

## DU ORAL HISTORY 1984-2014

**Interviewee:** Daniel L. Ritchie

**Interviewer:** James R. Griesemer

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Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

- James Griesemer: [00:21](#) Welcome to the University of Denver's oral history. Our series begins in the mid 1980's when DU was on the brink of bankruptcy and continues to 2014 with the university a regional academic leader and poised for national prominence. The interviews in this series present a panorama of progress against steep odds. Stories told by men and women who were personally involved in saving the university and undertaking an extraordinary process of renewal. Their narratives are a true renaissance tale. To continue our story, I'm joined by Daniel L. Ritchie, University of Denver's Chancellor Emeritus. Dan served as chancellor of the university for some 16 years from 1989 to 2005. Dan, welcome back to DU's oral history.
- James Griesemer: [01:13](#) In the first part of our interview, we talked about the significant role that education played in your early life and about your successful business career. We also discussed how you came to become part of the DU board and the very challenging financial conditions that you found. Those difficult issues ultimately led your colleagues on the board to ask you to become the chancellor of the University of Denver. In part one of our interview, you described the steps taken by yourself and others at the university, which ultimately led to a dramatic financial turnaround. That coupled with your legendary fundraising ability, provided the foundation for a physical and academic renewal, which we've called the DU renaissance. There's much more to cover and we'll do that. But first I'd like to take a step back. I think our viewers would like to know how you ever discovered Colorado in the first place.
- Daniel Ritchie: [02:12](#) By chance, is the short answer. What the really two pieces to it. I guess the first one, I was a freshman in college, uh, two classmates and I drove out from Cambridge, uh, without an overnight. We just took turns driving to go skiing in Aspen. That would be the winter of 50-51. When the, uh, the chairlift, uh, at, uh, Aspen was virtually brand new. I'd never seen a chairlift before and not many others had either, apparently because they, uh, maybe filled one in 10 chairs is what it was a single chair and they put a blanket around you, unthinkable today. And I was frankly scared because you looked down and thought, oh my gosh, there's this thing. But anyway, we had a wonderful time and the skiing was so much better than New Hampshire and Vermont. I won't forget what it was like to this day. But then having that experience. Uh, then my junior year I took a, an

economics class under a professor by the name of John Kenneth Galbraith, who was a very liberal economist who thought the Soviet Union almost got it right. Central planning was the way to go with just a few tweaks. It would have been fine. And I had a terrible time in that class because even then I was not a, uh, a not in the same place, uh, in economics as he was by any means. And we had arguments in class. I always lost. Of course. I barely passed the course and I decided after that that I was going to get serious about economics. Uh, I didn't think I could ever stand up to him, but I could give him a, a fit for a while. And so what I thought I would do is to spend the next summer studying economics, reading the early folks, the John Adams and Canes and so on.

Daniel Ritchie: [04:42](#)

And so I thought, why not Colorado? So I wrote a, a Boulder University of Colorado Boulder and asked if I could come out and use their stacks to do that. I didn't want to take another course. And uh, they wrote back a very nice note saying, sure, come on out, we'll give you a pass to the stacks and we'll find you a place to stay. This is such nice people. Anyway, I spent the summer, had a wonderful time, climbed Long's peak, uh, over the weekend and we saw only one other couple and which has changed a bit since that time. But the main thing that it told me was how nice the people were. Everybody was so nice to me. They'd never seen me before. They didn't ask, how rich are you, or poor are you, or who are your parents? Uh, it was a wonderful experience. And that's what really convinced me that Colorado is the best place on earth.

James Griesemer: [05:45](#)

Well, Colorado and the University of Denver are both lucky that you fell in love with our beautiful place. Let me turn, if I may, to continue our story of the events that occurred as you were chancellor to the, to the matter of athletics. Um, taking the University of Denver to Division One in sports was a major financial commitment and not without risk. Why did you want or think about, DU going to Division One? Can you tell us that story?

Daniel Ritchie: [06:16](#)

Uh, there's a lot to the story actually, but just quickly, uh, actually what triggered this, uh, was I went to a women's basketball game, uh, and the, uh, what was the, the court and uh, there may have been 20 people there and I sat next to a woman who, it turns out was the coach to the women's volleyball I believe. And uh, we began to talk and, uh, I asked her how a recruiting was going for the next year and she said, I don't know. And I thought, oh, we have the wrong coach. And, but it turns out as she went on to explain that being division two, you really didn't know until all the Division One folks have decided who they wanted and you could have your choice of what was left.

And I thought that's not a very good place to be, but also of the, uh, so much was about quality.

- Daniel Ritchie: [07:27](#) Uh, again, nobody cares whether you're the national champion in division two and you can't attract the quality of student. And, and, uh, I really believe that athletics is more important than people generally realize about what, what it does for young people. It teaches you teamwork, it teaches you a commitment, discipline, putting the team before yourself. And I could talk about that for quite a while, uh, but also the, the health effects both mentally and physically as well. So I really believe that, uh, that consistent with our other thoughts about the university that if you're going to do something, do it as well, or better than anybody else does it. And while this, how the world could you think we'd ever do that? Uh, I wasn't sure, but I knew we had to try.
- James Griesemer: [08:33](#) Well, those days I remember you and I discussing this. I was the CFO and began to get a glimpse of how much this was going to cost the university and uh,
- Daniel Ritchie: [08:44](#) that was an afterthought.
- James Griesemer: [08:45](#) And as we were traveling around the country looking at programs I mentally kept adding up the bill and thinking, I hope we can find a way to pay for this. But we did and it was not just a, it was donations, but it was more than that. And there were figures like Joy Burns, for example, who played such a leadership role in across many dimensions. You and I often talk about Joy's wonderful contributions. Could you talk about a little bit?
- Daniel Ritchie: [09:17](#) Yes. I think if we had taken a vote among the faculty or the staff, we probably would have lost, but we had some very strong people led by Joy who is in the sports hall, Colorado Sports Hall of fame because of her support for women's athletics at a time when it was not popular or not viewed as being. But she had the, the right idea and she was serious about it and then we had a Bill Coors who believed in fitness and that's why we have the Coors fitness center. And Marion Gottesfeld. So between those three, but others as well, the, the, the board of trustees really was solidly there, recognizing the risk and they were willing to, to fill some financial gaps if we had to, if really got in trouble. So that's really what led us to, to be able to do what I really wanted to do.
- James Griesemer: [10:27](#) Well, and it's had such an impact on, on the university. One of the stories that you and I both had a chance to watch was the renewal of DU ski team. It, it, it's hard to imagine that the University of Denver abandoned skiing here in the Rocky Mountains, but we did. But under your guidance and with the

leadership of Otto Tshudi um, could you talk about that? It's a wonderful story.

- Daniel Ritchie: [10:57](#) Yes. Because as I said, skiing is something that I liked, appreciated. And I thought it was really fundamental to Colorado. I think we have as good or the best skiing I know anything about and for us not to be intimately involved in that just didn't seem like it was Colorado. But we also, in addition to a, to a skiing, we also brought back golf which had been cancelled and we had some good support, uh, for that. We also, after the coach, got to retirement age, we cancelled baseball because we felt we couldn't be competitive in college baseball because with the time it gets to be a baseball weather in Colorado, the season's about over in college and that we never could be a very good at it no matter what we did. So, that was not the most popular thing I ever did either, but we had a wonderful man who retired, was Coach Rose. And we, that added Lacrosse which had been here as a club basis for 25 years at that point, but was a great sport that we felt was coming on and that we could really be competitive at it. And so we, we, we added Lacrosse.
- James Griesemer: [12:43](#) and that's an understatement to say we could be competitive, we have been very competitive.
- Daniel Ritchie: [12:48](#) We won a national championship.
- James Griesemer: [12:50](#) Well, that's, athletics is, seems to me to be part of a larger focus you have about the whole matter of wellness in general. Could you share your kind of perspective on that, Dan?
- Daniel Ritchie: [13:03](#) Do you have a little time? I, yes. The history of that is for me, interesting. And you may want to cut this out, but, what happened is that when I was in Hollywood, my best friend there was Eddie Albert, who costarred with Eva Gabor in Green Acres. He was at the time the, the face of the environmental movement at a time when it wasn't generally accepted as a good idea because in part it was triggered by DDT and its effect on various things. And so he was very much into that, also into organics, food. Uh, we debated is organic the right name for it. Is there a better name? But we couldn't come up with a better name, but he played a major role in that.
- Daniel Ritchie: [14:08](#) And then he introduced me to a holistic doctor, which I didn't know existed, and Dr. Walters, who was viewed by the profession, the medical profession as being a quack, although he had all the credentials and they raided his office every few years to see if they could prove it, but they never did. So his introduction to that as I got into it, began to realize there was so much more that I didn't know and almost nobody did about

mental health as well as physical health and the importance of exercise over your whole life and the other advantages of that. But also, what you ate and how you lived and how you thought. It taught me how to do meditation. And so anyway, the combination of all of these things and Eddie really lived it. And, he, he horrified his their neighborhood when he tore out his front yard and planted beans and corn and, and so anyway, he set a great example of how to do it. And do it right. And his wife Margo was the same in the same vein. And, and she was, by the way, in her young days, really the, what I would call the Babe Ruth of the flamingo dancers in Mexico. And her story's a great story. But that's, I guess, outside of what we should be talking about

- James Griesemer: [16:01](#) You earlier in our discussion today and certainly in our discussion in our first part of the discussion, you talked a number of times about the whole matter of quality at DU. At DU that your focus and that focus has been manifest in our buildings are magnificent campus, quality of our faculty, our programs, student life, and so much more. Could you, and you and I've talked about this many times, but could you share for our viewers your views on quality and why is it so important?
- Daniel Ritchie: [16:35](#) It starts with why are we here? For goodness sake, we are to here to help young people become, all they can be and one size does not fit all. Just as some fits two. So this to, to deliver on that, is not so easy to do but, we had a faculty who believed in this as well and who really cared as our board did and the whole idea of being the best, or at least as good as you can be, is so much more fun. And, and I think, that's what this university could, should stand for and deliver. And that was really, because that we never forgot. That's why we're here. We're not here to have fun watching whatever, anyway.
- James Griesemer: [17:43](#) Well, and, and in, in that connection, you've also talked about being on the leading edge of things and not following, but being on the leading edge, which of course carries risk with it as well.
- Daniel Ritchie: [17:56](#) Yes.
- James Griesemer: [17:56](#) What are, what are your thoughts a little more on that?
- Daniel Ritchie: [17:58](#) Well, I have often said that if you're not on the leading edge, you're taking up too much space, but also it's much more fun than just and certainly there's risk. I mean, there's huge risks sometimes and but that's okay. Tell you a story about Eddie speaking of this reminds me, and you may want to cut this out too, I don't know. But anyway, he was in the navy in World War II in the Pacific where we had these bloody invasions of island after island by the marines. And he led a, one of the landing

craft, and one of the particular bloody situations. He, when he came back to the mother boat, he'd gone through bloody red water with people, dying with marines, so terrible, terrible story. And the, he went to this to his commanding officer of the ship and said, I've got to go back and save some of these people, uh, some of these marines.

- Daniel Ritchie: [19:11](#) And his CEO said, no, Eddie, you're not going to do that. You stay here because you'll just die and you'll lose the boat and you will not do any good. Eddie did it anyway. And, he was court marshaled, but he saved 15 marines and at his, at his funeral, the five of those marines turned up and spoke. I was just. But that's the kind of risks, you know, to do the really great stuff. You've got to take some time. I never took anything quite like that, but the principle is absolutely the same. You do what it takes to do the best you can and if that puts your life in danger or your reputation or whatever you do it for goodness sake.
- James Griesemer: [20:04](#) Well, one of the things that, that we haven't yet talked about, but so important is the DU board of trustees in all this. You've alluded to them a couple of times, but I'd like to probe a little deeper. You worked intimately with the board of course, on a wide variety of issues and is, as you and I and our viewers know in any organization, whether it's private, public or nonprofit, the effectiveness of the board is vital to the success of the, of the operation. I'd love to hear your views about, about the importance of board relationships and your experience and in particular perhaps the DU board and your relationships.
- Daniel Ritchie: [20:46](#) The, the board of course, is the governing body of the, of the place, and we had an extraordinary group of people who really cared and who we're not a subject to being termed out. Marion Gottesfeld, for example, if my memory is right, was on the board 43 years and she died on the anniversary of the day that she 43 years earlier had come on the board. So you had people who were really committed to the place and to the students and to, to our people. And so, we, but we worked with by consensus really, you know, we, I, I only recall one vote that was not unanimous. And that was one vote among the whole. I think there were 27 or eight then at the time. And that was done with (??) that as a matter of conscience, uh, it had to do with gay rights as I recall.
- Daniel Ritchie: [22:08](#) It was one member who just felt from a religious perspective, they couldn't do that. So you had people who, who were accustomed to discussing it and modifying as needed, but to finally get to, to a consensus where, so it was, it was collegiality as far as I could tell, there wasn't rivalry or people, they disagreed sometimes, as they should have and criticized me as sometimes they should have, but ultimately we all came together and again, that set an example for the whole organization. That



this was, if those folks could get along that well, the rest of us could too. And it really had a wonderful influence, I think on how we worked because again, when I went on the, when I took the job, not everybody thought I was a good idea, understandably. But, uh, they soon, after a while at least, realized that I was not there for me. I was really there for them and the, and the students. So that the original concern I had about being, having fights, a nice scene, if that's the right word, fights, just didn't occur here. We had disagreements, but we came together in a common cause.

- James Griesemer: [23:42](#) And I would, I would underscore for our viewers that, that board, in spite of the unanimity on votes, involved some of the strongest people I have ever met. I knew them all and I'm, so lest anyone believed that it was because they were not strong people.
- Daniel Ritchie: [24:02](#) No, they were not Yes folks who said whatever. That was not their MO.
- James Griesemer: [24:08](#) One, one of the things stand that, that we haven't talked about but has always been an interest to me is you came from a CEO capacity in the private sector. That's happened many times where CEO's and business leaders have come to universities and the track record in terms of their tenure is not, not sterling. Most last a year or two, maybe five, but never more. And yet you came to the university with that background. Um, but there was something about what you saw here and about your own perspective that allowed you to succeed so well. What, what did you think about vis-a-vi your business experience when you join the university, you have a very different place than a private corporation.
- Daniel Ritchie: [25:04](#) Uh, it was, is, a different place as it should be. But the principle of how you lead is the same in my view, to do either well, it should be a bottoms up process. The folks in the front line, whether it's in the classroom or on the athletic field or whatever it is, know more about it than you do than I did, anyway. And they need to be listened to and feel a part of it and know that you're there for them. You're not trying to use them for your own advancement or survival as the case may be. And it was the same for me all of my business life. I, that's how I operated. And uh, and that is how to operate in my view. And also to set the example of behavior that matches what you want them to be. That it's where you are on a team together and you're there to help one another and you're there at, on a shared mission that, that everybody agrees on what, what it should be.
- James Griesemer: [26:35](#) But certainly it certainly was effective as, as many folks would, would attest. I'd like if I may at this point to again perhaps take a step back and I'd like to talk about your ranches because I know

they've been a really important part of your life. So perhaps we could start with your ranch in Santa Barbara, California. Perhaps you could describe it and then tell us how you acquired it or how you got it.

- Daniel Ritchie: [27:05](#) It sounds good to like the rest of my life that are not part of a plan. A, what happened is that, well, my first few years at Westinghouse, I was asked to take over a number of businesses they had acquired during the Go-go sixties and figure out what to do with them to develop them to whatever or liquidate them or sell them or whatever. And one of the businesses they had acquired a was the Seven Up bottling company of Southern California, which covered a southern California and Nevada, the southern Nevada in Las Vegas. But they didn't have Ventura, Santa Barbara or San Louis Obispo counties. And, but it was owned by the widow of the founder of those for those three counties and, but it made all kinds of sense for us. So every so often I would drop by Santa Barbara, which was a nice task to tell her that, uh, she ever wanted to sell. We want to buy. And one time she asked if I would like to go with the man who was the president for her who belonged to the rancheros there, which were the predecessor and the inspiration really for the roundup riders of the Rockies. You went on weekends and longer times on horseback through wilderness. So of course I said sure. And so we went on a February day. It was in 1976. It turned out to be a beautiful day and it was a full moon and that we maybe eight or 10 of us sat around the campfire that night and palm trees. I thought, oh my goodness. And this was February and one of the people on the ride owned a, an avocado ranch. And we got talking about what was like and what the economics of it were, and so on.
- Daniel Ritchie: [29:11](#) At the end of that discussion, I said, Gee, I'd like to own an avocado ranch, but I don't have time to do my homework. And so where upon the young man that my host had brought along who was, who'd married his niece. He had been brought along to take care of the horses, spoke up and said, Mr. Richie, I'd just love to do your homework for you. Ah, OK why not? And he said, tell me, give me some parameters and I'll love to do that. So I told him a, it had a, had to have a great view. I didn't want to be down in the hole. It had to overlook the harbor, the Channel Islands or the Pacific,
- James Griesemer: [30:01](#) a pretty tough set of criteria.
- Daniel Ritchie: [30:04](#) Well, I said it has to be within 20 minutes of downtown Santa Barbara and I only have a million dollars to spend in those days. That was a lot of money and I thought anyway, and I kind of forgot about it honestly.



- Daniel Ritchie: [30:19](#) So one day I got a call in New York from a young man from a, I didn't know who it was, his name, he said hello, Mr. Ritchie, I'm Terry Hanson. And at first I couldn't remember who Terry Hansen was and then he spoke and then I began to remember. He said, I think I found what you're looking for. And I, this was almost a year later. And so I said, well, it turns out we've made a deal and I'm going to be at the Biltmore. Uh, I gave them the date that in February and if you'll meet me at sunrise will go look before I go do my due diligence. I'm not due there until nine o'clock. So we went and I was just stunned that it was everything and more that I imagined. And I, as a result of being so awed, because it was actually only 12 minutes from the Biltmore hotel.
- Daniel Ritchie: [31:18](#) And it was all of the things that we had talked about. Anyway, I was standing on a 30 foot bank after it had rained the night before with my mouth open and my eyes bulging, I'm sure. And gave way beneath me. I fell 30 feet, tore up one leg, ended up in the hospital and on crutches to do my due diligence, but it was love. And um, I, we did it and it was a little less than a million dollars. He asked if he could be the first manager and I said, you've done your sure. But the problem was his wife however, was not a ranch person. She was a city woman and she didn't like what it took to be, but what really did it is one night a coyote got her cat and he called and said, Dan, I'm sorry, leave or divorce. And uh, anyway, that's the story.
- James Griesemer: [32:23](#) Well, I've been on, on that ranch. The views are just breathtaking on the, on the side of the Santa Barbara mountains.
- Daniel Ritchie: [32:28](#) Oh and I should have added that. I added property over the years. That was a 160 acres and I ended up with a lot more than that.
- James Griesemer: [32:38](#) How, roughly, how large was it?
- Daniel Ritchie: [32:39](#) A little over a thousand.
- James Griesemer: [32:42](#) And you had water rights and
- Daniel Ritchie: [32:45](#) Right, and also it was a, a, at the bottom of it was 900 feet above sea level. The top was 2000 and the bigger mountains yet by some margin behind, but it was an inversion area so that in cold weather, which you, you get some time in Santa Barbara, it was like 10 degrees warmer than Santa Barbara. So it was better than I knew
- James Griesemer: [33:15](#) the perfect, perfect, place.
- Daniel Ritchie: [33:17](#) accidental. The whole thing was.

- James Griesemer: [33:18](#) And then, and then, there was your Colorado, Colorado ranch, the Grand River ranch. Yes. Which begins in Kremmling, Colorado. I know that ranch as well and have had the pleasure, visited a number of times. You and I have hiked a good part of it. And I know how much it meant to you. That was a major undertaking also. How did you assemble that ranch and ultimately how large was it?
- Daniel Ritchie: [33:45](#) It started too relatively small. My first, it was a piece that was owned by a bankrupt REIT in Georgia. It was the only thing they owned outside of Georgia because they liked to hunt and fish so. But, they got in trouble. And so I was able to, it was 6,000 acres I ended up with just under a 100 square miles of deeded ground. That
- James Griesemer: [34:17](#) hundred, 100,000 acres?
- Daniel Ritchie: [34:20](#) No, no, let me try again. Well, what I meant to say was a, it ended up at just under 100 square miles, which was 62,000 acres. 64,000 I think is a hundred square miles. And uh, it went from the mile and a half frontage on the north side of the Colorado River, uh, to through Muddy Pass and into North Park. And so it includes almost five miles of the continental divide that runs east of the Muddy Pass.
- James Griesemer: [34:59](#) And you also had had leased land.
- Daniel Ritchie: [35:04](#) There was federal and state land that uh, yes, there's a lot of.
- James Griesemer: [35:08](#) So in total was 100,000 acres or thereabouts?
- Daniel Ritchie: [35:13](#) No, I imagine it was that, it may be a little more, but I don't really know.
- James Griesemer: [35:19](#) It was a beautiful place. And I, and, and I recall in fact all of your neighbors used to remark of the fact that when you bought another ranch and added it, that you repaved all the roads fixed up, fixed up all the cabins and it was, and they said, how does he do that?
- Daniel Ritchie: [35:36](#) And rebuilt the fences, more importantly.
- James Griesemer: [35:38](#) Absolutely. Absolutely. Well so you had these two wonderful ranches, one in California, one in Colorado. Places and I know how much you love them. And then you gave it all away to the University of Denver.
- Daniel Ritchie: [35:58](#) Yes.

- James Griesemer: [35:59](#) It's a legendary story here at the university. What made you do it in and why did you give it all to the University of Denver?
- Daniel Ritchie: [36:06](#) Um, I was going to say, I'm not quite sure why, but no, it was needed to do what needed to be done. Uh, the ranch in Santa Barbara, uh, uh, really, uh, paid for much of the engineering and computer science facility. And the, the Colorado ranch was sold in pieces to do different things that needed to be done. And I, uh, I had often said that, that it'll, uh, that I I would keep the ranches before DU, until either the sheriff took them or the undertaker. I was wrong.
- James Griesemer: [36:57](#) Those properties brought the university roughly \$100,000,000, which today would be worth much more. Um, but it was a pivotal point. It inspired others and it moved the university, as you said, um a great way. You know, finally, I guess throughout this interview, at various points you've talked about values, you talked about cowboy ethics, talked about values and a number of ways. I'd be interested in, in learning more about the values that you've carried through your life and certainly here at the university that motivated you and why they were so important to you.
- Daniel Ritchie: [37:47](#) I guess the one word that I would start with is being trustworthy. The second is being grateful because as you've heard, I've been really lucky to have my father, a professor in college and the, the ranches were to some considerable degree, not by preplanning. So I, uh, I'm really grateful for what I've been given and I wonder why all this happened and I really don't know the answer but, but I, it is out of a and love really for our, our people and uh, and for the mission of the university and to set an example personally, but also for the university to set an example for others, in athletics for example. We don't recruit thinking about the best athlete, but really we recruit thinking about character, because that's what makes a great team, winning is a side benefit. But the real benefit is teaching young people the values that we have discussed and that's why I've done what I've done and then I'm really lucky and, uh, and I've enjoyed and, and, and grateful not only to the folks that I mentioned, but to so many others who've made such a difference for me. So the very least I can do is pass it along.
- James Griesemer: [39:40](#) Well, Chancellor Emeritus, Dan Ritchie I can't thank you enough for your contributions to our oral history and of course, for what you've done for the University of Denver. I hope you'll join us in the future as we continue the story of the University of Denver's remarkable renaissance. I'm Jim Griesemer. Thank you for watching.