

University of Houston-Clear Lake Oral History Project

Interviewee: Thomas Stauffer
Interviewer: John Zophy
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Zophy: This is an oral history interview with Dr. Thomas Stauffer, who was president of the University of Houston at Clear Lake City between 1982 and 1991. I'm John Zophy of the history faculty, and this is April 29th, 2005.

Dr. Stauffer, would you mind telling us a little bit about your background before you came to UH-CLC?

Stauffer: Yes, happy to do it, and happy to participate in this project. I think it's a smart thing for the university to do. I came to, it was at that time called the University of Houston at Clear Lake City, and one of the early things I did was change the name of the place to the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and there was a lot of discussion about that at the time. We can talk about that.

But in answer to your question, I came to Clear Lake from the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C., better known as ACE. ACE is the principal association of colleges and universities in the United States, and I was a vice president there, had been there for exactly a decade, but decided that if I stayed

much longer I would turn into a Washington bureaucrat. So I determined to leave, first of all, and secondly I decided that I wanted to get back to a campus, and rather boldly, and I don't remember the details now, but rather boldly said, well, I applied for—actually, there's only two presidencies, one of which was here at Clear Lake. So I had come from some national experience, but was very pleased when I got the nod here in Texas.

Zophy: What was it about UH-CLC that attracted you, in terms of your decision to apply to this particular campus?

Stauffer: Well, there were probably a number of things. One, I knew the person who was then chancellor, Charles Bishop, who, I don't know what the titles are now, but at that time he was head of the System and head of the University of Houston at what came to be called University Park Campus, and I can tell you a story about that, where that idea came from.

But in any event, I knew him, had a lot of respect for him, and the notion of going to a campus next to the Johnson Space Center—when I was here I always used to say that the Johnson Space Center was probably better known than the university, and that it seemed to me that there had to be some opportunities there. I didn't know what they were at the time, but there had to be some opportunities in technology and relationships with the federal government.

Remember, in Washington I had worked on many federal-related projects, knew how the federal government worked with higher education and so on, so I figured there had to be some angle that universities here could exploit, being next to this NASA facility. It turns out I was right, although it came in ways I had not expected.

The other reason, frankly, was when I got here the title initially was chancellor. I came here as chancellor of the University of Houston at Clear Lake City, and I was here about, I don't know, two or three years when the title was changed to president. So I guess I was the last chancellor in the history of UH-Clear Lake.

But when I came and had an interview, everybody was very friendly, and I thought, I mean seriously, that had a big influence on me. I said, well, the Johnson Space Center I see over there, people are friendly, and if I get the nod maybe I should come, so it was no fancier explanation than that.

Zophy: Do you remember who was chairing that research committee for UHCL? That's kind of disappeared from the record.

Stauffer: Yes. Alex—he was head of the Downtown Campus.

Zophy: Alex Schilt.

Stauffer: —Schilt. He was chair of that committee. I've not seen him in a long time. But he was the chair of that committee, which was—I remember it reported at that time to Philip Hoffman, who was the chancellor of the System. Or no, I guess he was the previous chair, then Ed Bishop had come in. But I remember talking to him, and he was very encouraging and wanted to try some new ideas, was I interested in trying some new things? So I signed up.

Zophy: Did you get any mentoring from Alfred [R.] Neumann, or did you kind of have to hit the ground running?

Stauffer: There was some overlap. I think when I came here I was the chancellor, and I remember what to me was a funny story, that I was here about a week, and somebody had put an unsigned note under my office door of the president, saying, "We hear that this is too much for you, and that you feel overwhelmed and you're depressed, and that probably you'll be moving on shortly." Then I spent another nine years in the job, but, you know, it was daunting, I don't care who you are, daunting coming in with those kinds of responsibilities.

But Alfred was very friendly to me, and I was always a very frank person, and would ask him, "This person said this thing. Who is this person?" And he would tell me what the background was from his standpoint. I discovered later that there were some things I agreed with, some things I didn't, obviously. But he was very helpful, and his wife Selma was very helpful to me and my family at that time.

So yes, there was some mentoring going on, probably for about six months on a fairly intense basis, just to find out—because Alfred, of course, was the first chancellor in the history of the institution, and I was pretty young when I came here, forty years old.

Again, I don't care who you are. You probably after you arrive at one of these things, you say, "Where am I? What am I doing? What's going to happen next?" I mean, I didn't try to act that way. I tried to act like I knew what I was doing, and I had a few ideas, but at the same time it was obviously a big responsibility and I was willing to learn on the job, so to speak.

Zophy: You had some holdovers from the Neumann regime. You had Charles Hardwick had come I think the year before. He was provost. Then Jim Hale and Carl Van Wyatt, and Mary Ann Shallberg, among others.

Stauffer: Right. Mary Ann is the only one who—she worked with Philip Hoffman, and then with Alfred, then me, and I guess has been here ever since. Actually, you should interview her. If you want the real history of the university, you should talk to her.

Zophy: At least from the lives of the Caesars.

Stauffer: Well, she had a bigger role in the creation of this place than almost anybody around, in all seriousness. I mean, she may not have always had the title, but knew what was going on, and was a good counselor to me and I know other people she worked with.

Zophy: You found a fairly good group in place. I think you had to bring in some new deans, but—

Stauffer: Yes. All the three people, Wyatt and Hale and Charlie Hardwick. I had read a study from the University of California, Irvine, once, addressing the question, when you come into a college or university presidency, or a corporate one, should you get rid of everybody, or stick with the people you got? The answer of the study was, it didn't make any difference, that after five years you would end up with approximately the same result, except if you fired everybody you made everybody mad, so that was the major negative even if it was justified. So I figured, why not work with the people that were here, and I never regretted that decision.

Zophy: Good. What do you think were some of your greatest accomplishments at UHCL?

Stauffer: Well, actually I came in and formed an agenda pretty quickly. There are probably four things that would come—and I like to think that when you're a university

president you're really a steward of something pretty important in the scheme of things, and I don't take the position lightly at all. But you ought to try to do some big things, and forget the small stuff. There's always small stuff in university. People like you or don't like you, or they like what you did or don't like what you did. You know, that rolls off. But it's really what you did for the university that is important.

But let me tick off the four things that I'm thinking of right now, one of which is that I thought that the university sitting next to one of the great technological marvels of the planet, the Johnson Space Center, really had very little orientation to the Space Center. It was oriented more toward the humanities and social sciences, and I thought that the university—there was nothing wrong with that. I was a history major in college, by the way, and a geology major, which I always thought geology was just really old history, and I read history every single day of my life. It's my big avocation. So I'm not knocking the humanities and social sciences in any way.

But I thought that the university should have a particular expertise in technology, in science, research and development, so that was one of the things I deliberately set out to try to sort of turn the ship of the university, so to speak, more toward the hard sciences, information science and so on. So that was one of them.

The second one was to reach out to the community more. I thought there needed to be a whole lot more interaction not only with the Space Center, but the Clear Lake community in general, Houston, the greater Houston area, the petrochemical complexes nearby, and ended up spending a great deal of time—I can go into more detail on that if you like—but spending a great deal of time just cultivating people, figuring that even though I didn't know what it would result, that over time somehow that would benefit the university.

Thirdly, I thought that the university needed a bigger research emphasis, that if we were going to gain the respect of the other components in the University of Houston System and Texas higher education in general, there had to be a stronger research regime here, and that we had great opportunities. First of all, there were a lot of good people here, a lot of very good people, and I understand many of them are still here. Some of the charter faculty are still here, which pleases me no end.

Zophy: Fifteen of them.

Stauffer: Fifteen; I mean that's outstanding, it really is. But that having a greater emphasis on scholarship was important. And probably the fourth area was in fundraising, which somewhat relates to the other parts, that we started a fundraising campaign to bring in outside dollars, that I thought was important for the university's long-term development.

There were lots of other things. I mean, there were physical-plant things, and there were ideas that I started that didn't come to fruition till after I left. There's a new building here which I have not seen. I need to go see it. But that started when I was here, some housing and an animal facility. I don't know if that's still here. Parking lots, there were new parking lots, new soccer field. I don't know if that's still here either. But nonetheless, there were some things that got going at the time. But those four things were probably the major ones.

Zophy: Well, you started the Development Advisory Council, if I'm—

Stauffer: Right.

Zophy: And that was a big help. And then you brought in the Becky Schergens, because they hadn't had a director of development.

Stauffer: Right. She was great.

Zophy: Where did you meet her? Was it at the University of Denver?

Stauffer: She went through the University of Denver, and I did not know her there. I knew her in Washington. She was president of the National PTA, which was a fairly major position. That was a major position. She was tied in—she was a lot more

Republican than I ever was, and was tied in with the Reagan administration. I forget what she did, but she knew everybody in town.

I remember when I was at the American Council on Education I had lunch with her. I don't remember now how we connected, but I had lunch with her, and she started talking about Denver, and it turns out we had all kinds of connections, and people at the White House and elsewhere that we knew in common. So when I got here she—oh, I know. Later on, after I'd come here, I was in Washington for something and we got together for lunch again, and she talked about that if anything ever developed in Texas she might be interested. So when this came up, you know, bingo in my head maybe, and she was a very able person, so that's how that came about.

Zophy: It turns out that the fundraising efforts that you initiated were desperately needed. I believe in 1985 you were hit by 13 percent decline in state revenues, which I think is the largest cut in one year, and a 4 percent decline over the next several years.

Stauffer: Not only is that true, but this is an absolutely true story. We learned about that 13 percent cut ten days before the opening of the fall term, and would we mind identifying 13 percent, literally. And so democracy and consultation sort of had to go out the window. I was criticized for that, by the way. The faculty were unhappy, you know, why did you do this, but literally we had orders to deliver a

hit list, budgetary hit list within ten days. So I consulted, I remember at the time, as best I could, but had to sit down—I still remember that night, sitting down late one night and checking things, and circling stuff on the budget sheet that we had to deliver, so yes, there were some tough times.

Let me tell you another quick story, and I'd forgotten this till just now. Another reason that I came here, back to your original question, that I'd been reading in *The Washington Post* that there was an oil boom going on in Texas, and that everybody was living pretty high on the hog. There were all kinds of stories about how Houstonians were joining clubs and spending money lavishly for homes, and lodges in Aspen, and all kinds of things. So I figured, well, not only is it attractive from an academic and NASA standpoint, but gee, they have a lot of money, and I could go help them spend it, in wise ways, of course.

I got here and for the first couple of years it was just like that. It was, "This is pretty neat." Then the price of oil went from, I don't know what it was, forty dollars to nine dollars, and essentially the Texas economy collapsed, and there was also a large savings-and-loan debacle, which many people conveniently forget these days, but it was horrible at the time. I was on a bank board here that changed its name four times, the last one of which was a receivership with the federal government. But it was tough times, and the budget of the state collapsed, and it finally rippled down to the university.

When I came here, actually another sort of claim to fame, this is item maybe five on your list of things, that I gave some speeches around the city about economic development, saying that, “You know, you guys are in oil and gas, but this isn’t going to last forever,” because I knew the history of the state, and there had been oil busts and oil prosperity before, “and that you guys really ought to broaden your concept. There are other opportunities here. You have the Johnson Space Center, you have the Texas Medical Center, you have these assets. Why don’t you do something with them? And gave some speeches to that effect, and it attracted absolutely no attention. I mean, people thought I was weird, and here’s this academic, you know, he’s been reading the books too much, you know, get back to reality, kid, let’s go have a drink, I mean kind of attitude.

Well, then things collapsed and I was much in demand as a public speaker around town, gave exactly the same speech, and I gave hundreds of speeches like this, saying, “You guys need to get it together.” It led to a number of things, one of which was the—I don’t know if it still exists, but it was called the Clear Lake Economic Development Foundation, and then the Houston Partnership, which was an effort to harness the Johnson Space Center, the Medical Center, other assets to diversify the economy in Houston, and maybe in the bigger sense that was the most important thing I ever did, because it really did help—I mean, I wasn’t solely responsible. I’m not saying that. There were lots of other people involved.

But I took a pretty direct role in at least carrying the flag and saying that, “Economic development, you guys cannot live on oil and gas forever alone. You have to do other things.” And I know now the economy is much more diverse, and a lot of good things have happened, so I played that small role. But it was quite a change, from one day to the next almost, “You’re crazy,” to, “Would you mind coming and speaking to our group?”

Zophy: I was going to say, you could have listed the chili cook-off as one of your greatest accomplishment because that has taken---

Stauffer: Very important, very important. That probably will be long remembered, better than the other parts.

Zophy: Yes, although the partners and the other economic-development things have been very crucial in the development of this community. So you certainly started a lot of things in motion that have come to fruition. Any particular disappointments along the way in your nine, ten years here?

Stauffer: Oh, sure. Of course there were a good number. Just to emphasize, when I came here there were a lot of really good people here, and I made a lot of good friends, many of which I still correspond on e-mail to this day, both at NASA and here at the university. Other ones have died or disappeared, so fifteen years that I’ve been away is a long time, and fifteen more years from now it’ll happen again.

But in setting out the agenda that I did, I decided to be directive about that agenda, and I didn't always follow all of the academic protocols of, quote, "consulting with the faculty" as much as I probably should have. But I thought that the bigger picture was more important, quite frankly, and so I sort of bulldozed some things. I thought that was more important, and that upset some people. So I regret that. I mean, I didn't try to upset anybody. I didn't set out to do that. But I think that was the net result of the way in which I operated.

When I left the university—or maybe I could tell the story about why I left when I did leave. Again, I'd been at ACE, which was essentially a presidents' club, and college-and-university presidents' club, and I knew literally hundreds of college-and-university presidents of most of the major universities in the United States, and even around the world. One of the things I observed was that many of them stayed too long in the job, and when I came here I had a secret thing, I don't think I even told my wife at the time, that I was not going to stay longer than ten years.

From my ACE experience, that was always the outer limit, but the real window was probably from about seven years to ten years, and after that if you'd done your job, either you probably upset some people, or you've run out of ideas, or you need to recharge yourself, whatever the case may be. So at the start—I was getting near year ten, and I told the chancellor at the time that I was going to

leave. I had no other job, I didn't know where I was going, but I knew it was time to leave.

I also was not a believer in tenure, which I know is probably—and when I came here I deliberately said I did not want tenure. I'd never been tenured in my academic career, and I just don't believe in the concept, which is a minority opinion in the extreme in American higher education, but it's an absolutely true story.

But in any event, so I had no academic home here, and wanted to go on to something. I had a few other inquiries and offers on the table, but I really hadn't decided, so I announced I was going to the chancellor at the start of the academic year, and I said at the end of the academic year I want to at some point in the spring go down, said I was stepping down, "You can search for somebody." And then as it turns out, the last year I was here we had a blowup with a faculty member, and I honestly don't remember the names.

Zophy: Well, there was the Chris Downs and then the Robin Ptacek. Ptacek was the art historian, stealing slides, and Downs was the sexual harassment case.

Stauffer: I forgot about the Ptacek and the Downs, and you know, I have no ill will against either of those people, but it was an issue I had to deal with, and it got in the papers and blew up. So when I did leave, people didn't know that I'd already told

the chancellor before all this happened that I was going to leave. So the last year I was here it was kind of rough, and there was lots of noise, and stuff in the papers, interviews and lawyers and all kinds of nonsense.

Zophy: And yet Bruce Palmer gives you a lot of the credit for starting the Shared Governance process. You went out with a delegation to California Irvine—

Stauffer: Yes, that's true.

Zophy: —and some of those reforms were initiated.

Stauffer: That was one of the things, I really thought that that was important. I don't want to make it sound like I was an academic Neanderthal or something, not to offend all Neanderthals in the world, but I thought it was something that the university System in general—I thought that Shared Governance throughout the U.H. System was fairly weak. There was sort of a Texas tradition of kind of strong presidents, and they could pretty much do what they wanted to, and even though I admit I did that myself, I didn't always think it was a wise thing to do.

I had lots of advice from faculty colleagues here, and actually tried to listen and tried to abide by their thinking, but more formalizing it in a Shared Governance way I thought was a pretty good idea, so if some of the faculty thought that was a good idea—I thought it was at the time, and I'm pleased.

Zophy: You've already covered this somewhat, but anything other about your UHCL legacy, and then I'll ask you to fill us in a little bit about your life since the UHCL.

Stauffer: Well, you know, legacy, we're all given a shot in our careers at doing something at various institutions, and you do your best. You try to be ethical, you try to do the right thing, and then I think you need to walk away from it. I've never believed that old presidents ought to stick around. Maybe some have in U.H. history or something, I don't know. But my own belief is, you shouldn't stick around. You should get out of the way, and the smarter people come in and adjust the mistakes you made, and introduce some new ideas and so on, and let the pieces fall where they may. So you're probably better qualified, as a distinguished professor of history here, to judge what—

Zophy: That's kind of you to say. I'm very undistinguished. [laughs]

Stauffer: Well, I think that's a fair statement. So I don't know what—I think it's for others to judge what one's legacy is. But I think a lot of the things that I did start, the outreach and the fundraising and the research, and Shared Governance you mentioned, and economic development and all, and NASA, all those things are still part of the university, so some of those things stuck, and I guess in a legacy sense that's the—if somebody comes in and changes everything that you've done,

that's probably not a good sign. I'm sure they changed many things that I did, and probably for the better, I have no doubt.

Zophy: Well, they built—I think actually it's been kind of a continuous building process, scaffolding if you will, so I think you can feel very good about what you started and how it's led to—

Stauffer: I don't think I screwed up too much. A little bit, but I don't think too much.

Zophy: Well, we all do. That's part of being human. Could you tell us just briefly about your life since UHCL?

Stauffer: Yes. Since I was here, I actually had some Houston connections after I left, but not university connections, personal ones, and I owned property here over in the Brook Forest area. I had a couple of houses for a number of years that I finally sold at a loss. I remember that was my major memory of that. So I had a number of Houston connections, but they were in other parts of the city.

But my major part of my life moved to California, and the year after I left UH-Clear Lake I went to work for NASA, moved to Washington as special assistant to the administrator, and wrote the policy that also was enacted—I mean, there was a legacy there—policy on science, technology, and mathematics governance, or guidance I should say, within NASA.

Zophy: This was after—you worked for the U.H. System for a while, though.

Stauffer: I had an office there, but I never showed up. I really worked in Washington. I don't know if that's widely known, but I wasn't there very often, and I really didn't do anything for the System. I mean, I think that's fair to say. I've kind of forgotten all that. But the last years I was here, what kind of exacerbated the problem was that the chairman of the U.H. Board at that time was Ken Lay, who was chairman of Enron Corporation, and has now, of course, gone down in the—for those of you who look at this a hundred years from now—who went down in history as an infamous chairman of Enron, who is currently under indictment with a trial coming up next year, I understand. We'll see. He's innocent until proven guilty, but there's been a lot of controversy. If anybody wants to know that, look up under Enron on your search engine and learn.

But there were many complications because of that. He and I clashed in a major way, several major ways. Nobody knew about it on this campus, but he and I had some serious disagreements where, frankly, I stood up for Clear Lake against some people that wanted to do it some harm, and won. Maybe that was another—I forgot about that. But he and I went to the mat, and essentially, he was happy when I left.

In retrospect, the pieces fell where they may, and people can make their own judgments, but a lot of—at the time of the budget cuts that you mentioned, and subsequently, there was a lot of defending UH-Clear Lake behind the scenes that nobody on this campus ever, ever knew about, that people wanted to diminish it, wanted to under-fund it, wanted to move things to the University of Houston campus, and I fought that and sort of paid a few prices along the way, you know, as a result.

But in any event, so I worked as special assistant to the administrator of NASA, working on this policy document, and also wrote some history. I discovered the archives of the Johnson Space Center and wrote some memos about, you know, we ought to get these over at the university. I understand that's happened, so that's another—

Zophy: That's happened, in 2001 I believe.

Stauffer: —and found all kinds of stuff in the archives that were fascinating material, absolutely fascinating. But then I went to San Francisco, which is a city I always wanted to live in, and still live there today—I live in a nice Victorian home in the city—and I was president of a private university there called Golden Gate University for seven years.

Then I left there on an offer to be the chief executive officer of the Young Presidents Organization International. They're better known as YPO, which is an organization that when I was there, of 9,000 CEOs under the age of fifty, in seventy-five countries around the world, and its base was in Irving, Texas. So I actually moved back to Texas, albeit near that other city up north. But because it was international, I spent most of my time on the road, traveled about a million miles visiting eighty or ninety countries, and really became a world traveler in a major way.

Then the next step was I went back to San Francisco to take on a major consulting assignment which is ongoing to this day. I've always had a small management-consulting firm, and I work through that organization. Then went.... I developed some expertise, which actually started with my involvement with Ken Lay, my interest in it, in ethics—true story—and because of my international experience, combined interests with international-management ethics, and went to Thunderbird, the Garvin School of International Management in Glendale, Arizona, commuted back and forth every week to San Francisco. Phoenix is hot in the summertime, and you lose about fifty or sixty degrees going back to my home in San Francisco, so I commuted every week. Still do that, by the way.

And I'm going to be leaving, let's see, I'll be leaving in September 2005 to take on a new international assignment, which I can't talk about yet, but it's in the Middle East with some Asian things as well. I will have had a great deal of

experience, and I'm really looking forward to that. But it involves ethics and international management and some fairly high-level stuff, so I'm going to have fun with that.

Zophy: Well, you've had a wonderful career, and you've made some valuable contributions to this community, and I'd just like to thank you for taking some time for this interview.

Stauffer: Thanks for sticking in as the distinguished professor of history all these years.

Zophy: [Laughs] Undistinguished, but thank you very much.

Kelly: I have some questions. I just had a few quick things. Just for the record, my name is Shelly Kelly, and I'm the archivist here at UH-Clear Lake. Could you tell me the name of the bank?

Stauffer: It started out as, oh, my goodness, what was the name of that? There were four different names. The last name was Bridge Bank, and Bridge Bank in banking circles is not a good term. That means you were a bridge from becoming a private bank to being taken over by the government, and when it became a bridge bank they abandoned—it started out as the Bank of the Southwest, and there were two other names. I just don't remember what they were now. Then finally the fourth name was Bridge Bank, and at that time the board that I was sitting on was

disbanded, not because we did anything wrong, but again, the banking system in Texas was collapsing, literally, around everybody's ears.

Then I went over to be a member of Walter Hall's bank and Aaron Schein's bank—later Aaron Schein who was very prominent in the area; I think he's moved away now—called Bay Area Bank and Trust, and served on that bank board for a number of years. But anyway, so that answers your question.

I've got to say one quick thing. One accomplishment I think is really important for the long term is that—this is one thing I actually did start on my own, without any consultation with anybody, was the archives. We had a part-time archivist. The real motive was not only preserving—I thought this was a new university—and documenting a new university from its real inception. A lot of universities, you forget, or the records are lost. So I thought a brand-new university, literally out of the swamp, was a fairly rare occurrence in American higher education, and I thought it should be documented.

The other motive was that I knew the archives was sitting over there at the Space Center, and that that was another way that UH-Clear Lake could get on the map, by being the home of the Space Archives. So there was method in the madness. So I'm pleased that you're the archivist, and I'm pleased that you do what you do.

Kelly: Thank you. Could you tell me some more about, earlier in the interview you said that because of the people you knew in Washington, you knew that you'd have angles that you could use to benefit UH-Clear Lake. Can you tell me some more about that?

Stauffer: Well, one of the things I learned in Washington working with the federal government, and I worked with the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the White House, the OMB, Congress, I was all over the place, that there was money for everything. Anything you wanted to do, if you couldn't find money in the federal government it's certainly because you didn't look hard enough and you weren't creative enough.

I knew the history of why the Johnson Space Center landed where it did, going back to the history of the Johnson administration, and the Kennedy and even Eisenhower administrations—there was a long history there—and felt that they were probably isolated, which it turns out I think they were, from things going on in Washington, in spite of the fame of the Moon landings and everything, and thought that there probably were some opportunities for the university in joining the Space Center.

When I came here I discovered that literally no one had gone across the fence line to say hello, and in the first couple of weeks I was here I went over and shook the hand of the director, and he told me that that had never happened, literally that I

was the first president, or chancellor at that time, ever to come say hello. That led to just a long series of things, one of which, by the way, was getting quite a bit of acreage of land that used to be Johnson Space Center land that was cut off by one of the roads. I asked him at the very first meeting, “Could we have the land?” It turned out it was a habitat for some endangered species of some turtle or newt or something, I forget what it was, and it turned out to be a long, involved thing, involving the Environmental Protection Agency and stuff you wouldn’t—I mean, reams of paper. But we finally got the land, which I think is the only addition to the university land since its inception.

Kelly: Very early on you said there was a story about University Park Campus, how it came to be called University Park.

Stauffer: Yes. There was a discussion in the—and this had to do with, frankly, my efforts to defend this campus against some attempted inroads from folks up the freeway. The question came about, how do we differentiate between campuses of the university? I thought that you couldn’t have a university where you had the University of Houston and then three other universities that were University of Houston-hyphen-something else. I had a big fight about the hyphen, by the way. That almost cost me my job at one point, whether it was going to be a hyphen or a comma, believe it or not. True story.

But in any event, I thought that the University of Houston, the large campus—I always used to call it the campus with the basketball team; that did not endear me to the folks up the highway—that they should have a name, just like Clear Lake had a name, and Downtown had a name, and so on. So I was on a flight one time from Austin, and I was thinking about this, and it came into my head that we ought to call it University Park. I got back and I thought, that’s the best idea I’ve ever heard. So I’ve had lots of bad ideas, but I thought that was a good one.

So I went back and wrote a memo to send to the chancellor. He liked the idea. He presented it to the Board, and it became the University of Houston-University Park, which the University of Houston hated, and I think later abandoned, if I’m not mistaken. But I had great fun watching them twist slowly in the wind as they argued about this name, but that’s absolutely how it—I don’t think anybody else knows that story, where the idea came from. I even remember what seat I was sitting in. I was sitting in the exit row, by the window.

Kelly: Which airline?

Stauffer: Southwest. But that actually happened. So I got my jollies in strange ways, but that was one of them.

Kelly: Tell some more about the comma versus the dash.

Stauffer: Well, first of all, when I came here it was called The University of Houston at Clear Lake City, which is more words than I could remember, and I figured nobody else could remember it either. And right early on, I mean the first couple of weeks I was here I said, “You know, we’ve got to change the name of this place,” and proposed the University of Houston-hyphen-Clear Lake. There was all kinds of grumbling about that, mostly from the faculty. The charter faculty didn’t like it. They sent me some notes and things, and probably discussed my longevity in the presidency, I would imagine.

But I just thought this was one of the things that needed to happen, so we got rid of the The and the City and the at. We got rid of three words out of the title, and there was a supercilious person, who should go unnamed, on the staff of—who’s probably still there—on the staff of the System, who said it ought to be a comma. So I tried to give them some grammar lessons about what it should be, but she went over and lobbied with the Board of Regents, and so it got to the Board level, and we had this big discussion in the Board. They finally relented, but I was told, “You gave up some of your political capital in this one.” Whether that was important or not I don’t know.

I mean, the University of California, Berkeley, is University of California, comma, Berkeley. My daughter graduated from Berkeley, and I remember I told her the story about the hyphen, but somehow it was cleaner to me to have a

hyphen. So anyway that was one—so I changed the name and invented this new name, which hopefully will stick for a long time.

Kelly: Do you recall, was that before or after the City of Houston annexed Clear Lake City?

Stauffer: It was after. When I came here the university, I mean, Clear Lake City had already been annexed by the city, yes.

Kelly: Forgive me for not remembering the date, but were you here, were you part of when Pasadena wanted it to be named University of Houston-Clear Lake at Pasadena?

Stauffer: I fought that one as well. I fought that one as well. There was a senator as I remember, I can't remember his name, in Pasadena that I tried to befriend. Part of my outreach, I went around and talked to political people, and talked to all the community college presidents. I was also the first guy ever to go and say hello to the community—they said, "You're the first president ever who came to visit us," in Alvin and Galveston and San Jacinto and so on.

So I got friendly with this senator from Pasadena, and he told me one time that he had decided since we were—part of the campus, at least technically, was in

Pasadena, that we ought to be known as UH-Pasadena. And I said, “Not as long as I’m alive.” So we got into it.

Seriously, it got political with the Board, and again I was told, “Well, you chalk off, you have to give up some of your political capital.” By the time I left here, I had little political capital left. People were happy to see me go. I was happy to go. But you had to expend some of those things to prevent damage in other ways.

Kelly: Tell me about your role and involvement with the Challenger Center [for Space Science Education].

Stauffer: I knew all but one of the crew on the *Challenger*, and June Scobie, who was the wife of the commander of the *Challenger*, within a couple of days after the disaster called me and asked whether—she was on the faculty here as well, in the education department, and I had high regard for her, still do. She asked me whether I would meet with the widows of the other family members, and we met in—that’s a whole story; I could almost write a book on this.

We met on the floor, I remember it was a shag-carpet floor in her living room. This was just a few days after the accident, and tears were flowing all over the place. I was wondering what I was doing there. The whole topic was on what we should do to memorialize the *Challenger* crew. It’s a very long story. The university was involved. I gave offices, just freely I gave some offices to the

Challenger families, and we gradually evolved the plan, which is now called The Challenger Center for Space Science Education, based in Alexandria, Virginia, and for a time I was chairman of the national board of that.

But I remember on the front of the university right out here we had a memorial service where I was the emcee in 1986, a couple of weeks—it was sort of a major community event. There was a big thing at the Space Center, where Ronald Reagan, President Reagan came down. But the local story was, I mean the astronauts were local people. We knew them, and we had this memorial service, and it was one of the—talk about a touching episode. I mean, I'll never forget that as long as I live. Then I served on that board for sixteen years, stepped down just a few years ago, because I over-went my ten-year limit.

Kelly: Have you been in touch very much with Dr. Staples since you left?

Stauffer: Not that much, no. We've exchanged a few e-mails, but again it was always my theory that old presidents ought to get the heck out of the way. I understand he's done a fine job, but the truth is I've had very little contact with him.

Kelly: He was a faculty member, and I think a dean also.

Stauffer: He was dean of business. When I left here, he was the dean of the business school.

Kelly: Do you have any particular recollections about him that you're willing to share?

Stauffer: Well, the major thing we did was get AACSB accreditation, which lots of people said that couldn't be done. I said, "We're going to do it," and he said that he was going to make it happen. A lot of the faculty were against it, because they thought it would make some requirements that were too difficult. So he and I kind of worked together, and I made some promises that I probably shouldn't have, to add some money to the business school, took it away from some other things at the university, and we got accreditation not only in business but also in accounting, which was a very rare occurrence. Nationally it was a rare occurrence. So that was probably the—but he was just sort of a steady force, and I tried to stay out of his way.

Kelly: I think we're about to wrap it up, and I'm trying to remember now if I have anything else that I just couldn't live without asking you.

Stauffer: I've got one just for the record. Two things. As far as this outreach, I was chair of the Clear Lake Economic Development Foundation for a while. I was very active in that. But I also was chair, or president I guess was the title, of the board of St. John Hospital, which served the Space Center, and used that also to bring—that was very helpful to me to see how healthcare was managed in the area.

But it was helpful with this kind of outreach to the community, and there were lots of good things that came from that, the bank board involvement and the other things I've talked about. But I still think it's really important for the university to get out, to face outward, not inward, because it's a world-famous community, and it's important to relate to all parts of it, whether it's technical or health or education or whatever the case may be.

Kelly: In going through a lot of your papers, the archives now has quite a bit of files from—

Stauffer: I wrote too much. I apologize.

Kelly: You saved everything in triplicate.

Stauffer: That was right before the Internet.

Kelly: How much time did you spend in a regular week, would you say, in your office here?

Stauffer: Seventy or eighty hours. I mean, no lie, I really did, and probably my kids show the scars of that. But I worked pretty hard when I was here.

Kelly: You seem to be involved in just about anything and everything that was in this area at the time.

Stauffer: Probably I was, yes. Whether that was smart I don't know, but I mean, historically that was accurate.

Kelly: You started some awards here on campus. Can you tell me something about those?

Stauffer: Oh, the distinguished teaching, and service, and research award? Yes, we started that. Is that still going, I hope?

Kelly: Yes.

Stauffer: Good. Good.

Kelly: Any particular motivation that brought those about?

Stauffer: Yea, I had high regard for the faculty, I really did. Whatever they may have thought about me, I thought well of them, I really did, and thought that they deserved recognition, so that was one of the ways. Again, this was going through budget cuts, and their salaries weren't going up really very rapidly at the time.

Hopefully it's improved since then. But I thought the university had to step up and show them respect. I really thought that was important.

Kelly: What was your initial reaction when you learned that the Faculty Senate had voted you a vote of no confidence?

Stauffer: I was disappointed. I wasn't all that unhappy, because again, I had already planned to leave, and there was a lot that the faculty didn't know. For example, the lawyers in the Systems told me what I could and could not talk about. I guess I'm still enjoined to this day. There were a lot of things that I simply couldn't, in a sense couldn't defend myself. I was confident that I did the right thing, and I am to this day. If I had to do it again, I would do it exactly as I did it at that time. Even knowing what I later learned, I would do it exactly the same.

But, you know, at the time it was one of those bumps on the road that you had to kind of suck up and do, and I knew the university had advanced while I was here, and I was ready to leave, so I was not unhappy in the bigger sense.

Kelly: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us, or shall we let you go to walk the campus?

Stauffer: Yes, I want to walk around and see what has changed. I suspect there are many other stories that I could tell, but I think the future of this university is very bright.

I'm proud of what happened when I was here, and it wasn't just me, it was many other people were involved. But I think the future of this place is bright, and if sort of the higher academic values of service and academic strength and quality, if everybody sticks to those kinds of fundamental strengths and doesn't deviate from them, why, this not only will be one of the very important universities in this state, but I think nationally. So I was pleased to be associated during my watch.

Kelly: Well, it appears that you did quite a bit to advance us in those ten years that you were here.

Stauffer: Hopefully. Let archivists and distinguished professors of history be the judge.

Zophy: Thank you, Dr. Stauffer.

Kelly: Thank you very much.

Stauffer: Indeed. Thanks for the interview.

[End of interview]

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