

## DU ORAL HISTORY – 1985 TO 2014

**Interviewee: Victor (Vic) Quinn**

**Interviewer: James R. (Jim) Griesemer**

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Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

- Jim 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 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.
- Jim Griesemer: [00:58](#) To continue our story, I'm joined by Victor Quinn, who served as general counsel to the University of Denver in addition to a distinguished legal career serving a wide variety of clients as a principal in the law firm of Cockrell, Quinn and Creighton. Vic served as DU's outside legal counsel for some 50 years. In that position, he played a key role in helping to advise the University during some of its darkest hours. Vic Quinn, welcome to DU's oral history. Let's start with your background. Where did you grow up? Where'd you go to school?
- Vic Quinn: [01:37](#) Well, I'm a native Coloradan. I was born in the metropolis of Whetmore. If you know where Whetmore is, you know, Colorado pretty well, but our family moved a number of times. I was born, of course in 31, which was the depths of the depression, right. And we went wherever my father could find work. But we moved back from South Dakota to Idaho Springs in 1941. And uh, I went to school in Idaho Springs, graduated in 1948 from Idaho Springs High School. At the ripe old age of 16. I started school at the University of Colorado

and I graduated with a degree in finance and 1952, went to law school at CU. Graduated in 1955 and then came down to Denver and began practicing law.

Jim Griesemer: [02:48](#)

So you're native Coloradan. When and how did you get connected with DU? How did that occur?

Vic Quinn: [02:56](#)

Well, I joined the firm that was then known as Henry and Adams in 1955. Arthur Henry, who was the senior partner in the firm, had represented the University for a good many years. It was kind of a long story, but, uh, he had represented the University. And uh, in fact was a trustee for a time in the late fifties and early sixties. And uh, so the representation of the University was a continuation and uh, as a junior member of the firm, I started in with the jobs that you would expect a junior lawyer to have. But part of that involved the University and then gradually, um, in 1959, John Adams, who was the other partner in the firm, died unexpectedly and that left kind of a hole and the firm and, out of necessity I kind of got plugged into some of the things he had done for the University, which was, of course, fortunate for me not so fortunate for John and his family. And then just continued on from there.

Jim Griesemer: [04:29](#)

As general counsel during DU's financial struggles in the 1980's, and then financial turnaround in the 1990's, you were in a unique position to observe a whole series of events during that time as well as before and after. When we were talking with Dwight Smith, DU's former chancellor from 1984 to 1989, he described the mid 1980's as sort of a perfect storm. As the clouds were gathering for that storm in the early and mid-eighties, from your perspective is as a professional advisor to the, to the leadership of the University, what was, what was going on? Were there signs of trouble and if so, what were they?

Vic Quinn: [05:20](#)

Well, in in retrospect of course it's easier to see, I think. But the University as most schools in the

west I think, had had a relatively modest endowment. Uh, after the war, there were lots of students. The GI's came back, the GI bill financed that education and things went along quite nicely. But the result was that the University was heavily tuition dependent and after the GI rush sort of abated, there was much more of a competition for students. And that coincided with a time when the state was building and developing college facilities in Denver, downtown Denver. Um, and you had a, what used to be called the CU extension, which is now CU Denver, a Metropolitan State College, which is now Metropolitan State University and Community College. And my sense looking back is that when we hit the sixties, the competition for students was such that the student population at the University of Denver dropped, and since the University was heavily dependent on tuition revenues, that created a problem. And I think that coincided too, with a time when the University was building new facilities, which is useful, but expensive. And uh, it got to a sort of a cash crush as businesses sometimes do experience. But that's my sense of it.

Jim Griesemer: [07:44](#)

And, was it at that time that the University of Denver also took over the Colorado Women's College and then the law school was built? Or was that later in that period?

Vic Quinn: [08:02](#)

That was a little later. The CWC acquisition was in early 1982 and it came up quite suddenly in my recollection. CWC was a women's college of course. And uh, I think it was suffering from the fact that single sex education was beginning to phase out by that time. And it was having financial difficulties, which they tried to work out in in various ways for a number of years. And then my recollection is that all of a sudden in 81, and early 1982, the wheels just essentially came off and they were in a position where they simply didn't have operating funds and, uh, so they approached the University to acquire the school and that proceeded fairly quickly, uh, an agreement was reached whereby looking at it from

a legal standpoint, the University acquired the campus and the assets of the CWC, and it assumed certain specific liabilities and obligations of CWC, but it was not a merger or a situation in which the University simply assumed all of the debts of CWC. At that time, we had pretty good information, but the University just wasn't willing to assume all of the liabilities without knowing what they were. And, in today's dollars looking back. And I did go back and take a look at the acquisition agreement, the, the numbers were not huge. Uh, but at the time the University was also suffering from some of these same problems.

Vic Quinn: [10:44](#)

So the acquisition of the University not only involved additional liabilities, but, in order to finish out that school year, the University had to assume the costs of operating which were substantial and in those days. Uh, and also, uh, it was, I suppose you could say it was a diversion or an opportunity depending on how you look at it, but of course taking over and operating an institution, which is foundering involves a great deal of time and effort both from the trustees but also faculty, staff and other folks. Uh, so that kind of added to the University's problems, certainly in a long run sense. I don't think I ever saw a, it arrayed in this fashion, but I think it was a good decision. The University, uh, built a law school on the CWC campus, which permitted it to sell the prior law school, which was downtown. So it reaped that. And then later on the University sold the CWC campus. I think if you look at it in a long term, it probably was a good decision, but it did exacerbate some of the problems the University had at that time.

Jim Griesemer: [12:39](#)

Right. And, and the law when the law school was moved from downtown and rebuilt the building on the CWC campus, Colorado Women's college campus I assume that brought in some additional debt to the University to build a building so you can see things sort of piling up in a way.

- Vic Quinn: [13:00](#) Well, yes, that's, that's true. The sale of the law school property downtown funded part of that. But, uh, I think the law school was growing at that time and yes, as one the trustees, who I think was a lawyer, said at one time law school as sort of a cash register you have a lot of students, you don't have laboratories and elaborate buildings and you can charge a substantial tuition so that that's considered a pretty good operation for a University.
- Jim Griesemer: [13:47](#) So the, the culmination, the combination of those events that you described, which parallels exactly what Dwight Smith, who was the chancellor at the time a shared with us during his interview, Um Dwight Smith, his leadership team, faculty members, trustees, began by the mid-1980 to have to deal with a lot of difficult things. Um, how did they, how did they handle these problems? You were obviously not the decision maker, but you were observing close in. Can you tell us about that period, the kinds of decisions that folks had to make and how they came about them?
- Vic Quinn: [14:38](#) Well, you're right, we were'nt closely involved in the financial side of it, but, I do, I do recall a meeting with Dwight Smith and Lucian Wilson, who was the chair of the board of trustees at that time. And the, the gist of the that was looking at the University's operations uh from a legal standpoint. Uh, was it a situation where University ought to begin to consider a legal alternative, uh, and particularly some form perhaps of bankruptcy protection or reorganization. And I remember being somewhat surprised at that because I, I hadn't realized things were quite that, that dire and Lucian who, who was a retired business executive in a very, very savvy fellow, uh, asked me if I thought it would be worthwhile at that time to engage for consultation, at least, counsel who was a specialist in bankruptcies and reorganizations and that sort of thing. And I was taken aback, but I think I said something to the effect that, well, certainly that could, that could be wise if it got to that point. But it seemed to me that if the board

was thinking in those terms and that became known, that would be difficult for the University when it was struggling financially and trying to attract students and donors, to be in a situation where people would think, well, will the University survive? And uh, we didn't engage specialized council. So I, I think at that point the trustees decided it could be saved. And it was.

Jim Griesemer: [17:31](#)

Was indeed. And that's a perfect segue to, by mid-1989, Dan Ritchie became chancellor. Dan, of course, had served on the board of trustees for several years, uh was asked to become chancellor. The University was struggling. It just as you described in many different fronts and it was a difficult problem. When Dan came aboard, you were our council, what kinds of things did you and Dan talk about early on, obviously over the years are lots and lots of things, but early on, what kinds of things did you and Dan talk about?

Vic Quinn: [18:12](#)

Well, of course, Dan Ritchie, Dan Ritchie would certainly qualify, I think as the savior if they had to look at any one person. And he was uh, I think a unique kind of personality. I don't remember a conversation so much with, with Dan about financial matters, but as, as you know, um, Dan decided to donate his ranches on the western slope to the University and these were ranches that Dan had put together over a long, fairly long period of time. And they extended into two counties there on the western slope. He decided and advised the trustees that he would donate these ranches, which were really almost like his children, I think, to the University as, as a way, I think in his mind of stimulating others to make donations. And I remember trustees meeting where he announced this and I said to Dan afterward that I thought it was really a transformative gift.

Vic Quinn: [19:58](#)

I didn't realize the magnitude of it at that time, but over a period of time, the University sold all of these ranches. I don't remember how many sales there must've been about a half a dozen.

Jim Griesemer: [20:16](#)

Even more perhaps,

Vic Quinn: [20:17](#)

You know, he sort of dismembered what he had built up. And then the center part of it was sold. I, as I recall, as the last portion, and of course we, we conferred with Dan during that time because I learned pretty quickly that in any room of people, if Dan was there, he was the smartest person in the room. It really didn't matter who was in the room, but he was heavily involved in that, as well as his counsel Barney White who to put in a little plug for my own alma mater, Barney White, as you know, son of Byron White, a better known in Colorado is Whizzer White who was an all American football player and then later at the end of his career, a member of the United States Supreme Court for quite a number of years. But Dan was involved in the sale of those properties. Um, and at the end of that, for the development people, I totaled it up the total and the total was something above \$50 million dollars for these ranches and of course at that time that, that was just crucial to the University. So

Jim Griesemer: [21:56](#)

That period contained lots of events, lots of activities as we were trying to get the University turned around. Um, what stories stick with you during that, let's say between 90, 1990 and 1995. Um, are there any stories that sort of stick with you during that period?

Vic Quinn: [22:19](#)

Well, I don't think of any specific thing, but you know as these things sometimes work out, it turns out for the better, in, in one way or another as somebody once put it, whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. But the University's board of trustees, this is sort of my impression over a long period of time, had been a board that was made up of sort of the blue ribbon business, financial and legal communities. And the people were obviously all able people, but it was something that sort of went with the territory in the sense that they weren't, they weren't chosen as they are now, I think for specific kinds of things. And it wasn't bound together in quite the same way. And it

seemed to me that the board really came together during that span of time in a way that's continued. And I guess you'd have to say there, there had to be a sense of optimism there because it was pretty dark. As you know. But with Dan's leadership and the leadership that came from the board, um, that sort of optimism just seemed to carry through. And I think that did generate a gifts that came to the University and the University just improved and got better during all that time.

Jim Griesemer: [24:38](#)

One of the things that I recall, um, when Dan gave his ranch or was about to, um, the University, um has under the Colorado Constitution an absolute tax exemption from state taxes. And, Dan was the largest taxpayer in Grand County and I remember you wisely suggesting that we meet with the Grand County Commission because they were about to lose their largest tax base. Do you have any recollection of that that was a brilliant idea on your part?

Vic Quinn: [25:17](#)

Well, yes and I, and I think that that may have been stimulated to some extent, by a conversation that I had with the county treasurer. And, the, the University's tax exemption is unique, I think in Colorado because it's, it, it's part of the charter which was granted by the territorial legislature of Colorado in 1864. And charitable and educational properties under Colorado Law are entitled to tax exemption to the extent that they're used for that purpose. So a University campus is entitled to tax exemption. But that exemption by General Statute does not apply to income producing property. The property has to be used in the educational function. And, of course we advised the county treasurer, as we do always when the University acquires property in a new county, of the exemption and she relayed this onto the board of county commissioners and as she put it, one of the commissioners was aghast by that and said, how can that be? How could they simply take our tax base away, not pay taxes on it? And, it, it just seemed to me that since the University intended to sell it, it probably did



make sense to go ahead and pay the taxes during that relatively short period of time. And, I don't know whether that was good advice or not.

Jim Griesemer: [27:29](#)

I think it was excellent advice. And, and as you say, over a period of several years, we sold, sold the ranch, which was wonderful for the University. And, and, uh, ended up putting all that back on the tax rolls for the county. So it was a, so it was a good, a good thing. Um, all around. Let me change the subject, if I may, just a little bit during those years that you were very close to what was going on, both dealing with the problems that we've talked about, the and the financial and other pressures and during the turnaround period, you described the optimism of the board, so on. And then, and the numerous decisions that were made as, as folks dealt with these challenges and opportunities, what values do you think guided, um, administrators and trustees and faculty? Um, was there any kind of, sort of overall approach or theme that um sort of reflected the University's values that you could discern over those many years?

Vic Quinn: [28:44](#)

Oh, well, yes. I think there was a sense of optimism and it seemed to me that, and this came, I think particularly from Dan, that even though things were difficult, the University had to deal fairly with everybody. Uh, that, uh, it simply didn't make sense to say, well, we're having difficulties help us out. Um, and, I think that was Dan's personality also that things could be resolved and surmounted and, and I think that, but I think that cut both ways. I think Dan's view was that the University had to be sort of a paradigm in the way it dealt with it's various constituencies, but on the other hand, if the University was not being treated fairly, then it ought to react in a way that got things straightened out. And I remember, I think it was along during that time in, and you've probably got some recollection of this also.

- Vic Quinn: [30:13](#) The University had made an arrangement with a group to provide some classes in the college of business and it was not going well at all. And, uh, it didn't appear to be a situation that was going to get any better. So the decision was made that it had to be terminated. Yeah, I remember we had a meeting over in the old offices of the chancellor over South of Iliff there. I think it was a Saturday morning. And so I finally said after the discussion seemed to be going in the direction that this had to be terminated and it had to be done quickly and with finality. And so I said, well, we can terminate the contract. They'll undoubtedly take the position that that's not legally justified, but if the University is going to step in and get these people out, it seems to me we really need literally to lock them out.
- Vic Quinn: [31:48](#) And that decision was made and we did. They were locked out. The University took over and of course they sued immediately and we had a hearing on a motion they made for a temporary restraining order to restrain the University. But, that failed because the University had already done this and a restraining order is intended to stop you. Judge said, well, you've got other remedies. But, but I remember that because it sort of surprised me because, you know, I knew we'd be sued immediately and that turned out that way. But. But that was something Dan was willing to do. He thought that was right.
- Jim Griesemer: [32:38](#) As you, we've, we've talked about several things, but as you look back over this period of 30 years from sort of the debt, the depths of the great financial problems to today, where the University is, is just, um doing wonderfully well in many different dimensions. Seeing and living through that period of change. What are your overriding impressions? Um, as you think back about it, sort of what do you, what do you think about in terms of this transition and what I've called renaissance that occurred?

Vic Quinn:

[33:17](#)

Well, in a broad sense, it seems to me that it's an example of the genius of this country, which is to have institutions in the private sector as opposed to a governmental sector where education is a function of government, uh, and, and the way that people who are volunteers as the trustees are, and my recollection Dan Richard didn't draw a salary either during any of this time, uh, that, that kind of enthusiasm and optimism and desire to do things both locally and on a relatively small scale is exemplified by what happened. The University could have failed at that time but, people banded together. And just wouldn't let it fail. And so looking back, without waving the flag too much, I really think that's the genius of this country and it is exemplified here and, and the result is just spectacular. People come on this campus and they're just, they just consider it a jewel. And that carries over to the faculty and, and everybody else. It's, it's been marvelous, I think.

Jim Griesemer:

[35:16](#)

What a wonderful perspective you've, you've shared with us in terms of the University's going from great difficulty to its position today. Vic. Thank you so much for contributing to our oral history and sharing insights about the process of transformation and, and a renaissance that occurred at the University. 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.