

**Oral History Interview with Tom Sykes**  
**Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow**  
**June 16, 2009**

**[Start: 00:00:00]**

**JS: Today is June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I am conducting an oral history interview with a retired staff at his home. Could you please state your name?**

TS: State my name. Is Tom Sykes, S-Y-K-E-S.

**JS: What was your job title at Lawrence?**

TS: Director of Media Services.

**JS: What were the years that you were there?**

TS: Summer of 1984 to the spring of 2009.

**JS: Where did you grow up?**

TS: I'm a townie. Appleton, Wisconsin, born and pretty much raised.

**JS: What types of interests did you have growing up, subject areas? I know that you do a lot of photography and birding.**

TS: Well, growing up in Appleton, I think interests prior to graduating high school were learning how to drive and partying a lot. I wouldn't call myself a serious high school student. But post high school, things kind of improved a little bit and that's when I think I blossomed again when I became interested in things other than partying and driving cars. A lot of the things that I have been interested in and have done well in, my artwork and bird watching probably didn't start until after I was done in Vietnam.

**JS: What brought you to Lawrence? How did you learn about the job opening?**

TS: Well, it was interesting. Prior I had been working at Theda Clark regional medical center for 7 years. Started off in the purchasing department and an opening became available in their AV department. Then, my super interest in photography and videography led me to apply for that, too. I got it. Pretty much wrote my own job description at Theda Clark, until they ran out of money for the position and then I was summarily let do. I was drifting around for about a year. A friend of mine said "I just saw an ad in the paper for a position at Lawrence University. Today is the deadline to get your resume in. You might want to give it a shot." So I immediately grabbed my resume and walked over to the library, handed it over to Dennis Ribbens, who I engaged in conversation for the next hour about Aldo Leopold, an interest in all things environment, and I got a call back the next day for a formal interview, which lasted a couple of hours, and the next day I was offered the position.

**JS: Do you remember who all was present at your interview besides Dennis?**

TS: It was just Dennis.

**JS: Nice interview.**

TS: Yeah, he took me around and introduced me to various staff at the library. But he primarily conducted and concluded the interview. At the time, my two predecessors had been part-time media director and then part-time assistant to the university librarian. This was the first full-time media director staff position that Lawrence had had.

**JS: Growing up in Appleton, and always being aware that Lawrence was there, what was your perception of Lawrence before working there?**

TS: Well, it was very different. When I was growing up, I took one formal art class and that was with Tom Dietrich's wife, who was teaching a summer oil painting class at the university. I remember going into what was then, prior to the art center, the Worcester Center and taking art classes. It was fun, I enjoyed it but they had a small lecture hall and I was much more fascinated with all the lighting and the buttons and the machinery involved in Worcester. Here, years later when I started working at Lawrence, there it was all again, only this time I was actually going in and being able to work with the equipment. Growing up as I did along the Fox River near the campus, I spent a lot of time walking through the campus. Whenever I could, I would go into the library and do a little research when I was in high school. But that was my extent of familiarity with Lawrence. Usually it was a place where I would just ride my bicycle through.

**[00:05:29]**

**JS: Where was the Media Center when you started?**

TS: The Media Center was on what is now called Level A. The Media Center was a fairly large area. At one point they decided that they were going to have a television studio, until they understood the true cost of equipping such a studio and staffing it. Or for that matter, what the real need for having a television studio was at Lawrence University at the time. Didn't seem to be very practical. But they had a darkroom and immediately adjacent to my space in the Media Center was WLFM radio station. We shared some of the shelving in the caged area where they kept their recordings, and I kept a minimal amount of recordings and LPs that the library possessed to play on the three turntables that they had. There were also some listening station carrels dedicated strictly to foreign language that, between the time I started and the time it was remodeled, I could count on one hand the number of times classes were actually held there. So the need for some very expensive equipment, which had been donated as part of a grant. It was obvious that that stuff had to go, so when we remodeled, that's where the first listening stations were developed.

**JS: And when you remodeled, that was in what year?**

TS: It was the same year that the conservatory library came over, was put together with the library collection. It was pretty soon after I started work. I think it was 1987, '88 maybe.

**JS: And the Media Center came down to the first floor?**

TS: It came down to the first floor after Dennis Ribbens had left and Susan Richards had become the University Librarian. And under her guidance, the Media Center was folded into the first floor, and Level A then became pretty much where the periodicals are housed. Current and past.

**JS: So when it was remodeled in '87 or '88, everything stayed on Level A?**

TS: Yes. There was quite an extensive remodeling. It was about that time that WLFM was moved back over to the conservatory. The Career Center took up residence in the space that the radio station had vacated. And a couple of large rooms that, one of them I had already modified into a large classroom, then a second large space became a second large classroom and video viewing area. The flow of traffic in the Media Center was modified. A place where there were several large study tables, we increased the lighting and the overall feeling of comfort and openness in the Media Center.

**JS: And so it stayed that was from around '87 to about...**

TS: About 2003, maybe? 2004?

**JS: When you started in '84, how many people were part of the library staff?**

TS: Well, there was the University Librarian, the head of Circulation, we had the head of Technical Services, and there were I believe in Technical Services, three other staff. Circulation did have a night-time assistant, that was Carol Palmquist. And the University Librarian also served as a reference librarian and I believe – let's see, one, two, three other reference librarians? No music librarian.

**JS: So you were doing media and the music library?**

TS: Yes. And we separated items, actually circulated at the front desk, but the collection was kept up on Level A for all of the music conservatory and the DVDs, or excuse me the videotapes, there weren't any DVDs at that time. And there weren't any CDs at that time, either. Audiocassettes. Some larger three-quarter inch videotapes, half-inch videotape was just starting to come into play. And LPs.

**[00:11:18]**

**JS: What was it like in the library, since there were no computers yet? Were there typewriters around or did students handwrite a lot of things?**

TS: There were some typing carrels up on the upper floors. The card catalog system was all paper. We had a conservatory card catalog, a music card catalog, on Level A. And the rest of the library card catalog system was on the first floor, where the principal computer kiosks are now situated. It wasn't until 1986 that I got my first computer. It was an Apple Macintosh. Not long after that, we got the first laser printer on the campus, and that was located in the Media Center, and very quickly became a very popular printer, especially for students at the end of each term when they were printing off their term papers. I remember going through ream after ream after ream of paper and lots of ink.

**JS: I can relate to that. Your whole time there as Media Services Director you were responsible for recording events like Commencement.**

TS: Yes. Actually, Larry Page was the engineer at WLFM, and Larry had a lot to do with the sound set-up, for example, at Commencement, for assisting for Reunion Weekend sound placements when Gil Swift was there, head of alumni, and then on the Conservatory side, for setting up convocations and recording convocations and setting up the sound and recording of Freshman Studies. Larry did a lot of that, but I could backstop him when he was on vacation. And eventually when Larry left, I assumed that responsibility of setting up the sound for events in the Chapel, for recording convocations, recording Freshman Studies, for setting up sound, and then doing Commencement, and getting much more involved in Reunion Weekend. At the same time, there was a lot of equipment that was being used around campus to support various academic needs: overhead projectors and tape recorders, slide projectors, screens, and supportable sound, although that was pretty much handled by Paul Shrode over in Campus Activities. Over time of course that all changed when eventually they hired Dave Owens in Music-Drama and he and I would do Freshman Studies, eventually he took that over. And then of course Larry Darling and the development of the music library. I think a lot of the interest for the Conservatory taking over the recording, particularly of convocations, was that the musical preludes to the Commencements were not recorded in the past. And then they requested that they be recorded, but recording quality wasn't nearly what it is today, so I think that's been a very good benefit for the University to have Larry doing the recording that he is with the degree of skill that he presents.

**JS: In doing all of these different recordings, did something ever go terribly awry, like you thought you were recording an event and then the event was over and you went back to play it back and it had never picked up the event, or like working with all of the notable speakers with convocation?**

TS: In all of the years that I recorded, all of the Freshman Studies, all of the convocations, I never once had a problem where it didn't get recorded.

**JS: That's really great!**

TS: Yeah, I really hadn't thought about that. But that's true, I never lost a recording.

**[00:16:00]**

**JS: Were there any types of student groups or activities that you were a part of, like did you work with students regarding photography or any kinds of organizations like that at Lawrence?**

TS: There was another darkroom on campus and that was in the Art Center. And eventually when the Art Center was remodeled and in its present day configuration, the darkroom was expanded and at the time, when the darkroom was new, anybody wishing to use a darkroom outside of a photography class had the access of the darkroom in the Media Center, so I was helping people with their darkroom use and chemicals and paper, and basically how to develop film and print paper and that kind of support. Mainly because of my interest in photography, which I had done. I was involved in the Neenah Photography Club for many years, and of course at Theda Clark I also did a lot of my own development

and printing. So that helped out a lot. As far as other groups or organizations, the student paper would borrow some of the camera equipment. They would use the darkroom for development of their pictures, their materials. There was a small darkroom presence over in Brokaw, but it was often times very difficult to get into, whereas the library was much more accessible. Other student organizations could meet in the larger classrooms, or I might assist a student class or a student organization or group with various A/V needs.

**JS: Talking about Worcester Art Center made me think of this. It was torn down to make room for Wriston. During all the years that you were there, the buildings and the houses that have been torn down through the years, was there ever a reaction to that?**

TS: Me personally?

**JS: Of you or the Lawrence community?**

TS: Not only the Lawrence community, but I think the Appleton community, there have been some negative comments made by people who particularly aren't directly associated with the buildings, just see them on the periphery, and who don't understand, "Oh, there's a historical significance, we need to save that house," versus a real need to modify or change or use the space for something else. Personally I hate to see a building torn down just to make it into a parking lot. I have issues with that, realizing that parking on campus is and will always continue to be a problem for folks, particularly for people coming from off campus and coming in for events, that's problematic. I suppose my reaction to seeing some of the buildings torn down and changed goes back beyond when I was just working at Lawrence or when I was growing up in Appleton. The library itself, it has changed dramatically. I think by and large that the changes have been pretty good in terms of reconfiguring or redoing the buildings on campus. I'm probably much more upset with some of the building and changes that have occurred in downtown Appleton. My grandmother's house isn't there anymore, it's a bank.

**JS: Where was it?**

TS: It was on Washington Street, Washington and Durkee.

**JS: That's too bad. I know exactly where that is.**

TS: There's a barbershop that's kitty-corner, it was the first barbershop I got my hair cut in when I was growing up. Some of the department stores and grocery stores and other pharmacies and things downtown that went away, which is really a shame I think, for Appleton. But as far as Lawrence goes with their buildings, not quite as much of an impact on me personally.

**[00:20:58]**

**JS: I was going to ask if there were students that you've worked with over the years or staff and faculty that really had a strong influence on you, that you've remained in contact with through the years.**

TS: Oh, you're there twenty-five years. I specifically remember people like Elizabeth Forter, Gerry Reed, Dick Winslow, Bruce Cronmiller, who was particularly a favorite of mine. They were all, when I got there, very supportive of helping me assimilate and adjust to life at Lawrence. And they were very, very classy people, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. They were very supportive of me, and I did whatever I could in return to support them academically, but it was much beyond that. There were friendships that were developed. And many of these people are no longer there, and that's kind of sad. That happens I think with all of us, different situations. But there are some students who still stay in touch. The first student that I had working for me in the Media Center who was there working with me all four years of his time at Lawrence, we still stay in touch via email, he's living out in the Pacific Northwest. Another student who worked for me who actually, in order to get him graduated, he spent his senior year living with me in an apartment I rented so he had someplace to sleep, because he didn't have enough money, and I wound up being best man at his wedding. His son now, was working for me in the Media Center, his step-son. So there's ties that go back, and there's some connections, and occasionally I'll hear from other students or follow their exploits, and it's very gratifying.

**JS: I was going to ask about all of the traveling that you've done during vacations and breaks from Lawrence, and how you got into birding and all of that.**

TS: Well how I got into birding was, my last year in the military, after I'd gotten back from Vietnam, I was rooming with a biology teacher from Pennsylvania and we went out, I was an instructor at Fort Benning at the time and I had access to a lot of property. And we went out one weekend after he suggested, "Let's go bird-watching." "Oh, okay." I hadn't really done that, but it seemed like an interesting thing to do. And I saw, at the time it was called a rufous-sided towhee, and I thought it was the most magnificent and wonderful bird I'd ever seen. As it turns out it's a fairly common bird, but if you're not looking at birds, any bird can be pretty exotic. That's what got me interested in bird-watching, and when I got out of the military, I came back and got involved with the local Audubon chapter which was being kick-started by a local physician. And that got me started in bird-watching and then with the Audubon Society and the environmental movement, environmental issues, and that led me to a lot of trips to Madison, lobbying the legislature, and meeting other people and meeting other bird-watchers. And bird-watching and photography seem to go together, so it was a natural expansion to start taking bird-watching trips. And eventually I met and married my second wife, who is a bird-watcher and who led birding tours as a small business at some point, and it just seemed like every opportunity we had when we took a vacation it was involving bird-watching.

**[00:25:24]**

**JS: I was wondering if you could tell some, now that I have the recorder on, about what you were going to be doing now that you're retired.**

TS: Ah. Well, we're going to be joining the roughly 400,000 other people who are full-time RVers. We've sold our house, and we will be very shortly picking up our trailer that we will be living in over the next two to five years. It's kind of an experiment to see how this fits, taking up a rather nomadic life, with the one and only hard and fast rule of avoiding winter. Don't much care for winter. I like Wisconsin, my wife

likes Wisconsin, just not in the winter. And we've grown accustomed to, when we take a trip or a short vacation to someplace warm, commenting on the fact that "Gee, wouldn't it be nice to avoid winter?" So that's what we're going to be doing.

**JS: I was going to ask how Lawrence has changed and how it maybe has stayed the same from the time that you started there until now.**

TS: Well, change is inevitable. I have to say in part because some of the faculty that I had gotten to know very well when I first came to Lawrence have departed for various reasons, either they've passed away or they've actually retired and moved away, I think there's been a consistency in Lawrence, an academic consistency, that has managed to remain in the face of some adversity. Of late we've had economic adversity. And although there have been a number of changes in staff, certainly change in administration, because I had known Rik Warch for many, many years. And of course now we have just the second president. There are others at Lawrence who remember other presidents, like Bill Chaney, for example. But I think the one consistency has been the academic excellence of the University as far as the students and faculty go. I think there have been some other changes of late leading to some low staff morale that I think ultimately is going to have a negative impact on Lawrence, and that's unfortunate. In my job I get around the campus a lot, talk to a lot of different people on many different levels, and it's a sense that there's some unrest. Not so much with the students, but I think with the faculty and staff, hopefully in part that's due to the economic situation. I'm optimistic that that's going to turn around and turn out favorably. I think Lawrence has weathered many different storms in the past. But it still seems to be on somewhat of an even keel, and that's encouraging. I haven't seen anything, at least not yet, that would indicate dire straits ahead.

**JS: Great. Is there anything else you want to talk about before I turn off the recorder?**

TS: I think my time at Lawrence has personally been very good for me. I like to think that I've contributed to the university. In conversations with various people, I believe that to be the case. I feel very strongly about the library in particular, because the Media Center for years has been part of the library, and I think that the library itself is oftentimes overlooked by many on campus for just how much it does help the mission of the university in succeeding. I don't think that the staff of the library get nearly enough recognition. I think that they all work very, very hard and do what it is they need to do to ensure that the mission of the university is carried forward. I guess I would like to see the university library staff getting more recognition than they do at the present. I would certainly hope that at some point, because we're tight for space, that the library undergo an expansion similar to other buildings. I realize that there are other needs pressing, and it probably isn't going to happen right away, but I think that right now the core, I know we have a new campus center starting and in terms of campus activity for students, that's going to be a very good plus for them. But academically speaking, the library is the hub, and I think it will continue to be the hub, and it needs to be recognized as such.

**JS: Anything else?**

TS: No, that's it. Thank you.

**JS: Thank you!**

**[End: 00:31:28]**