Eldon Charles Hart – Life during WWII

By Eldon Charles Hart

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Box 2 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Samuel J. Passey

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
SP: What is your age?

EH: March one I’ll be 88.

SP: 88! In what year did you first come to Ricks College?

EH: I came here in 1940. I came to Ricks College in August 1940, first part of August 1940.

SP: What was it like back then?

EH: Well, of course the school isn’t as big as it is now and neither was Rexburg. When I came to Rexburg, Rexburg was 4,025 people.

SP: You were the librarian when you first came here?

EH: I was the librarian that’s right.

SP: I understand there was a bit of a fiasco with the books being numbered wrong or not matching the card file.

EH: Well, what happened is that the person who was here before me decided that all the classification was wrong. So she got the faculty members in the summer and she left and of course that summer she got the faculty members to come and renumber all the books. The library in those days was on the top floor of the Spori building and, and she got them and the students to properly number all the books in the library according to the current regulations. And she did absolutely nothing with the catalogs. So the books were all beautifully numbered, but the catalog was entirely different. So it took me at least [until] ’56 or ’57 before we got the two of them together.

SP: Now I am going to ask you some questions about what happened to the college during World War Two, [about] your responsibilities or your involvements. What were some of the changes you noticed during World War II?

EH: Well, one of the things that happened, I was at the library about six months and the president came up and said our registrar is going in the service. That was Eldred Stevenson and he said, “Eldon is going in the service tomorrow and we would like you to come and take over his job.” Because I had the proper facilities, I had a bachelor’s degree in accounting administration, and so…to have me teach accounting, the registrar wasn’t any problem. So he said, “We’ll hire you some more help to run the library and so you can supervise it, but you’ll be the registrar.” So in four hours I went and talked to Eldred and before he left, and he left the next day, and I spent four hours with him showing me, [giving me] an orientation on the bookstore, as part of his responsibilities not only [as] head of the business department, but he also was managing the bookstore also. The bookstore was right next to his office so that wasn’t a problem. But anyway, so I ran the bookstore and taught classes, accounting classes. Then in 19—I was teaching and
accounting classes and of course I told you about the airport being on the hill. In 1946 I was teaching an accounting class and a few of the students been in the service and said we would like to learn how to fly. And I said well, maybe we could arrange that and in the meantime of course we got a new president, which was John L. Clark. And so I asked him what he thought about, and he said well that’s fine. So we bought a couple airplanes, and we set up. I insisted that the department, the aviation department. If you go back to 1972 and before that in the catalog you’ll find the aviation department listed. And then I insisted that the aviation department take absolute no money out of the college.

SP: How did you support the aviation department then?

EH: We charged enough to pay the flight instructors and to maintain the airplanes and to buy airplanes. And when we quit in 1978 the college owned the hanger and the field all [was] paid for and two airplanes.

SP: Is that the building we’re in now?

EH: No.

SP: What your feelings were working with President Manwaring? What did you think of his leadership or him as a person?

EH: Well, I was delighted with him of course, what happened in the school program of course he didn’t really teach any classes. But the, he was responsible and so I didn’t have any objection. We had the board of education as far as the school, the management of the school included the dean of students and President Manwaring and the registrar. We had a meeting once a week and settled the various problems that went on.

SP: Were those meetings quite lively at times?

EH: Well yes, one time especially later of course, a member of the first presidency of the church insisted on moving the college to Idaho Falls because he had some property down there. And so it was quite lively, of course we had some people, Dell Taylor was chairman of our local board and he was, of course he has been dead for several years. Manwaring was all right, he lived just two houses down from the campus.

SP: You mentioned Delbert Taylor and his role. Which other individuals would you say were important in helping Ricks College survive all these years?

EH: Well, he was the primary fundamental purpose. He was the local chairman of commerce of course, and he was for many years the president of the chamber of commerce. Of course they were always concerned with having the school there. Of course there’s a lot of other things that when I came to the college, of course the college owned one square block and that was it. In fact, there was an interesting thing [in the day] I was here about a year and then they wanted me to manage the dormitory and the
dormitory, there was a dormitory. It’s a vacant lot now across from the career beauty college. There use to be a three story building there. We housed men on the main floor, women on the top floor. And we fed them all lunch or we fed them breakfast and gave them lunches at noon and then dinner at nine. We had them all as a family.

SP: There must have been a lot of interesting things that happened when boys sneaked up to see girls…?

EH: Oh yeah. Yeah in fact, every once in a while there was a noise upstairs. In fact in one time I remember one of them very carefully was there was a gal that lived in Driggs and she remembers it. In fact, her husband was president of the Idaho Falls temple for the last three years. Yeah, Brother Ricks. So there was a lot of noise going on one night and so I went upstairs to see what was going on just as he climbed through the window into her room. Well there was another one on the faculty, and about the same thing happened. It was a different program, but Daniel Hess who lives here in Rexburg (the one who has the museum up in Ashton). He was on faculty, he was a student then. Of course he left for the service and then came back to the college.

SP: How long did you and your wife manage the dorm?

EH: Three years.

SP: You were there during a good part of World War II.

EH: That’s right.

SP: What was it like with so many of the men gone? Did you have very many men?

EH: We had one man. During the war we had 134 girls to one boy.

SP: What did these girls do with all their free time?

EH: They, in fact, some of the time we had every week…every week we had some kind of social dance at the college. And they danced together or they invited their friends from Idaho Falls to Rexburg. The other thing that was interesting in those days of course, some of the faculty always went to the dances with their wives, and they danced together.

SP: Did the faculty members take their turns to dance with all of these lonely girls?

EH: Yes, yes…In fact many times we had the dances. Well…the dances in those days were in the old gym, if there was a large crowd. On the second floor in the old gym, that is where the gymnasium was in the old building. But, then we sometimes had if there wasn’t too good of a crowd, we stuck the tables together and had the dance in the dining hall.

SP: Were you involved in some dairy herd testing duties during the war?
EH: Two people were exempt from the war: the registrar and the college president, and so we—I didn’t even have to register and neither did he. John L. Clarke was the president. He came after Manwaring. We didn’t have any serious problems.

SP: What did you do about rationing and shortages?

EH: Of course what we did there because we had a little budget. So what we did there was we’d…back in the basement, the building in fact we had the men’s shower room downstairs in the southeast corner. In the Dorm building were the men’s showers. The upstairs had bathrooms for each apartment. But the main floor was…a shower for the men.

SP: What were their rooms like? Tell me about how many men per room?

EH: Usually two-four.

SP: Bunked?

EH: Bunk beds…usually there were four. There were bunk beds on the main floor. But there was only about…altogether if it was full…there was something like 380 as I remember. If everything was full, the girls and men and so forth.

SP: When the war ended, how many of the young men started coming back? Did it take a while or was it a flood of men?

EH: Oh no, immediately, as soon as the war was over. They came back, in fact, it was the students, they weren’t in the war, but they wanted to learn how to fly. That’s why in forty-six we started the aviation department.

SP: What other changes besides the aviation department were made to accommodate the returning veterans?

EH: For five years, we had a four-year program. I don’t remember the exact years, but for five years we had a four-year program. Then of course, then the thing came they were supposed to move the college…there were several board-meetings, and I was Registrar at the time, and I was there…John L. Clarke didn’t invite anybody, except me. I was the one who recorded the messages and that type of thing of all the sessions that we had. We had them about every six months at least on Saturdays. The last one we had was with President McKay. He was up here, on the campus, and he met with us on the second floor…with some of the faculty, it was on a Saturday. So I was there in the meeting.

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EH: The reservoir and then we started the pump. Within less than two hours we filled the reservoir, and we pumped over 2900 gallons of water per minute in that well and it is still there on the east side of the college.

SP: To change the subject for a little bit. When you and your wife were managing the dorms, what did you and her do to put up with all these college kids? You were just a few years older than them.

EH: Well, what we did of course is we had a dining room and we always had breakfast, we had a cook and a kitchen. Then we had students actually do the serving. We had the cook make the food and then she brought it out and put it on the table. We had table and chairs and so we had both man and girl eat breakfast together. Then we made lunches for them at noon and then in the evening we had dinner together again with the boys and the girls, altogether [as] family usually six or eight to a table. And of course, we always took turns with the various people blessing the food, that type of thing. Then when we got through in the evening we had some of the students assigned, tonight you’re going to have to wash the dishes.

SP: What were your feelings about President Wilkinson? I understand that there has been some controversy about him.

EH: Yes. In fact, President Wilkinson was not only the president of Brigham Young University, but he was also chairman of the board of education (The church board of education, which included Ricks College, BYU, and BYU-Hawaii). So he was chairman of the board. Of course I knew President Wilkinson…I knew where he used to live. In fact, I lived in Plain City, Utah. His youngest daughter was a schoolteacher. Her name as I remember was Alva. She was a schoolteacher in Plain City and after my dad died, I was a junior in High School. Then I got acquainted with her, and I went and took her out several times. For about three years anyway—I took her out on dates. So I got acquainted with the family. They were in those days living in Ogden. But anyway, so I got acquainted with the family, early in my young life. Then after I got up here at the college, I was here forty years before I took a leave (later after the recording Eldon clarified it was twenty years until he took a leave). President Clark said, “Well what we will do is pay you leave of absence for two years.” Well, I got into my first year at the University of Illinois. President Clarke called me and said, “President Manwaring,” he was chairman of the board of education “will not allow me to pay you your second year of leave.”

SP: President Wilkinson?

EH: President Wilkerson…So in those days, well before I left in the sixties…on leave of absence, why that was actually a…the President of the Church was here, then they decided we’ll let you stay here and so President Clarke said that why don’t you, he said …well nothing’s happened in the campus…in fact they made me chairman of the new construction and so that went on for about six months. Nothing happened so John said, “You’ve been wanting to leave and get your doctorate, so why don’t you do it? We’ll
give you two years of leave.” So I never got it [the leave]. So the University of Illinois said they wanted me to work for them. They said you can’t do it unless you are going to be here three years. You have to be in the physics library for three years. That’s what they wanted to do. So for three years I was the physics librarian. In the University of Illinois in those days, physics was their…Their library was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. So I managed it and I hired some other people to do it when I was gone. In the meantime I was made President of the High Priests quorum in the northern states mission. For three years, and the head of the economics department, Brother Broadbent, was in charge of the senior Aaronic Priesthood and another man down in Pocatello that was in charge of the Aaronic Priesthood…in those days conference was held on Saturday and Sunday. So I traveled, in fact I bought a used car, a Jaguar ‘cause we needed transportation. The church paid me fifteen cents a mile for three years for all our conferences. I drove over a hundred thousand miles. The headquarters were in Wisconsin, we were traveling in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana for conferences. Every week we had a conference.

<Interruption>

SP: After your three years you came back to the College?

EH: I came back to the college. They wanted me to be in charge of all the auxiliaries. There were nine auxiliaries. All of them were in the hole. So I got them all straightened out. The foodservice, the bookstore, housing, all of them, I got them straightened out. Then in 1980, of course in the meantime we had a new presidency and so forth. In fact, one of the presidents that was here then is on the First council [of twelve apostles].

SP: That was Henry B. Eyring?

EH: That’s right, he’s an apostle now.

SP: Over the years at Ricks College and in Rexburg how have you felt from seeing the school go from two buildings to an entire hillside full of buildings?

EH: Well, in fact I feel…sort of a responsibility for buying the property. The other thing was for twelve or thirteen years, in those days the budget for Ricks College, I had to meet with the President of the Church every March, about the college budget.

SP: What kind of numbers are we talking about? Back then?

EH: We’re talking a million, two and a half million, three and a half million, five and a half million something like that.

SP: That doesn’t seem like it could cover it now.

EH: No. But the…of course I married Joseph Fielding Smith’s daughter. He was chairman of the quorum of the twelve. Then when I met with the First Presidency of
course every year, every March, why I got acquainted with four of five of the Presidents of the Church.

SP: Was your Father-in-law an advocate for the college?

EH: Yes.

SP: Did you ever turn to him for help, when it wasn’t coming from other lines?

EH: No, it was always some other president. He didn’t—he wasn’t president of the church until my duties changed.

SP: Was there anything else you wanted to talk about today?

EH: I don’t know of anything else. I’ve only had one opportunity this year to meet with a business class and talk about the school, and so forth. But my association of course has been wonderful, but the thing that I am…I of course with my meetings with the presidency of the church every March for the budget, of course that had changed now. I’m convinced that it has a purpose.

SP: Definitely.

EH: Even though one of the brethren owned the property, he was responsible for the property in Idaho Falls…David O. McKay stood up and said, “I’m sorry my brother did this. Ricks College will not be moved.”

SP: That must have felt good to hear him say that.

EH: So the thing that I’ve been so pleased with all over the years not only the…the responsibilities of the local people. Of course this country was started very early. Brigham Young sent people up here: the Smiths, several other people, and the Ricks. I told you about President Ricks and his wife.

SP: That is quite the story about him. He turned out okay.

EH: Yeah. But Brother Hess and the experience I had with him, it was before he went in the service. He was there in school, but one evening in the men’s shower room a noise was going on like crazy. So I went down to see what was going on. Brother Hess, he probably won’t tell you this, but he’d been drinking. The boys were pushing him in the nude back and forth between showers waking him up.

SP: The crazy things people do. After you left the college what have you been doing these last twenty years?

EH: Well, they wanted me to go in and take…the president then, I don’t remember who the president was at that time. They wanted me to stay; I’d been there forty years, of
course in the meantime they decided they didn’t want the…the aviation department had been closed and so a couple of years earlier. So I said, “You people are going to kick me out of here in another year.” I’d been there for forty and so I said, “I think what’s best is I better just take a month early retirement and you hire somebody that can be there permanent in the operation.” But I, in fact I now…if I ever go to the foodservice or the housing there’s people that know me that got me in there. So they treat me royally, especially the food service and the bookstore especially because I managed those—all of those.

SP: Do you own this company here at the Rexburg Airport?

EH: Yes. We have two companies Hart Enterprises and Aero Technicians. Hart Enterprises, when I was at the college of course at 1946 I started Hart Enterprises because in those days I started to work with 1500 dollars a year. So that wasn’t enough. The president, even the president I think only was getting 1800 or 2000 a year. So there wasn’t enough money. I had the opportunity and there was a local guy here in Rexburg, Brother Garner, his son lives up near the campus, but he had a sand and gravel business. His son was on a mission. He needed some equipment. He needed a tractor and a bulldozer and a something that…so I arranged for, to buy it and loan it to him and he would pay me so much a month. After three years why he went out of business. He brought my tractor over. In the meantime, I mean I built the basement in my house after the…closed. So I was in the construction business. Then when the school went out of business then I gave you a brochure didn’t I?

SP: Yep.

EH: Then you’ll notice it says successor to…once was Ricks College Aviation Department. So in 1978 when the college went out of the aviation business we founded that organization, a non-profit educational foundation. We still teach airplane piloting and flight mechanics.

SP: Do you still fly?

EH: No, I can’t anymore I lost my medical. I can’t complain I had fifty-five years as a flight instructor.

SP: Who teaches the flight school right now?

EH: Right now, one of our instructors is in school this February. Our flight mechanics instructor is Dan Pierce. He has done [it] for many, many years. My son is certified to teach helicopter, and I can still repair airplanes. I don’t have time now. I’m taking care of books and stuff.

I was really interested with working with the brethren of the church; they were really honest and forthright. My wife was twelve years older than me. I’m just now after two months keeping her commandment. She was twelve years older than me and when she retired as a schoolteacher, she was out here. Three times a week at least she said,
“Eldon you have five days after you put me in the ground to find a pretty gal to start a new family with…and to take care of you.” So I married this gal from the Philippines the 23rd day of November last year.

SP: How long after your wife passed away?

EH: Oh, must be ten years.

SP: Thank you very much.

EH: I appreciate getting copies of that unit.

SP: When did you write that history?

EH: I think it was soon after I retired from the college. I’d have to go back and see…

SP: If we turn up anything else we’ll let you know.

EH: I was thinking it was about fifty or sixty pages. So you made me a copy.

SP: Yep.