

6-27-2000

Tanis, Elliot A Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: LaBarge, Melissa, "Tanis, Elliot A Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College" (2000). *Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College*. Paper 18.

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Published in: 2000 - *Retiring Members of the Hope College Faculty (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, June 27, 2000. Copyright © 2000 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Joint Archives of Holland
Oral History Project- summer 2000
Retired Hope Professors
Interviewee: Dr. Eliot Tanis
Interviewer: Melissa LaBarge
27 June 2000

ML: Can you tell me where you grew up and what it was like, and your education?

ET: I was born in Grand Rapids- St. Mary's Hospital. I only lived there for about three and a half years and then moved to Waupun, Wisconsin. My father was a minister so we moved quite a bit. And we lived there for about six and half years. I think I was ten when we moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan. I was only in Kalamazoo for three and a half years, then we moved to Pella, Iowa. So that's where I had high school, and then I stayed and went to Central College in Iowa. And then the University of Iowa for graduate study.

ML: What did you study?

ET: Mathematics. My major was mathematics in both places. And my research was in statistics at the University of Iowa.

ML: How did you come to Hope College?

ET: Well after I got my doctorate, I taught at the University of Nebraska for two years. And my parents, at that time, were living in Zeeland. Although in 1960 they moved. Dad was the first pastor of Faith Reformed Church in Zeeland, and then they moved to Holland. 79 West 12th Street, where we live now. And so we came to visit them. Jay Folkert was chairman of the math department and knew our family. So he tried to get me to come to Hope in 1964, but I stayed at Nebraska two years and then came here.

ML: So you came in '66?

ET: '65. My father graduated from Hope College in 1922, and he actually had a math major, but he went into the ministry. So he used his mathematics that way.

ML: Did he go to Western?

ET: Yeah. He grew up in Hamilton. My ancestors really settled in Overisel, Drenthe.

ML: What is your ancestry- are you Dutch?

ET: Way back to the 1500's. I've got one ancestor back there- fifteen hundred something.

ML: What was Hope like when you came?

ET: Well it was much smaller. And the faculty always met as a committee as a whole. So our faculty meetings were much more interesting- not very efficient because there were certain faculty who always spoke at every faculty meeting. But we did everything as a faculty as a whole. And the Van Raalte Hall was still standing. And there was one room, sort of a back room, with a couple of big round tables where the faculty often gathered for coffee time in the morning. And people like Bert Ponstein would have something interesting to say. And there were other professors who... it was just kind of fun. I don't know why I had time then to go across campus for coffee but it always happened. Those were interesting times. So I think we knew the faculty better- you knew the entire faculty, many different disciplines.

ML: Why has that changed now?

ET: I think because of the size. I still ate in the Kletz quite often. And there's a certain group of faculty that eats there from different disciplines- I always enjoyed that.

ML: Do you know about how big the faculty was when you came?

ET: No, maybe 125, 150. It'd be 1965.

ML: What was the student body like?

ET: Well it was also smaller, I think around fifteen hundred. So probably just over half the size. And our math department was much smaller when I started. And we grew after I became a member here, a few years afterwards. And we had more math majors then with a smaller student body than we did this past year. So I don't know why that was.

ML: Were most of the student body, were they mostly from around the area?

ET: Over the years, I think we've been getting more Michigan residents coming to Hope because of the tuition situation. That Michigan residents get in-state tuition breaks, tax credits or credits, and other states do the same. But I don't really know.

ML: What qualifications did they stress at your hiring? Did you have to go through the same process that they have to go through now?

ET: I would think that it was much looser. And the president would make the decision. Either the president or, we had a dean then- we had a different academic structure. Cal Vander Werf hired me. That was a long time ago, so I don't remember. I don't think it was quite as difficult. And at that time, there was no such thing as tenure. That started later and those who hadn't gone through the tenure process were just declared 'you're tenured'.

ML: How has leadership changed with the presidents? Has there been a noticeable change?

ET: Yeah. Cal Vander Werf, I think his goal was to make Hope like an MIT and really increase the sciences. He got some major grants in the late sixties from The Research Cooperation. The Sloan Foundation, the Natural Science Foundation. And that's what let the math department increase, almost double in size. And I think there was quite a bit of hiring that was done by Cal Vander Werf. Yeah he was just looking for the best academicians that he could.

ML: What have the subsequent presidents...?

ET: After Cal, we were without for a little bit. But the later presidents, I think they started to stress the Christian commitment more in addition to, I mean the academic qualifications are still extremely important. But also, the academic expectations are higher now as far as research. You know, when I was hired, they didn't say much about what you would do in the summer and do research with undergraduates. My first summers we had summer institutes, so I was involved that way. And then later summers I supervised students' research, but it wasn't through the National Science Foundation. But now when we hire someone, an important question is 'what projects do you work on with undergraduates and are you willing to do so?' And they're just expected to work with undergraduates, and also keep their own research program going- be active lots of ways.

ML: And that's becoming more and more- that's very interesting. As a professor, how much of your time was taken up by committees and research- things other than just teaching?

ET: Over the years, I've served on major boards. Well, the Academic Affairs Board and the Administrative Affairs Board. I served on both of those. I chaired the

Administrative Affairs Board- one year I did. And then when you're on one of the boards, you're on committees. So I was on the Religious Life Committee when we got rid of compulsory Chapel.

ML: Oh, what led to that decision?

ET: Lots of discussion. Actually we went through interesting phases. The student body used to be able to fit in the Chapel. And each one had an assigned seat; someone would sit up in back and take attendance. Then when the student body became larger there was a time when we computerized it. Everyone had a computer card and they'd tally in some way that way. And some people didn't graduate because of too many cuts of Chapel. Before my time, the faculty always used to sit together during Chapel. Now that wasn't true when I came. But they gradually realized that that's... you know, requiring students to attend chapel- it wasn't really that effective. You know so that's when it became optional. And that's gone up and down over the years.

ML: The issue of mandatory Chapel?

ET: No, the attendance of Chapel. When Bill Hillegonds was Chaplain there was a good following, good attendance at Chapel. Under Jerry Van Heest the attendance dropped. And I'm not sure it was necessarily because of Jerry but just the mood on campus. And now, of course, it's gone up again.

ML: Was it through discussion that mandatory Chapel was eliminated, was there a move by the students that they wanted to get rid of it? This is just so interesting to me.

ET: How did that go? I don't really remember. I just know as a committee we discussed it and recommended it to our board, which I guess would be the Administrative Affairs Board, to no longer have mandatory Chapel.

ML: Was there a lot of opposition to that decision? Was it controversial?

ET: I'm sure there would be some opposition. It was quite a while ago. It was twenty-five years ago. I hadn't really thought about that. If I run across anything, I'll let you know.

ML: What other kinds of committees? Is it mandatory for a Hope professor to serve on a certain number of committees or is it a voluntary thing?

ET: They try to get people on a committee, but that doesn't always happen. Several years ago we started having a faculty moderator. And I was elected one of the earlier faculty moderators. I don't think I was first. But as faculty moderator, because of that office, I sat on the President's Advisory Committee and the Professional Interest Committee. So that year I was going to an awful lot of committee meetings. But I learned a lot. A couple of times I served on the Status Committee, and that's one of the more interesting committees because that's where faculty make proposals for summer research, so you find out what faculty are up to in the summer. All promotion and tenure decisions come through that committee.

[problem with the machine- we moved to a different table to plug the machine in.]

ML: We were talking about faculty, the Status Committee. One thing that you touched upon a little bit with the faculty getting bigger is that there's not as much

interaction anymore. I was wondering with the Liberal Arts College, how much interaction is there between academic departments?

ET: I think now with the new core, the faculty are involved- like in the first year seminar, they meet together during the summer. So I think there's that interaction. When new faculty come in, they have a teaching enhancement workshop right at the beginning of the year. So the new faculty, each faculty class gets to meet each other. And I think those friendships are pretty deep. So the new faculty from different disciplines get to know each other.

ML: What, with the liberal arts... you taught at Nebraska?

ET: Yes.

ML: Was there a comparison between that?

ET: Oh yeah. I taught just statistics, that was it. And part of it was graduate courses so it was a very small segment. I did get to go to their football games- they have good football there.

ML: I have heard that Hope College is a four year liberal arts college in the tradition of the Reformed Church of America.

ET: No, it's in the context of the Christian faith.

ML: In the context of the Christian faith, okay. What does that mean?

ET: In mathematics, it's not that easy to... I'm not sure I would teach mathematics much differently here from anyplace else. I think, I would hope that Hope professors have more concern for their students. And that it manifests itself in other ways, just interaction with students.

ML: I hadn't thought about that. What role does admissions play in promoting Hope's academics and Hope's religious life, things like that?

ET: You'll get different reads from different people. Some of the faculty are... you know, we hear the student guides if you walk by them, they're talking about different programs. I'm not sure they always have the right information. I would guess a big aspect of what they promote is the Christian aspect of the college, which is not bad. But they have come out with brochures from time to time, in fact one I just dumped a couple a days ago, was a nice brochure that each department got to tell something about themselves. And I think now with the web pages that if students are interested they can get on to departmental web pages. Hopefully they're all getting up a good web page that students know what's available.

ML: With the city of Holland, were you familiar with it? You must have been a little bit before you came here.

ET: Yeah. The downtown has changed tremendously. We had a J.C. Penny's, a Sears, Steketees, you know department stores downtown. And they've all fled to the malls. So the downtown is much, much different.

ML: What was one of the big draws about Hope? Was it the city?

ET: I think it's my Reformed Church background. My father being a graduate of Hope- my brother went here two years but then graduated from Central. So I've known Hope College, in fact, we took some folks to Camp Geneva last night. And in one of the early years of Camp Geneva, before they had all the buildings out there, I went to Camp Geneva and we stayed on Hope's campus. And we

were bussed out there to go swimming. So that would be probably when I was ten years old- so that's more than fifty years ago.

ML: Do professors in general find their friendships within the community or within the Hope faculty or a combination?

ET: I think a combination. We probably found ours in the church and in the Hope faculty. But at that time, I think quite a few of the Hope faculty went to Third Church. So we'd see a lot of them at church and also on campus. It's not quite as true now. I think we have much more diverse- a lot of Roman Catholics. And those who go to St. Francis- Third and St. Francis do things together. So we see faculty at St. Francis quite a bit.

ML: Do you think Hope has gotten more or less diverse?

ET: Now when you talk about Hope, I think in the faculty, there's a fair diversity. It's within the Christian faith, but there are a few that don't fit that mold, but I think they're much more open to the Roman Catholics as well as Christian Reformed.

ML: And there are a lot more than there were?

ET: I think so, but I haven't really thought about that.

ML: With the students, religiously and ethnically, has it gotten more diverse?

ET: You know, ethnically it's gone up and down. There was a time we had a big contingent of students from Brewton, Alabama where the Reformed Church had a school. Unfortunately, those students were not prepared academically and had difficulty at Hope- which I thought was a mistake to bring students in and then don't have a program for them. There was one time we had a big group of students from Qatar, and there must have been a dozen of Qatari students. And a

lot of them took mathematics because they were gonna be engineers, and so we saw those in the math department. But aside from that, there have not been... it's been a pretty white campus.

ML: Almost every professor has mentioned the students from Brewton. I was wondering if you knew anything about how many years was it that they really brought those people in?

ET: I don't know, but there's one- Sam Williams is one of those students who went to Western Seminary, and part of his ministry was in California and he just received distinguished- some sort of award- Distinguished Alumni Award from Western Seminary. We happened to see him at this past alumni banquet. So there's one of the Brewton students who did well. Now I'm trying to think- was he a Hope student or a Central student? I might have known him in Pella. I know he went to Western Seminary. So at least he's one that did well.

ML: So it's interesting- people from Brewton came to Pella as well.

ET: Yes... I'm not sure where Floyd Brady came from, but he was one of the black students who played basketball, and he comes back on campus occasionally. He has a lot of the records yet. But we haven't done very well attracting black students. I don't know, someone could tell you the actually mix, but it seems like for Holland- that maybe attracting Hispanic students is what we should work on.

ML: With the teaching of statistics, have you found that it's changed?

ET: Oh tremendously.

ML: How has it changed?

ET: Well, I think the computer has made a lot of the difference because we used to do a lot of things by hand. When we first came, we had rotary calculators- you know mechanical calculators. We got a grant, I'm not sure who wrote the grant proposal, but I was to help spend it- about forty thousand dollars. We were going to buy mechanical calculators, and there were some electronic that came. They were this wide, like half this table size. And nice big display and had four storage registers. They cost \$1795 and the square root key was an extra \$200 to make it \$1995. That's one thousand nine hundred ninety-five dollars. And now you can get that for ten or twelve dollars. So that's made a big difference and now lately we've been using Minitab, which is a computer program that's on the computer network. You know, stuff I've been throwing away- I did things by hand and now you put it into the computer and zips it out. Now we spend more time analyzing the data rather than punching keys and formulas and that kind of thing. And the graphics too, I've done a lot of work with M.C. Escher, and we did some of that on TRS80's- Did you ever use the TRS80?

ML: No.

ET: That's Tandy- Radio Shack. And then we did it on a Tektronix 4051, which had a pen plotter which was really nice. Then we moved to other computers and... just to see how that's progressed over the years is quite interesting.

ML: Has the learning, because of the computers, has it increased? Are students learning more because of that or is it a different kind of learning?

ET: I think they learn something different. Hopefully, they learn how to analyze and interpret data rather than just plugging formulas and get answers out and say 'I'm done'.

ML: With the whole technological revolution, has that made more or less work for professors?

ET: Oh it's a lot more work.

ML: Really, why is that?

ET: Yeah because trying to get things on the Web. I just finished the sixth edition of our textbook. It'll be out in about a month, but all of the graphs- I plotted all of them using MAPLE, which is a computer algebra system. And then edited the files and you can just do so much more than we could before.

ML: With Hope, the atmosphere at Hope has been really hard the last couple of years. Has this been the biggest controversy that's touched Hope's campus do you think. The biggest period where things are changing since you've been there or has it always been going in a wave.

ET: Of course, the last few years, the Chapel program has been a controversy. You get people on both sides of the issue. Unfortunately it's hard to go the middle road for a lot of people. So what is the question?

ML: I was wondering if this is unusual because this is just what I've experienced since I've come to Hope, but has there been other things that have been like this in the past or is this a unique situation.

ET: Yeah, I don't know even like with the Vietnam War. I remember there was some protest but not that much. I think the Hope body has been pretty stable.

ML: Where do you see Hope heading in the future?

ET: Well, I think Jim Bultman will keep it going the direction we're going right now. With a Christian commitment but also stressing a strong academic program. I think the sciences are really pushing undergraduate research. And I think the other divisions are seeing the importance of that and more students are getting involved in scholarly activities in the summer.

ML: Do you think it's getting more academically challenging?

ET: For the students?

ML: Yes.

ET: I try to challenge my students, and get them- instead of just learning statistics, learn how to present the material- you know they give reports- oral reports, written reports. So rather than just answer questions in the back of the book.

ML: Do you think it will get more academically challenging in the future?

ET: Yeah, we're trying to attract different students and I think some students are gonna need more help academically. And at the same time we're getting some really top-notch students. And I think it's gonna be a challenge to keep them challenged or give them some extra projects, and at the same time don't lose. Several years ago it was a group of students- I think we just lost them. We brought them in and didn't have a program. But now we have different programs- the focus program and the soar program- they help students along. And I think Hope has become much more sensitive to that. That there are helps out there- students don't always find them- but there are ways to get help if you need it.

ML: What led to your decision to retire?

ET: Well I'm 66, and the reason I didn't retire a year earlier is we had plans to revise our textbook. It was easier for me to write and teach at the same time. I get ideas as I teach and get to incorporate them in the book. I was very busy. And there's a good chance I'll start a new book this fall so I'm retiring from teaching but I'll stay active professionally.

ML: Which leads me to my next question. What else are you planning on doing after?

ET: Well, we had proposed a short course for the annual math meetings. So last year it wasn't accepted, but it has been accepted for January. So I'll be doing that with two colleagues, Janet Andersen and Todd Swanson, in January. So I'll be working on this book. I'm looking at different travel options; I'm always ready to travel.

ML: What will you miss most about being a professor at Hope?

ET: Well one practical thing is I don't know what computer I'm going to be using. I may end up just working at home on my own computer. But the HASP, the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals, we plan to join that. So I think that's going to give us plenty of mental stimulation. Plan to join Evergreen Commons, so that's where I'll be able to get some physical stimulation, and I'll keep playing tennis- so I'll see... although there aren't as many Hope professors who play, but there are some that I play with. And I hope to enter intramural tennis again this fall.

ML: Oh did you do that?

ET: Oh yeah, came in second in both coed and men's.