

Interview with Wheeler Parrott, 1 November 1985

Allen: Now Wheeler you've been for a long time with Bridgeport Engineering Institute.

Parrott: Oh yes.

Allen: How many years?

Parrott: 20

Allen: 20 years and you were also at the university for a while

Parrott: 2 years

Allen: What did you do when you were here at the University?

Parrott: Well, when I was here, I was Director of Industrial Relations.

Allen: What did you do then?

Parrott: I took off for BEI.

Allen: No, I mean as Director of Industrial Relations, what did you do?

Parrott: My work at that time was mostly, Industrial companies were my business, and I'd been in industry for 30 years then and so the idea was to visit with various industries in the area which UB located. That meant Fairfield County. So I spent my two years visiting many companies. I worked mostly with Jim Halsey and there were one or two places that Jim seemed to have a little trouble going with, Getting them interested in UB so I worked with him and shall we say, we sprung them out.

Allen: Good, now when was this?

Parrott: That was '64-'65, those two years.

Allen: And then at BEI, what had you done?

Parrott: Well at BEI, I started there as Asst. to the President. I might say that starting at BEI was the reason for my leaving UB, I hate to say that because I enjoyed UB but I was leaving to be with a very fine gentlemen whom I always admired and always liked, Arthur Keating. And I'd known Arthur from the time I was a very young boy and I remembered his distinctly going off to MIT, leaving Bridgeport, and so that made quite an impression on me and then he was travelling a good deal during his, shall we

say work in industry. He would take a company that very often that was having a difficult time in making headway and put it on its feet. He did that with a number of different companies and all at the same time when, shall we say the first world war was over, and we got our boys coming back home with some money for their education. And at time we were sorely lacking in Bridgeport and the area any facilities for, and that also for all over New England, any facility for further education for these returns, or returnees. All right, so what do they do? Boston YMCA had a good many, the other YMCA'S in all of New England were under , you might say, the Boston leadership. So any of the YMCAS in Bridgeport, being one in New Haven and the larger cities all had YMCAS adequate for holding classes. So, Northeastern University, which is very closely allied to the YMCA was called into service and they organized and got a college going so to speak. It was a daily affair of course, for people that had some money to do it, to get some further education and so they started one in Bridgeport, and Arthur Keating was one of the instructors. There were quite a good many more but in the year 1924 the, shall we say, the returnees had pretty well been all cared for and given as much education as they could get, so they were giving up, not one of them had given up or has to this day, given up as a center for higher education. They all turned into various names. And BEI is one for Bridgeport that was born by the old YMCA on Main Street, and that was where that started and so Arthur Keating, when it came the fall of '24, and during the summer he'd been told there would be no further education under the wing of Northeastern, they'd have to be on their own if they were going to do anything, and so Arthur organized with \$1,000 borrowed from his father, the new BEI which is still doing very well, which is still going very well sixty-two years later and it has close to 1,000 students today.

Allen: Now as an institute, was it a private corporation, did it have any charter?

Parrott: Oh yes.

Allen: A private corporation.

Parrott: Private, that`s it, non profit.

Allen: Did it have a charter from the state?

Parrott: I believe so, I`m sure.

Allen: And it had the right to give diplomas, not degrees that will come later.

Parrott: Oh, yes.

Allen: That was preceding by a few years the development of

the Jr. College of Conn.

Parrott: Keating and Everett Cortright were very close friends.

Allen: Now I've run across a number of times where there seem to have been some abortive attempts to cooperate. They worked together in varying degrees, do you know much about that?

Parrott: Let me say this. The summers, I believe, now let me make sure I'm right, it seems that BEI, I'm not sure where their quarters were.

Allen: I'm not either.

Parrott: But it seems, as I recall, the thing that confuses me is this, we had summer classes, I believe. We ran three semesters from the very start and we had, now whether we, probably at the time or how that was taken care of, I don't know, we helped them out, that is UB, out, with I'm not sure whether rooms or classes or what, but I think it was rooms

Allen: One summer, BEI, held it's classes at the Jr. College.

Parrott: That was it. That answers that.

Allen: And I've run across, and I don't have it in front of me, several areas where there were further attempts at cooperation.

Parrott: Well there were but I'm not sure or clear as to what they were.

Allen: Then in the Spring of '48, this is after we had become a university, there were other discussions about cooperation, for example, the Chamber of Commerce Education Survey Committee was looking towards a development of a university of Southwestern Conn. and there were conversations in the Spring of '48 with Keating, who then presented a plan of coordination. Which was talked about. Studied by both boards and at that time we were also embarking upon a fund raising process and according to the records, Keating pledged \$10,000 in equipment, mainly.

Parrott: That's right.

Allen: And then in the fall, things seemed to come to a little loggerhead because, evidently things weren't moving fast enough for Keating and the record that I have said, he took the position that the plan was already adopted and both boards were committed to the plan. Whereas UB said "no, it needs more study." At which time, Keating called off the discussion and withdrew his offer of \$10,000 in equipment.

Paarrott: That's right.

Allen: Do you remember anything about that period?

Parrott: Well, not really, except what you've already mentioned because Arthur told me about that, and, but what he did say was, that UB was getting too timid, or whatever. It looked almost like he would lose his identity.

Allen: I see, o.k.

Parrott: And he was then becoming too deeply involved in this and he had not meant that the \$10,000 in equipment and so forth was going to be rolled over into UB, so to speak. You understand what -

Allen: I understand. We have a similar situation developing later with the Univ. of New Haven. Very, very similar. Another problem which seems to have surfaced during that time was the fact that BEI was accredited only as a technical institute.

Parrott: Well, now just a minute. Arthur Keating applied for a, shall we say toward being a college, so to speak, and then he discovered that he was going to be accredited as a technical institute, he said, "good bye boys, not for me, I'm not accepting that, I'll go my own way with my charter and what I have now, because that is a step backwards and not forwards" and so it was in June of '81, it finally became a college with Bachelor degrees.

Allen: I have letters from that were forwarded by the State Dept. of Education which say that according to their records the courses at BEI were "not of college level" and that if there was to be an accreditation, it would have to undergo further accreditation and inspection. So either UB or BEI would jeopardize their accrediting standards at that time if we went ahead with the coordination. Now you would only know second hand from what Keating told you about this period, do you have anything further to add on that.?

Parrott: I don't think so. I don't think I would have.

Allen: O.k.

Parrott: I know it was a, well at least it was, shall I say, I believe when, 1970 was when Arthur Keating passed on in the Spring, and we I believe, didn't feel that we could probably ever be a Bachelor College, he wasn't interested in it. And by that time, by '70, we had acquired, shall we say, the operation of a bona fide bachelor college. I mean we'd gotten to the point where our subjects, material covered, and so forth. was an accredited amount of material, which would give a college level education, especially through the boards (?) so actually we did go out and work on it and of course ended up as a bachelor's

institution. But Arthur wasn't interested in it. I don't know why he wasn't, that was one thing, he liked his five year operation and his five year operation was, actually met all the requirements of an associate degree. He didn't like that. He was different and that was it.

Allen: In all fairness, I think I should say the State Dept. of Education said that the work of BEI was not substandard but it is not a college of engineering, and this is one of the problems which plagues education both in this country and abroad, the difference between a college and a university and a technical institute. But there is still a big, big bone of contention. People living in the developing world.

Parrott: Well, that's true. You take for instance now, back in '44 or '45 somewhere along there, I was making making up my mind where I was going to go. Arthur was suggesting (?) so I?) Well my ancestors came from Europe and my father, from the time I was a little tiny youngster, travelling me to baseball games, football games and different things at Yale and so I had Yale background, and when I went to the factory, it didn't take me long to decide I'd go to Yale and so that was that. Because I wasn't steeped in the factory, I was in the edge I would say of design and operating and developing something new, something different, something out of a structure, and I'd always been interested in something like that, but the factory work wasn't so much for me so I went to Yale.

Allen: Now I know when we were planning the new campus at, down here at Marina, Seaside Park, Board of Trustee members said, "aren't we giving up a valuable education property, maybe BEI would like to buy it." I don't know whether there are any negotiations on that or not. However, eventually, there was a statement that Keating did say that he didn't think he could go it alone with that big a building. So that fell through. Now since that time, I've heard rumors, as we developed an engineering school, and as BEI began to have some problems with location, about further cooperation, in some instances even a merger. Now these are rumors between BEI and UB. Do you know anything about those?

Keating: Well, I think it was a friendly relationship. Dick Strand, I think and others, I knew very well and it's one of those things that whether we'd ever be interested in such a move, I don't know. You're talking about some sort of action in joining up. Ours is, of course a

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as students, most of them or many of them are people that come to us as a secondary or third element of their existence, so to speak, their life. First, they are raising a family, then comes

their job, whatever it may be and then comes further education as can be presumed, and we recognize that, so we have students anywhere from 72 down to 17.

Allen: That's not too far different from us, it happens to us.

Parrott: Well I mean it is one of those things and so some of them may take five, ten, fifteen, twenty years and so forth. I know most of the normal higher education seats you're supposed to come, spend your four years, do your undergraduate work, spent whatever time you want on your graduate work, and you're on your way. And some places it's so tough that they will not recognize your, shall be say your credits.

Allen: After seven years.

Parrott: After seven years. Now I personally feel and it may be just my own feeling, but my feeling is we are operating purely for the student, that's the only reason we're in business. I know basically but you got of faculty, you've got a lot of involvement so you're going to have to operate on some kind of a standard that is going to give you maybe a little more preference than we as a group. We as a group, yes if John Jones want's to come and take one course a year and he has no more time, he's got to get his family growing, has got to keep his business going, he's got to keep other things going first, we say all right. We recognize him, we give him credit and so on and so on. Now that may be a little out of the ordinary.

Allen: We do much the same thing.

Parrott: You do.

Allen: Oh yes, we've had some people that take nine or ten years to get their degree in the evening and an awful lot of students are part time students and this is true in Engineering as well.

Parrott: Well it has to be in Engineering because these Engineers, of course there are not a lot anyway, you know that, they are a group that very often are introverts and so it's been a very, I think, my twenty years at BEI has been very interesting, a most interesting time.

Allen: But you are not aware of any other attempts at cooperation between the two.

Parrott: No, I can't say so. As you say, it's been in the wind, rumors, there's always rumors but a bona fide, as far as Arthur Keating was concerned, the attempt at that time when he gave them the \$10,000 in equipment, that was the most realistic of any of the you might say possibilities. I'd say say the nearest fruition of anything that I know of that's in aware of in relations

to the two schools.

Allen: This has been very helpful because you have verified some information that I do have.

Parrott: I know that you spent some time with Bill Owens three weeks ago.

Allen: something like that and we had a little chat with him and as I say it all came up because one, I've heard the rumors over the years because I've been around here a few years too, and then it came up and my normal curiosity led me to contact Bill and you, to see what else we could find on that. If at any other time you have any recollection of any attempts to get together either by merger, by absorption or cooperation, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know.

Parrott: Well I know one involvement, this isn't with BEI I'm talking about this is, put this on tape, you'd better shut the tape. (tape is shut off)

Allen: Your wife Lillian

Parrott: My wife Lillian pretty much engineered the, I was going to say amalgamation but I don't think that's too good because the Weylister School of the Jr. College was a miniature compared to the great Univ. of Bridgeport, but Weylister felt they could give something to UB, it would be an addition to what UB had at the time, even though it might be small but Lillian was very much involved in the movement, I think it was with Jim probably at the time

Allen: Henry

Parrott: Henry probably but Jim was of course was involved too. And so Weylister came to the campus and it really had shall we say outgrown its usefulness as far as Milford was concerned.

Allen: Plus the fact that Milford had taken their land by eminent domain to build a high school.

Parrott: They were building a high school on it and I mean it was a terrible state and something had to be done.

Allen: And also Mrs. Beach was getting old.

Parrott: That's true, Mrs. Beach was, so it was a good move and Weylister became part of UB.

Allen: And we've kept the records of all the former students

Parrott: Lillian is still on the records you know. She receives all the material and when she was younger, she and I, well both of us are on the Board of Associates and we used to come to a great many things. But she has been doing other things of late and we haven't, shall I say taken the time or the effort to come down to these things. We probably should more.

Allen: Well we all get to the point where we cut down on our activities. Do you have any other recollection of relationships with UB?

Parrott: I have a very pleasant time with UB and I enjoyed working with Henry and Jim. I certainly enjoyed, shall we say coming down here from BEI as a BEI person, in the engineering part of it and coming to some of the things you people had here. I think the relationship has been very pleasant. I, whether the future could involve us both in more, shall we say somewhat of a unified plane, I say unified plane because we're both in the higher education field here and, well I guess we're both striving for the same thing as far as that's concerned, putting people with more knowledge, that are, well the people we have, the ones we have I'm sure are the ones that are thirsting for knowledge and their not with us just for the idea of getting some kind of a pasteboard, their looking for what they can build on. I don't know, when I think of the state of the present public education in Bridgeport, I'm surprised that anybody ever comes out of that institution that could even hope to get anywhere in UB or BEI.

Allen: It's just not Bridgeport but other schools. I haven't taught now for 12 years but even then I was finding the students were poorer and poorer, poorly prepared. That presents another long story.

Parrott: It's a shame in my mind. I don't know what has happened to things in this area.

End of tape.