Oral History Interview

with

Don Ellis

Interview Conducted by
Jerry Gill
September 10, 2010

O-STATE Stories
Oral History Project

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Interview History

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of O-State Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Don Ellis is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on September 10, 2010.

About Don Ellis…

Don Ellis was born and raised in Hobart, Oklahoma, and always loved the farm life. He went to Hobart schools all twelve primary-school years, active in FFA, chorus, and 4-H. After graduating in 1960, he spent a year working and then enrolled at Cameron Junior College in Lawton where he earned his associate's degree in 1963. Interested in agriculture, and knowing the Oklahoma State University campus from FFA and 4-H trips, he enrolled at OSU in 1963, majoring in agronomy and business. At OSU, Don was in the Agronomy Club and was selected for the Alpha Zeta Honorary Agricultural Fraternity. Working to pay his way through school, he would go back to the family farm on weekends to work wheat, cotton, and cattle.

Married with two children, Don graduated from OSU in 1965 and moved his family back to the homestead. They built a home for themselves and started a new life there in the Roosevelt area. Don took an active role in his community, serving on the Roosevelt school board and the Southwest Rural Electric board of trustees, which he continues to do. He was also president of the Oklahoma Association of Electric Co-ops in 1993. Having been the first in his family to attend college, and being very proud of his education, Don felt a strong commitment to OSU, as well as to his community. He appreciated the importance of education being available to all students, not just the privileged few, so he became very dedicated to the OSU POSSE fundraising efforts in his area and later to the Alumni Association, merging his love for OSU with his local roots. He served as president of the county Alumni Association and helps with the honors banquet every year, which recognizes Kiowa County top students and encourages them to continue their education.

Don's affiliation with the Alumni Association didn't stop locally, though. He served on the executive committee starting in 1986, was president-elect the next year, and was president of the Alumni Association in 1988 and 1989. He helped establish the OSU credit card to enhance fundraising efforts, assisted in the alumni membership increase, and helped organize Cowboys for Higher Education, which provides OSU alums the opportunity to lobby for university causes. In addition to his ongoing support of the Alumni Association, Don is still a farmer/rancher and enjoys spending time with his grandchildren, who are carrying on the OSU legacy.

Don Ellis

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Jerry Gill
September 10, 2010
Stillwater, Oklahoma

Gill *My name is Jerry Gill. Today is September 10, 2010. I'm visiting with Don Ellis on the Oklahoma State University campus in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This interview is for the O-STATE Stories Project of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program. Don, I appreciate you taking time away from your football weekend activities to come and visit with me.*

Ellis You're welcome.

Gill *Certainly, we want to talk about your lifelong relationship with Oklahoma State University, but first, Don, can we kind of step back, and could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up, your family, your parents?*

Ellis I grew up in Hobart, Oklahoma, attended all twelve years of school in Hobart. After that, instead of coming directly to college, I worked for a year to get a little more mature, and then I went to Cameron Junior College for two years and decided I better come to Oklahoma State. So I came up here, got a degree in agronomy and business, and went back home to the farm.

Gill *What year did you graduate Hobart High School?*

Ellis Nineteen sixty.

Gill *Will you tell me a little about some of the school and community activities that you were involved in?*

Ellis Well, I was in FFA and mixed chorus and H-Club and stuff like that. I never did play, really, varsity athletics. I was always too small, but I really enjoyed athletics and stuff like that, but I just never was good enough at it, Jerry, like you. (Laughter) Just all kinds of wonderful little

small-town community activities.

Gill *What about brothers and sisters?*

Ellis I have one sister that is fourteen years older, and then she has three children. Her oldest son, the only son, is four years younger than me, James Carley. He's a doctor here in Stillwater, an MD. So he and I grew up together more like brothers than my sister and I did because there's so much difference in age. And then Cathy, the oldest girl, she married Tommy Franks, the General Tommy Franks that ran the war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Gill *And this is your niece?*

Ellis This is my niece and her husband. And then I have another younger niece that's about ten years younger than Cathy. She lives in Houston, Texas. Caryn.

Gill *So, Don, all of you lived in Hobart. Your family had a farm there?*

Ellis At Roosevelt.

Gill *Roosevelt?*

Ellis Right. My dad moved to Hobart when I was four years old, so we had to live in town. But after college I went back home, decided to build a house out on the farm so I would be closer to the farm and wouldn't miss so much activities of the kids. And then we lived in the Roosevelt community then.

Gill *So after you graduated in what….*

Ellis Sixty-five.

Gill *In '65. So you laid out for a year.*

Ellis Yes.

Gill *So you graduated in 1960 from high school? I'm kind of tracking it here.*

Ellis Right.

Gill *You laid out for a year and then spent a couple of years…*

Ellis Then got an associate's degree from Cameron in '63.

Gill *So what interested you in Oklahoma State University?*

Ellis Well, it was the agriculture college was the main thing.

Gill *Was there anybody in particular in your family that had gone to OSU?*

Ellis No. In fact, I was the first one in the family really to attend college. I had been up here at OSU in Stillwater with FFA and 4-H functions and stuff like that, so I was familiar with the university.

Gill *So you enrolled in '63?*

Ellis Sixty-three.

Gill *And you graduated in '65.*

Ellis Sixty-five.

Gill *In animal science?*

Ellis No, in agronomy and business.

Gill *Agronomy with a business option.*

Ellis Business option, yes.

Gill *Do you remember some of your professors that you had, some of the teachers at that time?*

Ellis Oh, Dr. Sanders was my advisor in agronomy. And there was Dr. Matlock. And you know what? That's been about forty-five years ago, (Laughter) and I don't recall some...

Gill *Do you remember who was the dean of the college at that time?*

Ellis Was it Jones? Was Dr. Jones the dean then? I forgot.

Gill *I think he was the associate dean.*

Ellis He might have been.

Gill *He was in charge of enrollment for all the students. Don, let me just back up just a minute. I have a question I meant to ask you, forgot earlier. When you grew up working around the farm, taking care of animals, were there values or principles that you learned growing up that helped you be successful later in life?*

Ellis Sure. Well, the work ethic, you know, you better have it in a farm and ranch operation or you won't survive. So, the work ethic. You had to learn to work from daylight to dark to get things accomplished. If you didn't get done, you just had to do it again tomorrow, you know, but then the wheat and cattle was always an interest to me and just the lifestyle. It is a way of life as much as it is a way to make a living.

Gill *Sounds like that is what you wanted to do in life and decided that early on.*

Ellis I did, and then realized the importance of an education to learn to do it better. And then after Cameron, I went out to Texas Tech and went through the agriculture college and talked to an advisor. He said, "Don, now, if you plan on going back into production agriculture in Oklahoma, we'd love to have you come to Texas Tech in Lubbock. But you need to go to Oklahoma State and meet more people and meet the professors because that's where you'll be the rest of your life." That was real good advice, and I appreciated that, too.

Gill *So what was the fascination and interest in Texas Tech?*

Ellis At Texas Tech, I was interested in irrigating cotton at that time. At that time, because they were in an irrigated area, they were a little…

Gill *They had a national reputation in that area.*

Ellis They did. They did.

Gill *Where did you live here on the campus of Oklahoma State?*

Ellis I was married at the time. See, I was married in '62, halfway through my Cameron education.

Gill *And of course, this was Janice, right?*

Ellis Janice Weigandt. Had two children. We had one child when we came up here and had another child before we left.

Gill *Did you all meet in high school?*

Ellis Yes. I think we started dating—she was in Hobart High School, too. She was in eighth grade, and I was a sophomore when we started going together, so kind of a childhood sweetheart, you know. But we lived on McElroy, right north of the stadium in a duplex with two or three other guys. We lived in one duplex, and another friend lived in the next door,

and another guy lived the next door to that from Cameron. So there was quite a few of us that came up from Cameron together since it was a junior college at the time.

Gill *Can you share a little bit about your experience at Oklahoma State University? Were you involved in any organizations or activities?*

Ellis Well, I was in the Agronomy Club, and then I was honored to be chosen to be in the Alpha Zeta Honorary Ag Fraternity. And we really studied hard to try to make it.

Gill *Did you ever work as a student?*

Ellis I didn't. I worked at home. I would go home on weekends most of the time, and I was still farming at that time.

Gill *You were using income from your farming activities to pay for your education?*

Ellis Yes. Try and make enough money in the summer and then plant wheat in the fall, and then harvest it when I'd get out of school, so I was farming to go to school.

Gill *You were burning a lot of gas in those days.*

Ellis That's right.

Gill *Gas was probably twenty cents a gallon then, wasn't it?*

Ellis It was two hundred miles each way, too.

Gill *Wow, a lot of time.*

Ellis A lot of time.

Gill *What were you driving?*

Ellis Oh, I believe I had a '63 Chevrolet at that time, a car. First one I ever had with an air conditioner in it. (Laughter) That was pretty impressive and important.

Gill *Now, what were some of the favorite student places, hangouts on campus and off campus, when you were in school?*

Ellis You know what? I hung out in the library more than I did anywhere else, being a married student and a parent. I did attend most of the athletic

events, but between going home, studying, and going back to school, I didn't have time to do too much other.

Gill *Don, just thinking back a couple years when you were, as you said, you were there to get that degree, but what are some special memories you have of your time at Oklahoma State, some things that stand out in your mind?*

Ellis Well, there are a lot of them, but I really can't recall one that was—just the friendships that I made in the classes that I was in, classmates. Some of them I still communicate with regularly.

Gill *Was the advice you got from the professor at Texas Tech—was he right, that you met a lot of interesting…*

Ellis He was. He was right on. You meet a lot of people that you will associate with the rest of your life. It was real good advice.

Gill *Don, after you graduated in '65, you said you went back to the farm. Can you talk about some highlights of your career, your professional career, and your family after you went back to Hobart, or Roosevelt, I guess, actually?*

Ellis Well, we actually went back to Roosevelt, lived in a little house out on the farm in the summers, and then in '66 we decided to build a house out on the farm. It would be sixteen miles south of Hobart. I grew up in Hobart, and that was a pretty good commute every day, back and forth, so we decided to have a permanent house out on the farm. Two children: Tracy, our daughter, and Nick, our son. When they were old enough, they went to Roosevelt in the Roosevelt school district.

Gill *So were you in business with your dad when you started off, or how did that work?*

Ellis We did start out together. I would rent land off of him and the other neighbors, and then finally purchased some from my father and other people and built it up big enough to make a living, you know.

Gill *How many acres would you be, in terms of what you owned and rented and worked?*

Ellis We had a couple thousand at one time, and now I've backed it off to where we just have about eight hundred.

Gill *Cow-calf operation.*

Ellis At that time, I was mostly a stocker. Buy stocker calves and sell feeder cattle, and fed some cattle in the Texas panhandle, and ran cattle on wheat pasture. But wheat, cotton, and cattle were the main parts of the operation.

Gill *Any regrets as you look back? Is that kind of what you wanted to do, and enjoyed what you mostly did?*

Ellis It was exactly what I wanted to do and the lifestyle I wanted to live. I enjoyed it very much.

Gill *Don, you were involved in a lot of numerous leadership organizations and had leadership roles. Can you talk a little bit about some of those activities? I think you were active with SWRE, the rural cooperative, and your bank and some other things.*

Ellis We were active in the community in a lot of different ways. I served on the school board at Roosevelt, and then I was elected to the board of trustees at Southwest Rural Electric in Tipton, Oklahoma, that provides our electricity, rural electric co-op. I've been serving on that board for thirty-five years now.

Gill *Continuous?*

Ellis Continuous.

Gill *Wow.*

Ellis So it's been a big part of my life, as has Oklahoma State. From that organization, I represented our cooperative on the statewide board of directors of the Oklahoma Association of Electric Co-ops and served in that capacity as president of the OAEC in about '93, I believe. And then served as president of the directors association. It's just been another real good part of my life, this Rural Electric Cooperative.

Gill *You've invested a lot of your life and time in that aspect.*

Ellis I sure have, yes.

Gill *And you serve now with—is it a bank in Roosevelt?*

Ellis I did. In 1980, a group of investors bought minority interest in a bank in Roosevelt. That was not a real good time. Then the bank majority holder—we decided we didn't want to be associated with that deal, so we resigned, and then later, about two years and eight months later, that bank failed. So that was the extent of my banking experience.

Gill *(Laughs) That was a pretty tough experience for you, too, wasn't it?*

Ellis Well, it was. It was something we couldn't control.

Gill *Don, we have talked about your experience in SWRE and the bank. I am sure you're involved in the community of the school board, probably your local church, and other things, but could we talk a little bit about your time with the Alumni Association? You spent many years in that capacity. Did you start at the local chapter level?*

Ellis I did. When I went back home, I was so proud of the education I received at Oklahoma State, I wanted to make it available to other students that probably didn't have the knowledge or the experience to know that they could probably make it at Oklahoma State, to a big comprehensive university. So I became active in our county Alumni Association, an honors banquet system that the Alumni Association sponsored because of my love for the university. From there, I served as president of the county Alumni Association and later served on the board of directors on the OSU Alumni Association.

Gill *Now, I want to ask you about that, but I've got to back up and ask you first, Merle Rogers was the executive director of the Alumni Association?*

Ellis Yes, sir.

Gill *What do you remember about him?*

Ellis Oh, he was enthusiastic about the university just like all the rest of us. Great leader. I don't really recall any specific stories, but just a great man.

Gill *He was a tireless worker, wasn't he?*

Ellis He was. Worked hard at it, loved the university, and loved the Alumni Association.

Gill *And every year I remember the football team was going to go 10-0, right? (Laughter) He was an optimist.*

Ellis That's right.

Gill *Now, I guess about that, not too long after you got active in the Alumni Association, then Ray Sharpe, who had been under Merle, took over.*

Ellis Yes, and I worked with Ray.

Gill *You worked with Ray when he first came onto the board, I guess. What do you remember about Ray?*

Ellis Ray was a good friend, and he did a good job, too. I don't know just exactly what happened. I don't recall specifics, but he was a real good guy, too. I enjoyed working with him. And then about that time, I believe, you and I met when you were director of the OSU POSSE. I served on the POSSE Advisory Board, and, boy, was it a great thing for the university and for everyone when Dr. Gill came over to the Alumni Association. (Laughter) I want to tell everyone that right now.

Gill *I remember you had an airplane at the time, Don.*

Ellis Yes, that's right.

Gill *You used to fly quite a bit. Did you ever fly any of the coaches?*

Ellis I never did fly any of the coaches, but I had some of the coaches down to Hobart and try to recruit some of the kids. Brad Calip—and he was a small kid, I think a hundred and seventy or sixty pounds, quarterback and great athlete. He was the Oklahoma Athlete of the Year that year. Jimmy Johnson decided he was too small, but the kid went on to East Central, All-American there, and then played professional football in the Canadian Football League. I tried to get the guys to recruit him for Oklahoma State, but they just wouldn't do it.

Gill *Don, do you remember what year you went on the national board? Somewhere in the early '80s?*

Ellis It would've been early '81, '82, or '83. Something like that. I forgot. No, it might've been late '70s, even.

Gill *Before you moved into the past-president's role, how many years were you on the board of the executive committee?*

Ellis I was on the executive committee from about '86, probably. I think I was elected president-elect in '86 or '87. I served as national president of the Alumni Association in '88 and '89, so I was on the executive committee about two years before.

Gill *And you were president which year?*

Ellis Eighty-eight and eighty-nine.

Gill *Don, do you remember some of the people that served with you on the board at that time, some of your leadership team?*

Ellis Wendell Locke was the president immediately before me, and then Charlotte Crank before him, and then Bruce Scott followed me. So, we had a real good group. It was a good group. Two of those are deceased now, Bruce Scott and Wendell Locke.

Gill *Bruce Benbrook wasn't too far out there, was he?*

Ellis Bruce Benbrook was the year after Bruce Scott, I believe.

Gill *This was a transitional period, really, in the Alumni Association, as we would recall. Do you remember what some of the key issues were at that time? Some of the challenges that the Association had?*

Ellis The challenges were the OSU Foundation and the Alumni Association, as I recall, shared a lot of the ownership of the mailing list and the names. We didn't have as much ownership in the Alumni Association as we needed to have, in my mind, and therefore, some of the financial support from the Foundation, we lost some of that. During this same time frame, we had to become more independent financially. That's when, I think, during our time we developed the credit card concept and made it very beneficial to the Alumni Association. And then we also had a desire to be more associated with the administration of the university. We had a lot more support of the university because of our efforts after the Foundation, too, I believe.

Gill *The executive director then started reporting on the president's team, too.*

Ellis That's right. The director of the Alumni Association was a member of the leadership of the university. That was very important to us.

Gill *Don, what were some of the key programs and activities of the Alumni Association during your leadership era?*

Ellis Well, of course the Homecoming activities were. That was a big part of the Alumni Association and still is. One thing that we were proud of at the time I was serving on the executive committee is we helped organize the Cowboys for Higher Education. That was very beneficial to the Alumni Association, but mainly the university, where alums would go down and lobby for things that would be beneficial to the university. That was a very successful program starting in the mid-'80s, late '80s, and still today is something that needs to be done.

Gill *Were the honors banquets still going pretty strong at that time?*

Ellis They were. We are proud to say the honors banquet system is still going strong in southwest Oklahoma. Hobart is Kiowa County, so Kiowa County, Tillman County, [and Jackson County] still have a real active honors banquet.

Gill *Can you talk about that a little bit, because for years, the Alumni Association was engaged. How did that work? What was it?*

Ellis Well, the Alumni Association—the local chapters would identify the top 10 or 15 percent of the classes, the honor students in the county schools. Then the Alumni Association would bring down speakers to encourage kids to go to college, especially at Oklahoma State. We got to the point that we were smaller enrollments, and we would try to get the top 20 percent of the classes to come, to get more numbers. The top 20 percent of those classes—if you're in the top 20 percent, you're college material. So we really worked hard to get the kids informed about Oklahoma State University and the opportunity to go to college whether they came here or not.

Gill *Did Garth Brooks ever come out to Hobart?*

Ellis I don't believe he ever did to Hobart. I don't recall if I would've even known who he was at the time. (Laughs)

Gill *Don, of course, we know Garth now, but he was a student worker in the Alumni office, wasn't he?*

Ellis Exactly.

Gill *He used to go out and—one of the components of the honors banquet, usually, was entertainment. We'd have some student entertainment. Garth was the student entertainer for several years.*

Ellis Exactly. I don't think he ever came. If he did, he didn't impress me that much at the time. (Laughter) I wish I would've remembered it anyway.

Gill *You would've gotten an autograph?*

Ellis That's right. But the honors banquet system really was beneficial to the students, and that's why we were doing it.

Gill *Now, what do you remember about the composition of the board, the Alumni Association Board, in terms of men, women?*

Ellis Well, it was predominantly men, of course, at the time. We had some great ladies. Charlotte Crank was the first president of the board that I recall, anyway. Maybe the first one, I'm not sure. She was the first lady, but she was two or three years before me, and she was a great leader and a great supporter of the university.

Gill *Don, wasn't it under your era that we put term limits on some of the board members? Was that during your tenure?*

Ellis You know, there was a lot of change, and I didn't remember, really, term limits. There might have been. I don't recall.

Gill *Eventually, we tried to start turning them over a little bit. Some of them had been there, like, twenty years on the board, and we were trying to get some younger…*

Ellis Right, some new blood in there.

Gill *I remember that was part of your era, I think. There was a lot of trying to get some younger members on the board, getting more women on the board, things like that.*

Ellis And minorities, too. I don't recall some of the names, but it did change quite a bit.

Gill *As you look back into the time, about four years or so, you were on the executive committee, and you were president for that four-, five-, six-year period. What were some of the—you listed one of them, the inception of the Cowboys of Higher Education. Were there some other things that you remember that you did that were highlights that you thought were positive?*

Ellis We did start long-term planning for the Alumni Center. I have already mentioned the OSU credit card, which turned out to be an even bigger windfall than we imagined it could be at the time for fundraising efforts. I guess the big objective was to increase alumni membership more than anything else, too, but those were the main things that I can remember.

Gill *I think you're right. The membership increased dramatically during your tenure, which was important. I know the board had a lot of influence because the board did a lot of phone calling and membership, themselves, and getting people back and old players involved.*

Ellis I know at the time we were challenged to get ten life members per board member. Each one was challenged to get ten, so that was a big effort, too.

Gill *When you look back, were there some frustrations and some things you didn't get accomplished that you really wanted to?*

Ellis Oh, I don't want to get too political, but the frustrations were, at that time, (and it has completely changed) but the frustrations of the ownership of the mailing list of the Foundation. That was a little bit problematic to the Alumni Association. Don't want to be too critical of anything, but it's a lot better now.

Gill *Now what do you remember about Charlotte Crank? You mentioned her. She, I think, was the first woman president since the 1910s. There is a gap of about sixty years. What do you remember about Charlotte?*

Ellis Charlotte was a great OSU alum. She could be forceful enough, too. I don't know if we want to get into some of the committee reports, but she could stand up for herself. I know that.

Gill *She could be pretty direct, couldn't she?*

Ellis She sure could be. Great, great person.

Gill *When she finished speaking, you knew where she stood.*

Ellis That's right. (Laughter)

Gill *She did a great job. So what are some other personalities that you remember that you can share of that time?*

Ellis Well, Wendell Locke was a great architect in Oklahoma City. He was the president immediately before I was. He went with us on the Orient Tour when we played Texas Tech in the Coca-Cola Bowl, so he and I were together all the time on that trip. I think his tenure just finished, and mine had just started, so it was a transition period.

Gill *You went to Thailand, also?*

Ellis We went to Bangkok, Thailand, and Hong Kong, and then back to Japan. We met a lot of alums and had banquets in Bangkok, Thailand. Great group of alums in Bangkok.

Gill *Don, did you make some other international trips, as well?*

Ellis No, that was the only international trip, that ten-day trip in the Orient. We had a lot of receptions in Japan and Thailand. It was very interesting.

Gill *It was Barry Sanders' last OSU football game, wasn't it?*

Ellis Won the Heisman Trophy while we were there. That afternoon before the game, actually, he was presented the Heisman Trophy.

Gill *What do you remember about the game? It was a great atmosphere, wasn't it?*

Ellis That was. I remember on the scoreboard, it had "Heisman"—it wasn't "Celebration" because it was spelled differently. I forgot what it was now. It was kind of the way the Japanese would say it, I guess. I remember the score of the game: forty-five to forty-four. It was a real offensive shootout. I think Barry—I don't know if that's the time he set the single season record. I'm not sure for Oklahoma State. Three hundred and something yards rushing, I believe.

Gill *Don, you've been a part of the Alumni Association for several years, but picking that ten-year segment you were actively involved, how did the Alumni Association change? How was it different over that period of time, from when you started to when you kind of got out of an active role?*

Ellis I'm not sure. I think there was a lot of young, good leaders that came in during that time. We were more visible from the university's standpoint. I know that. As far as the leadership and the board of directors, I believe we were getting more new, young, aggressive board members at that time, too.

Gill *Kathy Laster.*

Ellis Yes.

Gill *Gene Batchelder.*

Ellis Yes.

Gill *Leonard Court. People like that.*

Ellis Right, exactly.

Gill *And then, like you said, the long-range planning that your leadership team started, and that would come to fruition later. But a lot of things, like I said, the Alumni Center or the finances in terms of credit card, a lot of those things came out of the long-range and strategic planning, didn't it?*

Ellis It did, and I think at the end we'll have to give Dr. Gill a lot of credit for this, too. Through your leadership, Jerry, it was just a wonderful experience and great opportunity to work with the Alumni Association because of your leadership.

Gill *Thank you, I appreciate it. I have some more generic kinds of questions from your observations and your involvement within your town. How are the ways that alumni should and could be involved with their university? What roles do you see the university and the university alumni doing?*

Ellis There's two or three ways to give back to the university: financially, or just your support of the university. One can try to get the good students to attend the university in your area. That's something I have always been more interested in and more able to do, is encourage the kids to come to Oklahoma State University, the kinds of kids that you want there.

Gill *So helping recruit good students to Oklahoma State, helping raise the visibility of the university, and act as ambassadors and advocates for the university.*

Ellis Exactly.

Gill *You mentioned earlier about Cowboys for Higher Education helping and supporting the state for OSU and higher education.*

Ellis You know, money is a big problem to any university and the political atmosphere. The alums need to be more involved in helping support the universities. Especially, the land-grant university in the state of Oklahoma is the one that we are interested in, and there's a lot of opportunities to help with that.

Gill *Don, from your perspective and experience, what should be the mission of the Alumni Association?*

Ellis We are going right back to my saying. The saying was, "Support the university, raise the visibility of the alums, and support and recruit students." This is still the goal of the Alumni Association, to me.

Gill *You talked about Connections for Life in the Alumni Association. Is it one of the missions of the Alumni Association, perhaps, connecting alumni with each other and with their alma mater?*

Ellis Exactly. It is. The Connections for Life program was great. I think that probably started a little bit later than when I was on the leadership team. That is a great concept, too, Connections for Life.

Gill *It seemed like you guys talked a lot about getting alumni together and getting to talk about Oklahoma State and getting them connected.*

Ellis Getting the visibility.

Gill *Even if it's just part of membership was getting people connected. At that time, was it about a twenty- or thirty-dollar membership?*

Ellis Yes, and life memberships. We pushed for life memberships, and they started out at what? Two or three hundred dollars? At one time we might have had too many of those. (Laughs) I don't know what they are now. A thousand dollars for life membership, or more?

Gill *Right, a thousand. So Don, what you're saying is, the life membership was what? An endowment?*

Ellis Yes, it was the endowment. I think our goal was to raise just a million-dollar endowment at one time.

Gill *So you could only just use the earning off of that?*

Ellis Exactly.

Gill *So when the stock market wasn't doing too good, we weren't doing well.*

Ellis That is right. You know, the financial part of the Alumni Association has always been a real challenge. There was lot of activities and a lot of different things we needed to do to raise money.

Gill *Don, you touched on something I liked. You talked about getting the Alumni Association more independent, if you will, more self-sufficient and to be more of a self-governed kind of association, about having alumni leadership, control of it, et cetera. What are your opinions about how the Alumni Association should be structured and organized to be as effective as possible?*

Ellis The Alumni Association shouldn't be a tool of the university or the Foundation or anyone, but we can all work together to make each other stronger. I think the Alumni Association should be completely independent from the university. Therefore, we need to be working together, and we need the input from the administration but don't want the administration dictating political or fundraising efforts for the Alumni Association, either. We don't want to be a political tool for the university, but we can help them politically on raising money and allocations of resources from the state government. But we don't need to

be dictated from the administration of the university, either.

Gill *Don, in your era, there was a lot of discussion about being a grassroots organization and about engaging, connecting as many alumni as possible. And then another kind of discussion around that era, seemed like, how the Alumni Association should be governed. Should the staff run it? Should it be run by the alumni? Could you speak to those two issues?*

Ellis That's one of the greatest strengths of a land-grant university like Oklahoma State. We have an appearance in every county in the state of Oklahoma. Therefore, we are known, and we have friends and legislators. We have friends of legislators in every county. So the grassroots is the way to build strength in an organization, and that's what we have done, I believe, in the past. I am a real firm believer in the grassroots organization controlling the staff of the Alumni Association, but then when you hire a good man, you've got to let him run it, though, too.

Gill *That is the partnership and the dynamics of trying to get a good staff, trying to get a good leadership. You have got to let them work together.*

Ellis Yes, they have to work together. You and I both have seen strong leaders on each side that are a little dominant. You want everyone to be aggressive and do the best they can for the university, but there is a balance there.

Gill *Don, surely you have some special memories of your time in the Alumni Association. You talked about the trip to the Orient. Are there some special memories and highlights of your leadership era?*

Ellis That was one of the most impressive times of my leadership era. I believe we had 120 alums for ten days on the Orient tour. The football game highlighted all that. But just the friendships and everything that we developed in the organization are the most important to me now. As far as highlights of the Alumni Association, we had some good successes. The credit card program turned out, like we said, to be even a bigger landfall than we thought it was going to be at the time, when times were really pretty tight financially for the Alumni Association. As far as any other special events, I can't recall one off the top of my head right now.

Gill *You had a lot of small highlights. You had our annual meeting in the spring where you change over officers and gifts and a lot of those kinds of activities. Of course, you did a lot of stuff in your local chapter, as well. You've had some good times there.*

Ellis I really can't recall one that was just standout anymore. We did have a lot of strategic planning sessions. I believe they became more popular about the time that we were on the executive committee. The executive committee would go to different parts of the state each year and have a strategic planning session, which was very beneficial. I believe that was probably pretty new, a new concept for us.

Gill *Don, how do feel about the future of the Alumni Association?*

Ellis With the addition of the Alumni Center and the independent Alumni Association, it's probably as strong now as I have ever seen it, probably better than it's ever been.

Gill *What do you think about Larry Shell coming back?*

Ellis Oh, wonderful. It is wonderful for Larry to, I think, finally accept the position. We just think the world of Larry.

Gill *What do you think have been the traditional strengths through the years of the Alumni Association? And maybe the add-on question is, what is the Alumni Association going to need to continue to do going forward in the future to continue to be successful?*

Ellis Well, the real strength of the Alumni Association is the love of the alums for the university. It is a way that they can give back to the university by being active in the Alumni Association. As far as the future of the Alumni Association, boy, it's really bright. The brightest I've ever seen it.

Gill *Because they had such good leadership and leaders earlier on, it set a good foundation for them, Don. As we've said here, for most of your life you have been very closely affiliated with the Alumni Association at the local chapter level and as an executive member of the national board, as president of the National Alumni Association. You have given countless hours of your time and resources. Don, why has it been so important for you to stay connected? Why have you had so much passion for OSU?*

Ellis Well, it is hard to put your finger right on it, but just the love of the university and education that I received here and the friends that I have made. I want other students to have that same opportunity that I had, and learn to love the university like I have. The Alumni Association is the way to do it.

Gill *What has OSU meant to you, Don?*

Ellis Oh, man.

Gill *It has been important to you in your life in what ways?*

Ellis Well, the pride, the education, and the friendships, altogether. It has just been a big part of our life.

Gill *Looking back over the years, what have been some of your favorite memories of OSU?*

Ellis Of course, athletic events are a way to get the university spirit up and bring recognition to the university. They're a lot of great enjoyment. They had a lot of athletic events that I remember, victories over certain teams here, wrestling matches, basketball, football, and just a lot of memories with friends and students that mean a lot to us now.

Gill *And you talked about earlier, before you got as involved in the Alumni Association, you were active on the OSU POSSE Advisory Board, which POSSE is the booster group for Oklahoma State University athletics. What do you remember about your time there?*

Ellis We did a lot of fundraising efforts in Kiowa County and Jackson County in southwest Oklahoma for the POSSE Club. At that time, if we met certain goals, a lot of the POSSE Advisory Board members would go on a football trip once a year. We went to Arizona State when they were ranked two or three in the nation, and beat Arizona State forty-five to three, I believe.

Gill *And OSU was unranked, right?*

Ellis Yes, unranked. That was just a great night. Then, I believe, the next year we went to Seattle, Washington. I got frustrated. We won the game but they were running Thurman Thomas. I think he was a young sophomore. I thought they were going to get the kid hurt. (Laughter) I think he gained two hundred thirty or forty yards or something like that. We won that game, and that was a big victory, too. Just a lot of memories of athletic events and the good people that were associated with us.

Gill *Don, you have got some interesting activities going on now that you are working with, like, the museum there in Hobart. Could you share a little bit of information about that?*

Ellis Sure will. General Tommy Franks is married to my niece, so he and I have been best friends since we were—I think they were married in '69, and he and I have been best friends ever since then. He ran the Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. After he retired in 2003, he wrote his book *The American Soldier*, then was on the speaking circuit for

three years. He moved back and built a house. He and Cathy moved back to Roosevelt and built a house out on my dad's ranch. At that time, different people in different communities had asked him about the possibility of building a museum in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. They talked about New York City. I told him, "Well, if you're going to live out here on the ranch, why don't we consider seeing if the Hobart community would like to get behind the effort to place Tommy Frank's Museum and Leadership Institute in Hobart?" Boy, they jumped all over that, and he agreed that, "Sure, we'll not only build a museum but a leadership institute to bring recognition to Hobart and educate kids."

This is about the second year the museum has been open in Hobart. There are three main phases of the leadership institute and museum. We have the museum in Hobart, we have a traveling road show, a traveling museum on a trailer that we have an educator and a driver. Then we take this trailer around to all the middle schools that it can schedule in the state of Oklahoma and Texas. This is actually the second full year of that. And then the leadership part of it, we've had a four-star debate in Oklahoma City. Eventually we'll be in Hobart when we get the new museum built. But there was forty-eight kids the last three years, that have come to a leadership training session and participated in debates. These two years it was in Oklahoma City. This last year the King of Jordan took them all to Jordan. There were twenty-four American kids, twenty-four Middle Eastern kids, and they paired up. It's just a great learning experience for these kids to meet their counterparts and study on leadership activities. So that is where we are at on that.

Gill *You are pretty active in that, aren't you?*

Ellis Pretty active, yes.

Gill *That is great. So you are still farming and ranching?*

Ellis Still farming and ranching. Not doing as much as I used to, but just enough to keep me busy and keep me occupied. I do a lot of hunting with grandkids, and life is good.

Gill *How many grandkids do you have?*

Ellis I have two grandsons and a granddaughter. The oldest grandson is a graduate of Oklahoma State. The youngest grandson is a sophomore at Oklahoma State, and we are working on our granddaughter. She is sixteen. (Laughter) We will be recruiting her.

Gill *That's great. Don, this is a serious question, remember that. You've been involved with Oklahoma State University so much and with Rural*

Electric, and in a lot of ways with your community. Looking back, how do you hope people will remember Don Ellis?

Ellis Oh, man, I don't know. (Laughs) That he cared about the community and everything he did, I guess, and that I tried to make their life a little better. I don't really think about that much, but I guess that has always been one reason we've been doing it, just to make life better for other people.

Gill *Don, thank you. Let me just ask, what have I left out? What have we not talked about that we ought to today?*

Ellis I can't think of anything, Jerry, but we do need to tell everyone that because of Jerry Gill's leadership is why I'm here and the Alumni Association is as strong as it is today. I know it will embarrass you if I say that, but it is your leadership that has caused all of this to happen, too.

Gill *Well, it is really great to have really passionate leaders like yourself involved over the years, Don. Congratulations for all you have done for the university. Please accept our appreciation for, particularly, your leadership role in the Alumni Association. It has made a big difference in life and the university.*

Ellis Well, thank you.

Gill *Thank you.*

------- *End of interview* -------