

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Virginia Hamilton Vercher

COLLECTION: 4700.0182

IDENTIFICATION: Founding employee and Associate Director of the LSU Personnel Services office.

INTERVIEWER: Everett Besch

SERIES: University History – Distinguished Faculty & Administrators

INTERVIEW DATES: October 8, 1992; February 24, 1993; March 11, 1993

FOCUS DATES: 1960s - 1980s

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 260, Side A

Vercher born in York County, South Carolina, near Fort Mill; birthday January 8, 1922; she graduated from high school and had two years of college, then worked for six years at Duke Power Company; she married, moved to Baton Rouge and took a job at the Louisiana State Department of Revenue; her husband was from Shreveport and worked for Ethyl Corporation in Baton Rouge; she got married in 1947; started at the department of revenue in 1948 and worked there for four years until she got pregnant; stayed home for six years, then went to work with highway department; began working at LSU in 1962 as secretary to Dr. James Upp in the agricultural experiment station; Upp retired around 1964, Doyle Chambers came in and she worked with him until 1966, then became secretary to Chancellor Cecil Taylor; memories of Dr. Upp, offices and staff in Stubbs Hall; discussion of potential conflict between state university and land grant; recollections of agriculture experiment stations throughout the state; Dr. Upp was more passive, Chambers was younger and energetic; she asked to leave that office because she couldn't go any higher, wanted a challenge; other employees involved with ag experiment stations; Vercher invited by Dean of Academic Affairs Bernard Sliger to set up personnel office in David Boyd Hall; sequence of succession for associate and assistant deans; Polly Bondy Hernandez kept personnel records of all university employees; Dr. Sliger's executive secretary in academic affairs, Emily Hubbard; Hubbard's campaign against sexist lending practices at the campus credit union; personal recollections of Bernard Sliger, he was always advocating for the university, was on the board of directors of the Baton Rouge Bank; Sliger later became the first commissioner of administration, situation with him remaining tenured at the university while serving in that post; he left that position to become president of Florida State University; Vercher's office dealt with academic and unclassified personnel, she worked closely with academic affairs; no real system in place for checking, correcting, or filing personnel forms when

she started; rules and regulations for university staff were short and vague; she had to be familiar with what was allowable and what was not, e.g. length of sabbaticals; she and other secretaries started thinking they needed more guidelines to avoid confusion; difference in salary for Vercher and another secretary had to be justified; a former secretary to the chancellor who made some enemies and was moved to a part-time position; other secretaries, Jean Ford and Marion Comeaux; when the personnel office started, Vercher was the only employee; her first task involved copying info from a biographical card for every academic and unclassified employee so she would have records; Vercher's professional dealings with George Schwab were limited; early copy machines on campus; personnel records were kept in filing boxes with metal casings that locked; learning a hard lesson when a document that she had commented on went up the chain; personnel forms were constantly being changed, Vercher was always recommending changes to improve the forms; tenure was granted automatically after seven years of service, staff were often not even notified of their status change; forms had to be changed again when they got to affirmative action; a more rigorous hiring process in place now; she worked with Lynn Pesson to make changes to the forms that were then approved by the president's office;

Tape 260, Side B

Working with the president's office and meeting with other campuses about updating personnel forms; the president's office once had very much control over campus operation; James Wharton fought for more final approval by the chancellor's office so not everything had to go to the president; Nancy Brueck started as one of Vercher's clerks; Vercher was originally supposed to be in academic affairs, but she answered to the chancellor until 1974 and had her own budget; Mila Gernan was Vercher's first employee, there were nine employees when Vercher retired; personal memories of Chancellor Taylor, "The only reason he hasn't walked on water is because he has not tried"; Taylor's effort to meet the French-speaking parents of one of his student workers; Taylor wrote his own letters and wore seersucker suits; student protests in the chancellor's office and how she and her fellow employees secured the personnel records; Donald Tarver pacified these students and helped Vercher secure their boxes of forms; James Reddoch had a different approach with students; another protest where students filled Paul Murrill's office, Tarver pacified that group as well by inviting them to weekly meetings until no one was showed up anymore; Tarver was a big man with a sharp wit; revision of flag-lowering policy after Martin Luther King Jr. assassination; Murrill did the very first work on procedures for tenure, retention and promotion; sequence and importance of policy statements, chancellor's memoranda, and president's memoranda.; Murrill recognized the need for guidelines because things were done so loosely; Murrill's memo was the basis of policy statement PS-35, which has been revised countless times; Lynn Pesson was a federal and state employee which made it hard for him to assume the vice chancellorship, it had to do with his retirement funds; Pesson, Murrill and Wharton all had total recall; Pesson initiated policy statements, Tarver worked on format and details with Vercher; policy statements are now numerous, provided guidance they didn't have previously; Pesson was the first vice chancellor for administration, he was a quick study, very interested in future technologies, of Cajun heritage, later worked for the federal government; funding difficulties in the early 1970s led to proposal from J. Norman Efferson to change the university organizational structure; discussion between Efferson and Chancellor Taylor about a form that Vercher took part in; she had trouble with the record keeping in ag sciences because of funding that came from federal and state sources; eventual creation of "per forms" [personnel forms, numbered 1 through 3] also known as personnel action forms, explanation of use and

importance of forms; work-around for hiring people when funding was not certain; Vercher found Efferson to be cold but had little interaction with him, she worked more with Alvin Harper; Efferson and Besch were friendly, Besch shares his memories of Efferson; Vercher had a few run-ins with Harper about funding formulas for employees on nine-month appointments; Martin Woodin brought Harper over from LSU Alexandria; Besch's personal memories of Harper; Reddoch was team player; Vercher recalls how Reddoch doubted Randy Lopez's abilities because of his manner of dress and speech; recalls working with Lopez to correct letters for Reddoch multiple times and becoming frustrated; Reddoch responsible for improvements on campus such as electronic networking and parking; Vercher proved her competence to Reddoch over time; some departments had loose contracts when appointing staff; many questions about what documentation would hold up legally if tested; employment contracts initiated by Wharton; one man refused to sign a loyalty oath; they no longer asked for photos from applicants; end of interview session.

Session II

Tape 352, Side A

Continuing discussion from previous session on applicants providing photos, that stopped in the early 70s; changes over time in the biographical information required from staff members; aspects and timeline of the Justice Department investigation in the 1970s, they claimed LSU was a segregated institution and sought evidence of that; breaks in the investigation were difficult for LSU staff who had to deal with new investigators each time; Paul Murrill told Vercher that the university lawyer suggested they just go to court instead of appealing; suit continued into the 80s, ended with a consent decree; affirmative action groundwork laid in 50s took hold in 60s; tenure was once granted automatically after seven years of teaching, now the process is entirely different; statement from Murrill on recruitment, appointment, and retention that evolved into policy statement (PS) 35; positions held by Murrill in his first years at LSU; rotation of office holders in dean of academic affairs position; assistants to the chancellor; as chancellor, Murrill brought budget office under his umbrella; positive influence of Murrill, Lynn Pesson, and James Wharton; evolution of PSs from existing bylaws, from notes kept by Vercher and Nancy Brueck; Walter Calhoun helped them clarify information; learned tough lesson when her comments on a document went to Calhoun; Baton Rouge campus first to have written guidelines; presidential memoranda and chancellor's memoranda; Calhoun involved in securing university retirement programs, he was a pilot in WWII; Harold Levy worked for Calhoun and was an expert in civil service laws; Levy was a skeptical person, followed up on things; Vercher worked on PSs and was involved with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies; role of personnel forms and biographical data cards, revisions in forms were approved by the president; difficulty of tracing faculty status upon retirement based on inconsistent record keeping and lack of a standard method; documentation that was reviewed by multiple staff members in personnel office; standardization of leave records and increased role of computerized records; deans or department heads were trusted and consulted to provide information on personnel; work with Donald Tarver to audit staff leave; PM 11 dealt with work outside of LSU; estimating cost of abuse of the prior leave-tracking system, the high number she gave was actually an underestimate; T. Harry Williams' opposition to PM 11 trickled down; instances of faculty using LSU resources or equipment for personal projects; PS 35 was based on university bylaws; typical rules on sequence and timing of promotions; regular reviews of assistant professors, deans, and the chancellor; Murrill may have started chancellor reviews when he served; recruiting faculty and

choosing their titles; PS 35 changed often to avoid loopholes; Vercher recalls very few firings in her early years working; PS 35 dealt with tenured personnel, instructors could not be tenured, exceptions to the rule; classified, unclassified, and academic personnel; academic personnel could be faculty or not; faculty moving from associate to instructor titles; category rankings of academic departments for budgetary reasons; PS 20 listed acceptable titles for personnel, was always changing and contested; titles Besch used for veterinary medicine personnel; hashing out role of directors versus deans was a big hullabaloo; use of terms like center and division; PS 20 attempted to define all these things;

Tape 352, Side B

Vercher's service on the board of the Campus Federal Credit Union; Emily Hubbard's role in ending sexist lending practices that initially prevented her from getting a loan; university code; Vercher's impressions of Murrill, he was a quick study, behaved like an engineer, was a caring chancellor but could be tough; Murrill came to Vercher with a stack of forms looking for input on whether he should sign them; Murrill maintained a database about campus, retained a wealth of information and could speak at length when needed; Murrill could have a conversation and recall it totally two weeks later; Murrill used humor and was personable; Besch was present when Dean Paul Hebert had a heart attack and died during a speech; Vercher liked the way Wharton worked but he had his fingers on too much; Wharton expected a lot from people, he was a workaholic, once called Vercher on her day off; Wharton could be combative but he gave praise freely; Vercher worked with Wharton before he was chancellor, he complimented her on being the smartest women on campus; Besch's impression of Wharton as sometimes brisk but fair; chancellorship appointment struggle between Wharton and Richard Matula, Wharton became chancellor but included Matula in deans meetings and allowed him to argue against him; friction between Wharton and Matula because they were alike and both wanted to be right; another dean's group member, Ronald Henry, was not a yes man, he was quiet and easy to work with from Vercher's perspective; Henry was first dean of the college of basic sciences, was not as aggressive as Matula in dealing with Wharton; recollections of Otis Wheeler, vice chancellor of academic affairs; he was a quiet man, kept a clean desk, felt that he had to step up to bat from the English department into the academic affairs position; Wheeler and Carolyn Hargrave were great problem solvers and longtime employees in academic affairs; Besch recalls an issue he worked through with Wheeler involving the university library committee and the school of veterinary medicine's plans for a library; input from George Guidry on vet med library; long decision-making process by Wheeler on the library issue; Murrill retired on short notice, Wheeler became acting chancellor until Wharton was appointed; Besch's impressions of the three chancellors he worked under: Taylor, Murrill and Wharton; Wharton was known throughout the state; Justice Department investigation into female faculty members' salaries; Besch argues there was a misunderstanding of how people were paid based on their experience and position; EEO office's role in Justice Department investigation, Gwen Redding and Evans Roberts; Justice Department did not understand basis for salary differences; specialty area in schools like vet med, people with equivalent ranks on paper but varied expertise; Vercher's role in preparing paperwork for the Justice Department, working with Roberts and Donald Tarver; hard feelings that stemmed from the investigation, women unclear why they were getting raises, facing resentment from male faculty; instances of hiring people in lower positions who turn out to be valuable assets; campus-wide loss of faculty after Justice Department investigation; Gwen Redding in the EEO office saw things in black and white; example from Besch of hiring a

highly-qualified person and having problems when trying to secure a higher salary for him; a small minority of people were directly involved in the Justice Department investigation; Vercher recalls lawsuits over termination of faculty; William Swor, the director of bands was terminated; Swor's Golden Band from Tigerland performed in the Rose Bowl and Orange Bowl in 1973; Swor's individual relationship with the university left a lot to be desired; university had to build a case against him because he had tenure; Besch and Vercher discuss vague instances of faculty members being approved or terminated, sometimes involving the board of supervisors and university administration; other instances of turmoil over appointments but no specific details or names given; loophole in the law one summer that allowed academic employees to wrongfully draw from unemployment compensation; Vercher did not work with the faculty senate, she only got involved if records were needed; recollections of Ruby Williams, secretary to Quinn Coco and Walter Calhoun; Vercher's dealings with James Traynham as dean of the graduate school; conflict between Traynham and Besch over levels and titles for graduate student appointments; Vercher's work with Randy Lopez in EEO; end of interview session.

Session III

Tape 353, Side A

From end of previous session, Besch and Vercher return to discussion of James Traynham and his various positions at LSU in the 70s and 80s; Vercher worked with Traynham on personnel matters; Traynham was a busy man, she went to his office with issues after making an appointment; question of who handled graduate student appointments; role of associate graduate students and non-faculty academics; Vercher worked with Randy Lopez to set associate salary levels and titles specific to various departments; library positions were classified differently; departments wanted to retain rank of associate because it paid more; academic positions were not committed to a forty-hour work week; classified employees got paid overtime; university rules on work hours; levels of expertise for associate versus classified employees; problem of pay for people in associate positions when the Justice Department investigated; Justice Department didn't understand why employees with the same titles were not paid the same salary; PS 20 dealt with associate categories, the rules for and order of appointments; salary supplements had to be justified; Vercher and Lopez faced opposition from top officials in classified positions; process of auditing staff salary or reclassifying positions involved writing a report; department of classified personnel kept in constant contact, showed the power of civil service in the state because they could reclassify people; recollections of audit proceedings and role of civil service; civil service held a tighter rein on the Baton Rouge campus, perhaps due to proximity; Vercher's colleagues at other campuses were never audited; explanation of classified and unclassified categories of the state budget; PS 20 outlined many unclassified positions, was not very rigid; Lynn Pesson, Gwen Redding, and Vercher worked on PS 20; how salary levels came into play when hiring; PS 20 outlined base salaries but more money could be granted; Besch opines on the EEO office and Justice Department mindset; difficulty of setting guidelines that would apply university-wide; salary increases could depend on education and years of experience; Vercher was always interested when deans or department heads defended the titles and salaries of their staff; Ralph Pike from chemical engineering was level-headed; Vercher sums up Carl Maddox by saying he was not colorful enough for some people; information on Maddox's positions at LSU; story about Paul Dietzel attending the Heisman Trophy banquet and being told a table was reserved for Carl Maddox; recollections of Paul Hebert and his secretary Florence Molaison; Hebert served in many positions at LSU, was not in favor of the law school being separate from

the campus; all law professors had the same official title; Hebert's administration of the law school; law faculty were contentious but Hebert handled them confidently; Hulen Williams, Dean of Chemistry and Physics, took over from Arthur Choppin; Williams had a tough job at first, always had time for pleasantries; Choppin was a dominant person, started Boys State and Girls State, was one of the university's chief lobbyists; Besch once had an office near Choppin's, his office was not in the chemistry building; Williams' wife was also a chemist in the department, her name is on the chemistry building; struggle over naming of the chemistry building between Williams and the daughter of a former department head; a committee decides on the names of campus buildings and roads, rules on how soon after someone's death they would use their name, exception of Pete Maravich; recollections of Earl Klein from the school of social welfare; Besch shares story about Klein having a mustache and Besch growing one after Klein's retirement; Dean of Education, Lemos Fulmer, succeeded by Peter Soderbergh; conflict between Fulmer and John Garrett; Garrett was a nice man but was pulled in many directions; Howard Hanchey and J. Norman Efferson's roles in the college of agriculture; Hanchey's wife Marguerite was science librarian for the university; Vercher tells a funny story about Irwin Berg singing a bawdy song and embarrassing his wife; personal recollections of Berg and his wife, a diabetic; St. John Chilton, Head of Plant Pathology, was conservative and didn't like outsiders trying to do anything in his department;

Tape 353, Side B

Chilton's and other offices in Audubon Hall and the Life Sciences building; Vercher expands on memories of "nice times" when staff socialized outside of work, it was a calmer time then; things were not as fun by the time she retired; changes over time in amount of paperwork for academic appointments; Vercher explains process of record keeping, saving items on microfiche, purging unnecessary documents; Vercher worked with Helen [Gassie?] on purging personnel files, they kept things forever; Vercher's positions and titles during her time at LSU; Martin Woodin established the title of staff assistant but civil service stopped it; university administrative function twenty-five years ago was entirely different; Vercher's office could handle the work that forty people do now because there were not as many rules and regulations and they worked very hard; discussion of reasons for the change from one-hour to half-hour lunch breaks, likely enacted during early 1970s energy crisis; Vercher often worked late and took work home, her staff had a strong work ethic and low turnover; experiences with library directors George Guidry and T.N. McMullan; McMullan felt that personnel matter were beneath him and often sent his secretary, Jewel, to handle things; story about McMullan's attempt to fire an employee who was pregnant and unmarried; Besch's experiences with Guidry and McMullan, their input on plans for the veterinary medicine library; Guidry was the second choice to take over the library after a national search was conducted; Besch wrote a letter of support that someone told Guidry about; breach in the confidentiality of records could be grounds for dismissal, Besch does not know who leaked the letter; Vercher once had to let a student worker go because she allowed her boyfriend to view confidential files; personnel staff had to remove certain items before allowing staff members to see their own files, e.g. letters of recommendation; confidentiality of student records versus their application materials; Vercher trained herself to forget personal details she came across; other instances of breaches in confidentiality of records, like copies of personnel forms floating around campus; Prentiss Schilling, Dean of the College of Agriculture, asked many questions and actively learned his job, he also grew watermelons that he shared; Barbara Jackson, one of the first black administrative secretaries, worked for Dr. Pesson; Jackson was

very smart, pulled her weight, was so popular among black students that they had to move her desk so she could get work done; recollections of brothers John, Dale, and Donald Newsom; Vercher recalls Max Goodrich as a dedicated employee who was close with Chancellor Taylor, she knew him on a more friendly level and didn't work with him often; three unrelated faculty members with the last name Tims and Timm; revisiting discussion of previous manner of granting tenure, whether associates, instructors, assistant professors, or unclassified staff could gain tenure and under what circumstances; tenure rules and qualifications for promotion outlined in PS 35 and Murrill's policy statement; if they move to terminate someone tenured, there must be a trail of evidence that documents his inefficiency or inability as it happens; possibility of conflicting reports from a supervisor and the employee being considered for termination, a case like that could go all the way to the board of supervisors to make a decision; three cases that Vercher recalls of attempted termination of a tenured faculty member; her most frustrating moment caused by Reddoch's demand that a single piece of paperwork be edited several times when her office was extremely busy; her most memorable moment when a quirk in the legislature allowed nine-month academic appointees to apply for unemployment during the summer months, her nervousness over having to testify before the unemployment commission were calmed by Shelby McKenzie; her experience at LSU was definitely good; end of interview.

TAPES: 3 (T260, T352, T353)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 4 hours, 35 minutes

PAGES: Session I: 73 page transcript; Session II: 16 page index; Session III: 15 page index

OTHER MATERIALS: Inventory sheet; Correspondence (2 pages)

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