



1-11-2023

Bob Coffman and a Love for East Campus

University Libraries
University Libraries

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories



Part of the Oral History Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

University Libraries, "Bob Coffman and a Love for East Campus" (2023). *East Campus Oral Histories*. 17. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories/17

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Campus Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



WMU Alum Bob Coffman

Wednesday, January 11 at 5:30 pm

Virtual Meeting via Google Meet

Cassie: Okay, perfect. Okay, so we are recording, so just to give you a bit of background, I do have a few questions that I can ask. Or if you have any stories that you want to share up front, we can do that, whatever you want to share.

But we will start with, I'll just have you introduce yourself, spell your name for the transcription, and then we'll start with your connection to WMU, how you came here. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Bob: No. Well, maybe. I'm in Arizona and I was looking at a map of Kalamazoo. It's been quite a while since I've been there. Is the East Campus still standing?

Cassie: Yes, yes.

Bob: Okay.

Cassie: It will probably look a lot different than when you were taking classes on East Campus. North Hall is mostly gone, but they kept the facade of the building, so the front wall is still there as a monument.

East Hall is still there and is now being used by the Alumni Association. It was completely refurbished; they kept a lot original but spent a lot of money renovating it while maintaining the integrity of the building. Only the main East Hall building remains; the gym that was connected to it is gone.

Obviously, the old training school is long gone and has been replaced by a parking lot. There's also a big green space. The stairs that went down Prospect Hill towards Vine are gone and have been replaced by an outlook area with practice fields below. Walwood is still in use by Graduate Studies and the Little Theater is still there.

Let's see, there are a few other buildings that are still there, including—what were the dorms across Oakland from East Hall?

Bob: I don't know.

Cassie: They were the oldest dorms. I think they were boys' dorms while Walwood was for women. Anyway, it's still there but it's shut down. But Walwood and East Hall are still used pretty frequently.

Bob: Well, good.

Cassie: Yeah. Those are still good and operating, so that's basically all that's there. I can't think of anything else right now.

Bob: Well, I could kind of tell that things were different even though I didn't have a lot of time to look at the maps. But again, you're talking about 50 years; things change.

Cassie: Yes.

Bob: No, I had just gotten out of the service and moved to Kalamazoo that summer to prepare to attend Western and get a business degree, which is what I did. I kind of fell in love with the East Campus, where most of the business classes I took were located.

The patina of the buildings and the older, more stately look of the campus made me feel like I was almost at Harvard or something like that.

Cassie: Right, very cliché, yeah.

Bob: Yeah, and I lived in a student ghetto, so the location was great for me. I also worked at Bronson Hospital. Everything was right there for me and it was a terrific experience.

Cassie: Okay, what year did you start at WMU?

Bob: Well, I believe it was in '77 after I got out of the service. I graduated in '79.

Cassie: What brought you to WMU? Are you from the Kalamazoo area?

Bob: I grew up in Western Michigan and had a number of friends. I spent most of my education before college at North Muskegon High School, but I actually graduated from Fruitport High School, which is in Spring Lake.

Cassie: Yeah, I'm from there actually.

Bob: You are?

Cassie: Yeah, I went to Spring Lake Highschool.

Bob Coffman: You did?

Cassie: Yes.

Bob: I actually lived in Spring Lake, but we were in that section that was more towards Fruitport.

Cassie: Right, like Ferrysburg area almost?

Bob: Yeah! My brother now lives in Ferrysburg, but it would have been south of Spring Lake Golf Course as you're heading towards Fruitport. Our address was actually in Spring Lake. It was just part of Petty's Bayou off of Spring Lake.

Cassie: I used to live right there too! My childhood home is on North Fruitport Road.

Bob: Is that right?

Cassie: Yes, once you cross over the bridge past the country club golf course and go over the bridge, it was up the hill. I was about three houses down from the top of the hill.



Bob: So, as you go past the bridge, there was a flower shop there when I was there. Then you go a little bit further down and take a right on Kelly.

Cassie: Yes, I lived right before Kelly, yeah.

Bob: Yeah, that's where our subdivision was.

Cassie: Okay, yeah, we were right before Kelly, if you're coming from Spring Lake.

Bob: Interesting, small world.

Cassie: Yes it is!

Bob: Anyway, I had friends who had gone to Western. I had been in the service and got out in '76. Since I grew up in Michigan, Western was always a school that was on my radar. So, when I got out of the service, that's where I headed.

Cassie: Okay, and reflecting back on your years at WMU, how would you summarize your experience?

Bob: It was great; I enjoyed it. Actually, when I first got there, it was in the summer. Classes had already begun but I joined the WMU Vets Club. I got to meet some people before the school year started and I actually ended up going there year-round. I finished in three years.

I did take some classes at Kalamazoo-CC. In order to-

Cassie: Like summer courses and such?

Bob: Yeah, right. Exactly.

Cassie: Do you remember any professors during your time at Western?

Bob: I can't remember off the top of my head. I'm sure if you threw some names out I might remember them. I do remember the guy who ran communications. I was a member of, I think it was called the American Business Communications Association. Joel Bowman was the guy who was heading that up. I think when I was there, it had just started. I'm not sure if it had been around for a while or if we were part of the beginning of it. To be honest with you, I don't remember.

But yeah, that's a name that comes to mind. As for others, no. After being in the service for four years, I wanted to get this education thing out of the way. I was more focused on getting to classes and getting them done. Like I said, I worked at Bronson at night so I was fairly busy.

Cassie: Yeah, on that topic, what did a typical day look like for you then while you were a student?

Bob: Well, other than classes, I actually worked in the ER. So, I did most of my homework in the darkroom because I worked in ER. It gave me a location that was very close. I mean, I could walk or ride my bike to class, to the hospital, and to my place in the ghetto. It was all very convenient.

So, an average day would have obviously involved going to some classes. There wasn't a whole lot of library work, but I would go to classes and take notes. And then when you're done, it was an interesting schedule—do you go by Cassandra or Cassie?

Cassie: Cassie.

Bob: Cassie, it was an interesting schedule. In fact, I was just talking to people about this yesterday. I worked seven days on and seven days off at the ER at Bronson. It was just me and one other guy that performed this job during that time frame. Our shift was from five o'clock till midnight. So, for that week, it would be class and work pretty much for the entire week. Then on the off week, it gave me time to do whatever—play games or do what college people do.

Cassie: Yeah, whatever they do with their free time.

Bob: There was kind of an interesting situation at the orientation. I am an avid golfer and, as I mentioned, I moved to Kalamazoo after getting out of service. I was there in the summertime, so I started playing golf at Milham Park Golf Course. At that time—you have to remember this was the late '70s—I had a pair of yellow-green madras golf pants. And of course, I was older because I graduated high school in '70. But when I came back and went to that orientation, I was actually on the golf course at Milham Park and realized that I was supposed to be at orientation. So, I just stopped and got in my car and drove over.

There were many groups, but our group had maybe seven people on a blanket in the grass. There was somebody there coordinating those of us through that orientation. But it was the job of the group to determine who was not a student. Because of the way I was dressed and because of my age, everybody assumed that I was the coordinator, which I wasn't, obviously.

Cassie: Yeah, that's funny though.

Bob: Yeah, it was.

Cassie: Do you remember where most of your classes were, like what buildings?

Bob: Well, yeah, I mean I just kind of bounced around - mostly North and East. And I had other classes. Like one summer, I took a class that you guys offered - so don't blame me for it - but it was a summer class called Practical Vegetable Gardening. There was a plot of land out between the freeways that we would go out to and tend to our gardens.

There were classroom areas, but to be honest, I don't remember where those were. Very frankly, because I was a business degree student, I didn't spend a lot of time on the main campus at all. Yeah, I didn't live there, I didn't work there, and I didn't have a whole lot of classes over there. The vets had a house not far from what was then the student union, so I'd go over there.

Cassie: Yeah right, do you remember anything about the buildings, about East Hall or North Hall?

Bob Coffman: Yeah, well like I said, it just reminded me of academia. To me, it was college. For example, I had gone up and looked at Ferris and the buildings there were just all these light brick buildings with no character or real substance. East campus was everything that that wasn't. So yeah, just that whole vibe there to me was just academia. It made me feel like I was in a real college, going to real classes and getting real degrees.

Cassie: Yeah, yeah, what was your favorite part about campus do you think?

Bob: About East campus then?

Cassie: Yeah.

Bob: Well, yeah, I know I keep repeating this, but for me, it was the ability - first of all - to easily get from North to East. If you had a class at North and had to get to East, it really wasn't a problem. So, the convenience was huge.

But like I said, I can recall thinking back then that instead of looking at having to go to this old rundown part of Western Michigan University, I saw it completely differently. To me, I was fortunate to be on East Campus. Yeah, so those were my feelings then and I still feel that way. In fact, I probably wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't because I felt that way. But when you guys reached out and said you were wanting to put together this project, I wish I had a better memory. But I'm 70 so I don't remember some of the professors' names. I do remember my emotional attachment to the campus.

Cassie: Yeah, and that's what we're looking for anyway. The written records keep track of the exact names and photos, but we're looking more for your connection to it.

Bob: It just made me feel like - and then the stadium was always fun to go to for the games. In fact, I actually - back then, for charity - they had a thing called the Pig Ball. I don't know if the Pig Ball still exists anymore, but it was a game where the vets played the Kalamazoo police in a tag football game at Waldo Stadium.

Cassie: That's cool!

Bob: You sold tickets and people came to the game. The money went to a charity, but I can't remember the name of it. So, I have a picture of me in a jersey, sitting on the bench at the football field looking like I had been in a war. I obviously didn't play for the football team. It was flag football, but it's kind of cute to look at it now again, and go, here I am on the football field.

Cassie: Yeah, that's funny. I have a few more questions.

Bob: Sure.

Cassie: What do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU, whether it be an event, a person, place, or just a thing?

Bob: What affected me most?

Cassie: Yeah, what do you think impacted you the most during your time here?

Bob: I guess having spent four years in the service and then getting out and just going, "Okay, I'm going to go get this done," to have received my Bachelor in Business Administration and to have gone through that in a faster than the usual timeframe - and to have achieved that in less time than I had spent in the military - that allowed me the confidence to be able to say, "Now I can go out into the business world and be involved in business because I'm carrying a business degree from a more than reputable college and a College of Business, for that matter."

Let's face it, would I even have been in business if I hadn't gotten the business degree from Western Michigan University? So, I went on, I worked for 27 years in corporate America. And then I've had my own business for 20 years since then, so-

Cassie: Wow.

Bob: I guess it worked out pretty good.

Cassie: Yeah, I think so.

Bob: Yeah.

Cassie: Was there anything that you didn't like about Western or East Campus while you were going there?

Bob: The football coach.

Cassie: Really?

Bob: Well, you probably won't record this or use it, but his name at the time was Elliot. I don't know if that's a name you're familiar with, but he was the coach for Western Michigan University when I went there. And because we didn't win very many games, instead of calling him Elliot Uzelac, we called him Idiot Lose-a-lot. So I mean, he probably never heard us say that.

So yeah, I would say I was disappointed in him as a football coach. Now, on the other hand, I'm extremely impressed with our coach who is now at Minnesota - P.J. Fleck. He was an exceptional college coach. And I follow Minnesota now because of what he did with Western Michigan.

Cassie: Really, wow.

Bob: Yeah.

Cassie: You have two ends of the spectrum then.

Bob: Exactly

Cassie: How do you feel about WMU now versus when you were going there?

Bob: I wish - and I haven't - but years ago, maybe 20 years ago, we took our kids and we drove to see family in Western Michigan. So, we drove them through campus and went to the Student Center to give them a chance to see what it was like. But I mean, that was probably 30 years ago. So that's why I kind of went to the map before you called because I was trying to see if I could orient myself to places and things. I'd kind of like to see what it looks like now. And maybe if I ever get back again, we'll make that trip down there to Western. But I'm sure it has improved in many, many ways. I mean, every college has got to be able to do that or they won't survive.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: And just the fact that you're doing this says a lot for the university, to want to keep track of something like that that could easily be forgotten in time.

Cassie: Right, especially with losing so many buildings on East Campus. I know a lot of people were upset about it. So that's why I like this project. Hopefully that keeps some of the sentiment going.

Bob: Well, here's a great example since you know the area. North Muskegon High School has been around since dirt, and it still sits on Ruddiman Boulevard. But Fruitport High School, where I graduated from, doesn't exist anymore.

It's been torn down and a new Fruitport High School has been built. So there you go. I couldn't go back right now to the high school I graduated from and memorialize it, walk down the hallway, because it's not there anymore.

Cassie: Right, no.

Bob: So, this is what you guys are able to do with East Campus, I guess.

Cassie: Yes, yeah.

Bob: And that's great.

Cassie: Right, really anything, I guess, would be good.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

Cassie: I just have one more question. Do you have any other memories or stories that you'd like to share or any topics we didn't touch on that you wanted to talk about?

Bob: Hm, I don't think any, I'll probably have several at about 2 o'clock this morning- When it hits me. I guess I don't have any that I think would be worthy of expressing. But I'd be happy, if I think of one at 2 o'clock in the morning, email it to you the next day.

Cassie: You can do that, yeah, I can include it with your project, too, yeah.

Bob: All right.

Cassie: Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today and sitting down with me. Yes, I saw your shirt when I got on and I was like, "wohoo!"

Bob: Well, I appreciate you reaching out as well.

So, when did you graduate?

Cassie: In December.

Bob: Good for you, now you're working for the school then?

Cassie: I have an internship, technically through the WMU Libraries. It's a collaborative project with FOHEC and Advancement, the alumni association, and libraries. And they asked me to stay on and finish out the project.

Bob: Nice.

Cassie: And I plan to finish the project hopefully soon.

Bob: Alright, so is this something then in the future I'll be able to click on and see what everybody had to say?

Cassie: Yes, yeah, yep, you can view all of the stories on there, it's a whole collection. There's been at least 25 other people before you and about 20 people after you so far.

Bob: Wow.

Cassie: And it's a very wide range, so we have some old faculty, we had somebody who was an assistant for one of the WMU presidents.

Bob: Wow.

Cassie: Yes, we've had people who went to the old Campus Training School, like the elementary school that WMU used to run.

We have graduates dating back to about 1948 and as recently as the 2000s for the School of Art because the School of Art was in East Hall before they changed that.

Bob: Is that right?

Cassie: Yes.

Bob: Good luck with your project.

Cassie: Thank you very much, have a good night.

Bob: You too, bye-bye.

Cassie: Bye.