesting. I'd forgotten about him, you know - to bring him back to memory. You were a professor, Head of the Soil Science Department – and then from that, when they formed the University of Guelph – is that when you became Dean of O.A.C.?

R Well, you will recall, when you were a student on campus there was always this chatter that we were going to become a University.

H Yes.

R And in retrospect, it is understandable, because we were the only Agricultural College in Ontario, and the only Veterinary College. So, I was appointed Head of the Soils Department in 1950-51, and towards the latter part of that decade, there was much more attention being given to some way of establishing a University at Guelph, using the three founding Colleges. So, the first step was to establish what was known as the Federated Colleges. Do you remember this, as an Alumnus?

H Yes. I do remember a bit about that.

R This was a combining under one Administrator, the Ontario Veterinary College, Macdonald Institute, and the Ontario Agricultural College, and Dr. MacLachlan, who was President of O.A.C. became the President of the three Federated Colleges. And prior to that time, O.V.C. had a Dean, and I think Macdonald Institute the Head of the Institute was known as a Principal, and O.A.C. had the President – President Christie, when I was a student, and President MacLachlan – well, Dr. MacLachlan was named the President of the Federated Colleges, and each College, then had the position of Dean created, so, the administrative organization was a President with a Dean of College. And then, when we became a University, that pattern of organization continued, because we had a Dean of Arts, a Dean of Social Science and I think there are seven or eight Deans in the University at the present time.

H That's interesting

R That was an interesting point in time. in the history of the three institutions. Our funds continued to come directly from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. The Federated Colleges had no connection with the Department of University Affairs in Toronto. Our budget came entirely from the Ministry of Agriculture. So there was a very, very close liaison, between the administration and the Ministry of Agriculture, and the pattern of operation in O.A.C.

H Right.

R And as we moved to a University organized on the same basis as the other universities in Ontario, that was the big challenge to establish a pattern of operation, that we could continue to have this association with the Ministry, and at the same time, operate under the guidelines like the other universities in the province. 'Cause you see, this was the Federated Colleges. When they became a University in '64, the land that the Ontario Agricultural College – and it was really responsible for operation of most of the land, but the O.V.C. had that holding as well – that land was deeded to the University and the Ministry provided the funds for the purchase of the land at Elora for the Research Station. And this was very, very generous on the part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. And what I like to think as one of the best illustrations of what developed out of that arrangement was that the University of Guelph was able to commit almost two hundred acres to an Arboretum, because they had had more than nine hundred acres gifted to them, from the Ministry of Agriculture.

H Yes.

R And then, those people in O.A.C., who had been doing research for the Ministry of Agriculture, an arrangement was worked out where funds were made available for them to continue that research, and at the same time, be full-fledge members of Faculty of the University of Guelph. A very unusual and unique arrangement which really was the envy of many other universities with Faculties of Agriculture in Canada.

H Right. And that would certainly start the University of Guelph off - give it terrific impetus to go ahead.

R Yes. A very good point. When you compare the launching of the University of Guelph, with the launching of Brock or Trent, where they were truly beginning from scratch, here was a university being formed, that had three founding colleges, O.V.C. almost a hundred years old, O.A.C a hundred years in – what was it – 1974, and Macdonald Institute, well founded, well established, founding colleges.

H Yeh, It's a great thing. Well, is there any more you want to say about that?

R Well, other than I think the history and the development of the University of Guelph has been very positive. I think that the University built well on what it inherited from the three colleges, and now as I read the funds that come to the University for research. The research programme at Guelph has developed very, very positively, and I think it is related to the programmes that were there, before the University was formed. It was just a matter of building on them

H Right

R Of course the choice of Presidents was fairly important, too.

H Yes. It certainly developed into a great institution – and with the land that is available there to expand on, really made it an ideal setting. It's an ideal setting. But, with the land that was available you might say free to build on. Just unbelievable.

R And not only the land they inherited, but the attitude of the people that the University was there to serve the people of Ontario. Because that came from our association with the with the Ministry of Agriculture.

H So, you were the first Dean, then, of O.A.C.?

R Yes. Yes.

H And for how many years were you Dean?

R I was there ten years. That includes the two years, as the Federated Colleges.

H Yes.

R When we became a University, we accepted the principle – the Deans would serve for a five-year period, renewable for a second term. And that was a good pattern of operation. Before that time, you know, a person could be appointed a Head of a department, and some of them were there for decades, many, many years. But this really came early in the history of the University of Guelph, that the academic administrative appointments would be for a five-year period, subject to renewal for one term, and I served two terms. That was a very interesting time for everyone on campus, because here we were on the ground floor, forming a new university. We had to establish a Senate, we had to establish our Alumni Association that would recognize the Alumni Associations of the founding Colleges, and at the same time recognize that there was a University. A real challenge to protect those things that people associated with the Colleges thought were very meaningful to the Colleges, but yet, at the same time not be accused of dragging one's feet in the interests of the University.

R And, you know our first President was Dr. MacLachlan... he was, President of O.A.C. when you were a student there.

H No. Dr. Christie was...

R Oh, yes, yes. Dr Christie

H Then came Reek. Then came MacLachlan.

R Christie you know, as President of O.A.C. – wasn't he a great...

I know that you had association with him.

H Yes. He was a real promoter of O.A.C. Just unbelievable. The man could stand up and speak, you know. He might say nothing, but his voice kept you awake. I'll tell you that.

R You hear it said in different ways, Ross, but it seems to me, that Dr. G.I. Christie, did a tremendous job in convincing the people of Ontario, that O.A.C. was their College.

H Well he could have swung me one way or the other, when I talked to him about coming here. But he said "We need men like you there. You come. We'll look after you. You come and see me." And then wrote to me. The following week, I get a letter from him, telling me to let him know when we could come.

R And I rather expect you know that he himself was a farm boy from Dundas County..., Eastern Ontario - in Winchester- very close to the town of Winchester, but a big man and big voice, did everything in a big way.

H Now, Rick, I'm going to change this a little bit, find out some things about you. I know your wife, Mary. Is she a graduate of Guelph?

R No.

H Is she a local girl - a Guelph girl?

R Yes. Mary was born and raised in Puslinch. Her family - one of the early settlers in the Puslinch area - her father was a drover - and Mary came to the campus as a secretary in the Soils Department. That's where we met.

H Yeh. And now you have how many children?

R Two boys.

H And where are they, and what are they doing.

R Well, they're both in Toronto. Robin is an orthopaedic surgeon, and Gregory is a lawyer. I say I've one to try to keep me well, one to try to keep me out of jail, but no one to try to get me into heaven. (Chuckle)

H Yeh. Well, you're doing a pretty good job of that yourself.

R But they tell me I'm on my own. (Laughter)

H Right. Well I know that you're in Masonic and you've been Head of the Scottish Rites. Am I saying that correctly? Is that correct?

R Extracurricularly, I have spent a lot of time initially. I'm a not a very athletic person. You didn't ask me about my athletic prowess, when I was an under-graduate. I'm very clumsy. But yes, I'd spent a lot of time on Masonry. You know the Head of the Masonic Order is known as the Grand Master, and we've had three graduates of O.A.C. served as Grand Master for Masonic Orders. Bruce Mossinger, who was a Principal of the Ridgetown High School, and I guess it was Vocational School as well. Jim Allen, the former provincial treasurer...

H Yes, yes.

R ...he was a Grand Master and myself – and I don't know of any other college in Canada, that can claim having produced three Grand Masters, and Bert Matthews, who was the President of the University of Guelph. I think –as far as I know, Bert was the only University President, that belonged to the Masonic Order.

H Great. Well now you're President of the Scottish Rites Foundation?

R Yes. In retirement.

H Well Rick, we've talked a little bit about your life in the University – is there anything else you'd like to say that that I have omitted in my questions to you?

R Oh you've covered it pretty well Ross. You've mentioned the Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation, and that is one of the areas that since I retired, that I've been associated with, particularly in the research programme. And Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation – they have gathered together capital funds to support research in the area...

H Now just a minute. Those capital funds amount to about four million dollars.

R That's right. We've just gone over the four million mark. And we use the income from that capital fund to provide assistance for research at six universities. We choose a researcher – we get some help on the choice, and recipients of our major grants, which are thirty-five thousand dollars per year uh, to individuals. We have recipients at the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, two at the University of Toronto, one at Dalhousie University, and one at the University of Montreal. And in addition to that, we have Bursaries for under-graduate students, or graduate students and students at the Colleges of Fine Art and Technology, who are doing work in preparing themselves to work in the field of Mental Illness. Actually what got us into this field, was so many people being affected with the problems of Alzheimer's Disease. And its satisfying to be able to provide assistance for people who are attempting to become educated in that area. Because it's a very debilitating disease.

H Yes, I knew of one fellow who lived over in the next street who had Alzheimer's Disease, and it was a sad – just a terrible thing for that man.

R I think an interesting part of my association with the Campus has been - we alluded to the Dean serving for two terms, and then I returned to the Department from whence I had left – the Soils Department...

H And excuse me for interrupting, but the Soil Science Building is now named the Richards Building after you.

R Oh, yes. The University's been very kind to me. It was interesting to be in administration, Ross, for ten years, and then go back, because my first semester back in the Soil Science Department, I started to teach again – to meet the students face to face - very interesting to be back in the environment that I'd left and the attitudinal change (chuckle) on the part of the people that I had left as a colleague in the Department, and then been in administration, and then coming back to associate with them. That was a very interesting and satisfying experience...

H Wonderful.

R ..but, I tell you it's much different to be behind the desk in the Dean's Office, when you're making decisions as to relate to the people that you're going to come back to work shoulder to shoulder. Particularly in the areas of promotion and tenure. (chuckle)

H Yeh. I can imagine.

R But there's an area that you would be interested in and you and I have chatted about a lot of things on campus, because there were a lot of common areas of interest. But when I did come back shortly after I returned to the department they established the Canadian Agricultural Research Council, and that Council was to provide a forum for the discussion of what was happening in research in the areas that weren't receiving the attention that they might across Canada. And I had the good fortune to be the first President of the Canadian Agricultural Research Council in Canada. And that was a very interesting experience working with the Agriculture Canada people – people at the Federal level, and the Deans and the Provincial Ministers and even then, and that was, see in 1974 that Council was established. Even then, we could see where funding for research in agriculture coming more and more difficult, and it just seems to have continued over the years.

H What's the reason for that? Is it because farms are getting smaller...?

R Well, I think one of the reasons is, it's difficult to establish and convince other Ministries of the need for agriculture research, because the results from such research are so long in becoming apparent. And when the Minister of Agriculture goes in to compete with and tussle with the Ministry of Health, you know the health programmes are terribly demanding for fund support. And not so much now, but, National Defense when that's proper – the Minister of Agriculture has a very, very difficult assignment. And what was happening, at least in my view, what was happening in the decades of the eighties, rather than reduce support programmes, call it support or subsidy – it's the

same thing, rather than reduce those programmes, if the Ministry had to operate with the same budget, they would continue the support programmes, and that was reducing the budget available for research. And it creates a very difficult situation. But I continued with the Canadian Agricultural Research Council until as I say, I retired twice and I first retired in 1980, and then I worked in a part-time basis for Agricultural Research Council and left the Department for another five years. One of the interesting things that happened during that period was the establishment of the School of Rural Planning and Development at the University of Guelph. And this would have been very close to my heart, and you know, from your experience, that in an area of planning, planning in the city was much different than planning out in the countryside.

H Yes.

R What county did you come from?

H Lambton. W.P. MacDonald was the Ag. Rep.

R Oh, and he had a great rapport with the people in the county, didn't he?

H Of course, I didn't know him very well, because I lived in the town.

R Yes. But you would have come from the – the “Chemical Valley” you know... was there concern about pollution and destruction of the environment.

H No. I never heard of it if there was. No. And it would certainly be going on at that time – worse than today, I would think, because of newer methods of manufacturing.

R Did Reg Stratford he was researcher with Imperial Oil and very close friend of Gerry Ruhnke, so in the Chemistry option, we would see a fair bit of Reg Stratford. One area we haven't chatted about which we have a common interest, is the Alumni.

H Hmhm.

R You've become very active with the Alumni, since you've been back to Guelph

H Yes. Well, Alumni – in – Action group. Yes. I've kind of been moulded into it, I guess you'd say – or pushed into it – I don't mind that work. It's not pressing. Doesn't seem to be. I think a lot can be accomplished there.

R ...could be. There is a great feeling amongst the graduates of O.A.C. – certainly over the years. I sometimes wonder if the College will be able to continue.

H It seems to be lacking, in the newer Colleges, whether that will come I don't know – time will tell. I think what we'll do now, Rick is just cut this off, by saying, “Thank you very much for all the information you have given here. And it's certainly a trip through the

ages in at least Ontario Agriculture and a lot in Canadian Agriculture. And I thank you very much for it.”

R Well, it’s good being with you. Thanks a lot