

Talking History of Abilene Series
Interview of Dr. Don H. Morris, President of Abilene Christian College
Interviewed by Mrs. G. D. (Monty McGinty) Foster
Date: 5/17/1966
Length of tape: 30 minutes

Mrs. Foster: Today is Tuesday, May 17, 1966. Your interviewer is Mrs. G. D. Foster, Colorado City, Texas. Dr. Don H. Morris, President of Abilene Christian College, is to be interviewed as a part of a project currently being sponsored by the Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association. It might be significant and of interest to some that Mr. Morris is not a stranger to the interviewer. Mrs. Foster was for ten years a member of the faculty at Abilene Christian College concluding her tenure of service last spring when she resigned her position as a teacher of speech, soon thereafter changing her name from McGinty to Foster. Mr. Foster, a businessman in Colorado City, is a member of the Board of Advisors of Abilene Christian College. Many people in the Big Country, as well as other parts in the state and the nation, are familiar with the name Don H. Morris. Dr. Morris, will you tell us what your middle name is?

Dr. Morris: Well, my middle name is Heath, H-E-A-T-H. I was named for one of my great-grandfathers, Christopher Heath, who moved to the southern part of Dallas County, Texas, from the state of Iowa in 1849. Christopher Heath was a farmer-preacher. He preached for little groups, who met in homes at first, and helped to establish the DeSoto congregation of the Church of Christ.

Mrs. Foster: We're very glad to have this information, Dr. Morris. Since each of us is closely bound in with his forbearers and particularly with his parents, will you tell us who your parents were or are?

Dr. Morris: My father was B. P. Morris, who grew up in this same community in the southern part of Dallas County where the town of Desoto now is. My mother's name was Annie Laura Nance. She was born near Bonham, Texas, but moved to the DeSoto community with her parents, to Desoto, when she was a small child. My mother is still living. She lives with me and my wife. She is now 89 years old.

Mrs. Foster: Can you tell us about other members of your father's family?

Dr. Morris: Well, uh, my father's father was Thomas Asbury Morris, who lived also after he was married, he was married to Amanda Heath, the daughter of Christopher Heath and they lived practically all of their lives, after they were married, in the DeSoto community and in two adjoining communities, Lancaster and Cedar Hill. This interesting thing about my grandfather, when he was 16 years old, he lived with his family, his parents, about 15 or 20 miles north of the town of Weatherford, Texas in the community then called Veals Station. When he was 16 years old, he was asked by members of the community to take the tax money for that year for the

community to Austin, Texas. He rode alone horseback from Veals Station to Austin and carried along with him the money to pay the taxes for the people who lived in the community.

Mrs. Foster: Very interesting. Very unusual. Do you have brothers and sisters?

Dr. Morris: Well, I had two brothers. One brother died in infancy and my other brother, Jack Morris, died in 1956.

Mrs. Foster: Where did you attend school as a child?

Dr. Morris: Well, I attended school in the DeSoto Public School. We had about six or seven teachers, I believe, in the DeSoto Public Schools that includes elementary school and the high school. I was graduated from high school in DeSoto, Texas, in 1918.

Mrs. Foster: And what educational level had you achieved before you became first to Abilene?

Dr. Morris: Well, after I was graduated from high school, I attended a junior college that is not now in operation, Thorpes Springs Christian College, which was located at Thorpes Springs near Granbury, Texas. I was graduated from this junior college in 1920 and then I taught in the Red Oak High School, which is about nine miles, which was about nine miles from my home, the Red Oak High for two years from 1920 to 1922.

Mrs. Foster: And you came first to Abilene Christian College in 1922, I believe.

Dr. Morris: I came in the fall of 1922 and entered Abilene Christian College as a junior student in September 1922.

Mrs. Foster: And you were graduated in from Abilene Christian College in...?

Dr. Morris: 1924.

Mrs. Foster: And what was your first employment after graduation from college?

Dr. Morris: Well, my first employment for the summer of 1924, I was a book salesman. I had, in Lamar County, Texas, with Paris as my headquarters. But, my first real job, then you might say, was as a teacher in the Abilene High School beginning September, 1924.

Mrs. Foster: And I believe your marriage came about soon after you began teaching in Abilene High School.

Dr. Morris: That's right. I met my wife, whose name was Alberta Allen, in a Spanish class at Abilene Christian College in the fall of 1922. We were married in November the 1st, 1924.

Mrs. Foster: And I'm sure that you'd like to tell us about your children and grandchildren.

Dr. Morris: My wife and I have three children, Jackie is Mrs. Shorty Lawson. They live here in Abilene. Shorty is the Director of Health and Physical Education for the Abilene Public School system. Jackie and Shorty have three sons: Jimmy, who is now a freshman in Abilene Christian College; Don is a student in the Lincoln Junior High School, and Bobby, who is a student in the Taylor school. Patsy, our second daughter, or Patricia, her name is now Mrs. Fred Snyder, They live in Garden Grove, California, where Fred is a real estate man for the Humble Oil Company. Patsy and Fred have three children: Cara and Mark and Kristen. Then our son Tommy, he and his wife, Martha, and their children live in Abilene. Tommy is in the life insurance business. Their three children, I started to say, but I'll put it four because they have a new son now less than a week old. Their four children are Marta and Melinda and Patty and the new son, Don Thomas.

Mrs. Foster: Dr. Morris, this is off-the-cuff, and not planned at all, but I believe Jimmy has achieved something unusual in Abilene Christian College. Is it not true that he was president or is president of the freshman class at this time?

Dr. Morris: Yes, he is.

Mrs. Foster: And is he also president-elect of the sophomore class ...

Dr. Morris: I believe that's right.

Mrs. Foster: .. at Abilene Christian College? I think I read that in the newspaper and I do think that's something worthy of mention.

Dr. Morris: We are very proud of Jimmy.

Mrs. Foster: I understand that there was something of a sensation too on the campus of Abilene Christian College when less than a week ago this grandson was born. Is that not right?

Dr. Morris: Oh yes, we, uh, this is the first boy in our family. Now we have five grandsons, six now, (laughs) and four granddaughters, but this is the first grandson to wear the Morris name. For that reason, we think he is a little special.

Mrs. Foster: Well, I think we all agree that that is true. President Morris, in what year did you assume the presidency of Abilene Christian College?

Dr. Morris: It was in June, 1940.

Mrs. Foster: I think there was some distinction also in connection with your age as you became president of our school. Would you like to say something about that?

Dr. Morris: Well, I was, uh, 37 years old, I believe, when I became president of the college. There were some reports, uh, that, um, I was the youngest college president in the United States, but I don't think, I don't think those reports are correct.

Mrs. Foster: Well, your modesty is understandable. Will you give us something of the historical background of Abilene Christian College, which you had been chosen at that time to head?

Dr. Morris: Well, the history of Abilene Christian College is, like the history of many institutions of higher learning, is very interesting, especially to the friends of the college and those who are connected with the college in different ways. Abilene Christian College was founded in 1906. It had an unusual name. The name was Childers Classical Institute. The first president was a man named A. B. Barrett, who was a minister and a man that was especially interested in education. He had been connected with a little Christian school in Denton, Texas, and came out to West Texas to find a place for a new Christian school and he and a group of businessmen in Abilene started the school in 1906. Along about 1911, they began to call the school the Christian College. And then I believe about 1912, they began to call it Abilene Christian College. The name was formally changed in the early twenties from Childers Classical Institute to Abilene Christian College. I'd like to mention some of the men, of course, they are many, many men and women, who have had a great part in the building of Abilene Christian College, but I might mention just a very few. In 1912, J. P. Sewell (Jesse P. Sewell), who at that time lived at San Angelo, Texas; he was a businessman and a preacher in San Angelo and became the president of Abilene Christian College and did a great deal, more probably than any person at that time thought anyone could do, toward the building up of the school. Now the college became an accredited junior college in 1915 and became a senior college in the fall of 1919. J. P. Sewell had associated with him in his work at Abilene Christian College, Dean H. E. Speck and assembled a fine family. I think I should mention that his wife, Daisy McQuade Sewell, had a great part in the building of the college. President Sewell was succeeded in 1924 by Batsell Baxter, who was a member of the faculty. Batsell Baxter served the college as its president until 1932. It was during this time that one of the most significant events in the history of the college took place. The college was moved from its old campus on North First Street to its present campus, northeast Abilene, in 1929. This was a very, very unusual move and has had a great deal to do with the history of the college since that time. Batsell Baxter resigned as president in 1932 and the man who was the dean during his presidency, James F. Cox,¹ whom I often refer to as the "grand old man" of Abilene Christian College, became president and served from 1932 until 1940. I think an interesting thing right here is too that there are two living presidents, ex-presidents of Abilene Christian College; two presidents, men, who have been named President Emeritus. These are J. P. Sewell and James. F. Cox and each of them live within half a block of the present Abilene Christian College campus.

Mrs. Foster: That is very unusual. Mr. Morris, how many students were there in Abilene Christian College when you became president of the college?

Dr. Morris: Oh in 1939, the year before I became president, I think the enrollment was about 675 or, um, 700, about 675 to 700 students.

Mrs. Foster: And how many teachers were on the faculty at that time?

Dr. Morris: The catalogue for that year shows that there were 39 members of the faculty.

Mrs. Foster: And can you give us parallel figures for this school term, the 1965-66 term?

Dr. Morris: Our total enrollment, our head count in September 1965, was 3058 students and we had at that time approximately 165 members of the faculty.

Mrs. Foster: Well, I'm sure that you don't take very much personal credit for this, but these figures must be tremendously satisfying to you, at any rate. Would you like to mention a few milestones of achievement along the road since you first became president of this college?

Dr. Morris: Well, I must say that, um, as you indicated, many, many people have had an important part in the history in the building of Abilene Christian College. And I wish I could name hundreds who have had an important part. But during this, this period of twenty-five or twenty-six years that you've spoken about, I must name at least three other persons. One is B. Sheridan of Lubbock, Texas, who is the chairman of the board of Abilene Christian College and who has served as its, as the chairman of the board for some 17 or 18 years. Mr. Sheridan has given months and months of time to the building of the college, all without any financial remuneration, and has traveled hundreds of thousands of miles for the college, a good part of the time at his own expense. And then there are two members of Abilene Christian College staff, I wish I could mention all 165 of the members of the faculty, but I think especially of Dean Walter H. Adams, who has been the dean of Abilene Christian College since 1932 and who is recognized as one of the great college deans of the Southwest. And Lawrence L. Smith, who has been the business manager of the college since about 1927; these two men have had, well, they have had a tremendous effect upon the history of the college. Now you see, see this, one is, of course, on the business side, and the other on the academic and these are the two great areas now that a college has to deal with. Strong, able, dedicated men, like Walter Adams and Lawrence Smith, have made the college possible.

Mrs. Foster: Dr. Morris, what is the most satisfying phase of your work as the president of Abilene Christian College?

Dr. Morris: Well, I think that I would say immediately that association with the people, members of the faculty, the other officials of the college, and members of the student body. It's a very gratifying thing to know, to be associated with hundreds of young men and women of college age. And then, of course, there are those great strong men, who are members of the Board of Trustees and the advisory board of the college and men, who have worked with the college in its design for development and then there are the alumni, who live all over the world. One of greatest pleasures that my wife and I have is that wherever we go we meet and see alumni of the college.

Mrs. Foster: I can hardly resist the temptation, as one associated with Dr. Morris during the past ten years, of mentioning what I have found to be the attitude of the students towards this man.

Any numbers of times during these years, I have seen him in meeting the boys at the college on the campus, put an arm on their shoulder, shake hands with them, and inquire about their welfare. And, I have seen him open doors for girls, who were passing along about the time he was. And I happen to know as a member of the staff that students felt that they were welcome to step into his office at any time they desired. The door was always open to them. President Morris, I'm sure you have dreams of the future for Abilene Christian College. Would you care to mention some of them?

Dr. Morris: Well, there are many dreams. In 1965, the Board of Trustees of the college announced the design for development, which is a development program which at that time it was estimated would take about ten years to complete and which it was estimated at that time would cost about twenty-five million dollars. Now, one of the dreams is to be successful in this design for development because it will stabilize the college financially. It will give it an excellent endowment. It will make better salaries for the members of the faculty. It will provide equipment and buildings, facilities so that the college can better serve its students. That's one dream. Very often people ask me about what will the enrollment of Abilene Christian College be or what should it be. Well, the thing that I am interested in most is that the equipment, the facilities, and the faculty and the enrollment of the college, all be planned in such a way so that the college can serve its students adequately.

The great dream, of course, the one big dream, which thousands have for Abilene Christian College, is that it always be a Christian college, one that emphasizes the religion of Jesus Christ, whom we believe in as the begotten son of God, and we want the ideals on the campus to be in harmony with the ideals of Christ the Savior. And we want the teaching on the campus of Abilene Christian College to be of such a nature that it will cause more and more students to believe in those ideals.

Mrs. Foster: Dr. Morris, since you have lived in Abilene for a number of years, I am sure there are other ties besides these in connection with the college that hold you to the city of Abilene and its environs. I wonder if you would like to mention these other connections.

Dr. Morris: Oh yes. My wife and I moved to Abilene the day after we were married. And we have never lived anywhere else a day and we have never wanted to live in any other town. As I mentioned a while ago, at that time I was a teacher in Abilene High School. This gave me the opportunity to become acquainted with practically all of the families in Abilene at that time. I taught in Abilene from 1924 to 1928. So many of the leading citizens of the city now are men and women who were enrolled in the Abilene High School during that time. So this is one of the most satisfying things to get to know the people of this wonderfully fine West Texas city. I've said many times to the students at Abilene Christian College and I've said it away from here that I think Abilene is the best home possible for Abilene Christian College. I think it's that way because of the spirit of the people here and because of the character of the people. Hardin Simmons University and McMurry College have added much to the culture and to the

environment of Abilene. We at Abilene Christian College believe that this culture and environment is conducive toward the building of the finest kind of Abilene Christian College.

Mrs. Foster: Are there other connections in Abilene that you'd like to mention? Service clubs?

Dr. Morris: Well, the business and professional men of Abilene are many of them are my close friends. I know these men from business associations and also especially from membership in the Rotary Club of Abilene. I have been a member of the Rotary Club for some 35 years and, of course, I know these men very well. And I have been associated in programs and in other activities for the betterment of Abilene with men in many of the organizations: Lions Club, Kiwanis, Optimus, and other organizations in Abilene.

Mrs. Foster: Well, all of this became singularly apparent about a year ago when Don Morris Day was observed in Abilene and it would take another interview to tell about that, but we must conclude this one. And may I say, President Morris that we appreciate your giving the time from your schedule to make this tape recording and we hope that it will be of some service to someone in the years to come. And may we now express our appreciation to the Taylor County Legal Secretaries Association for having made the move that made this possible.

Dr. Morris: Well, thank you very much. I am honored to be invited by you and this organization to participate in this interview.

¹ James O. Cox, not James F. Cox