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## **Bumpers College Oral History Centennial Project**

Interview with

John Rolloff  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
20 September 2005

Interviewer: Dr. Donna Graham

Donna Graham: Okay. Our interview is with Dr. John Rolloff. Tell me a little bit about your background—where you were born, where you went to public school.

John Rolloff: Well, goodness. I went to school in the western part of the state of Minnesota, a town called Montevideo. It's not—it's the sister city of Montevideo, Uruguay, which I was finally able to get to at one time by becoming a merchant mariner.

DG: Oh, wow. So you visited your sister city? Tell me about your family.

JR: Well, my father was the first of [a family of] immigrants—my grandparents—to go off to college. My mother was [from] a Swedish immigrant family—the first born—and my father was the first born of a German immigrant family. At the

small Methodist college in Minnesota called Hamlin University, they met at a snake dance.

DG: What is a snake dance?

JR: Well, I'm not exactly certain. Maybe it's a little bit like a conga line used to be.

DG: And how did you meet your wife?

JR: That's a long story, too. She was an exchange student on junior college level, but she came to study the American secondary schools. My parents said that she was welcome in our home. I was out in my first foreign agricultural experience because I'd won the Alpha Zeta national scholarship and used that money to attend a agricultural conference in Helsinki, Finland. [I] came through her town in Sweden, and I was quite disappointed that statuesque blonde young lady that I had envisioned—it was—she looked in the picture of the application very much out of sync with the traditional Swedish image. But I saw another picture in her parents' home that I stopped in, and I was very gallant in offering to take [anything] she might have forgotten home. Later I met my future wife [for] the first time, and we celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary just about a week ago. This was quite—we were married—she went back to Sweden. We married a year later and then went on an extended honeymoon by freighter from Amsterdam to Tokyo, Japan. My first assignment for graduating from the University of Minnesota in Agricultural Education was to try to bring some expertise to a grassland on agriculture experiment. This [was done?] by an Episcopalian group, and it was Mount Espilatoki in Japan about seventy miles due west from the Japanese Alps. It'd been, actually, land

that had been called the crown lands, where only if you couldn't grow rice in the lower levels that was left open to squatters, so we had a very nice touch of going. We utilized the beef, dairy, goats, and chickens, and it's still going today.

DG: How did you become interested in agriculture education?

JR: Well, my father didn't go into agriculture. He went in to become a lawyer and he had a chance to go join Frank B. Kellogg in the World Court in Hague at the time but he wanted to be a country lawyer. So I was—he was later a judge in the state of Minnesota and served on the supreme court of the state for a time. Then I came along and was reverted back to agriculture and had a very satisfying career.

DG: Would you say that your rural roots, perhaps, gave you that interest?

JR: I think so. It's been tempered by the German immigrant background because the Swedish grandparents died when I was quite young. I still go back to the heritage fest in a German community called New Old Minnesota.

DG: Why did you then, basically, when you came to the University—what year?

JR: I started in January 1967. I graduated from Ohio State in 1966 and had the opportunity to go several places, but I opted for Arkansas.

DG: Any particular reason?

JR: Yes. It was a land of opportunity, and I thought I could make an impact with it. I came as a Director of the Research Coordinating unit for Occupational Education with appointment to the College of Education. There weren't any

research specialists at the time in other vocational areas, so agricultural education provided most of the leadership for all of vocational education.

DG: Was agricultural education—how long do you think it was considered truly a vocation in the sense of training students?

JR: Oh, I really don't know. It took several years, to say the least, before other vocational areas got up to steam on par with research expertise of the day. When I look back at research, yesterday is a far cry from what it is today. I can still remember the punching in on the calculator and pulling a lever and getting the numbers. And you had the deck of cards for your computer, and [the] computer was a whole building at Ohio State University. When I came here, there were just two of us coming in mechanical engineering. [We] were the only two that came to the conference on FORTRAN, which was one of the early [computer] languages. So when I had an opportunity, within two years of going, to help establish a little conference on agricultural education and science with UNESCO, we took the family to Paris, France where we lived. I traveled to Geneva [Switzerland] to FAO in Rome [Italy] for preparatory meetings. The conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, and was opened by the king. So it was quite an honor to be asked at an early age to be asked to help with this.

DG: How long were you there?

JR: A whole year.

DG: A year. Then you came back to the U of A?

JR: Then I came back to the U of A and I continued—not with the research coordination unit, but on the faculty per se in vocational education.

DG: How long did agricultural education stay in the College of Education? Do you remember?

JR: Oh, goodness. Pretty much when the various federal legislation was enacted was when vocational education really became established in the states. It pretty much followed the legislation.

DG: So, it was really considered training for high school teachers?

JR: Yes.

DG: That was the focus. I believe the merger to the college of agriculture was in 1983. Can you tell me some of the background to moving to the College of Agriculture?

JR: Well, we were missing a lot of logistics in the College of Education. We tried for eighteen years to get moved to the College of Agriculture, and we finally made it and we have appreciated that ever since. And let me say that we went from a very nominal department to one with some respect within a couple of years, utilizing the same staff recognized in several areas nationally, and that was basically the same group with several others that we were able to advance in the right short times, so it was a good move.

DG: Tell me some of your early peers in faculty of Ag Ed [Agricultural Education].

JR: Lamar Love was one of the leaders at the time in Ag Ed and then came James Scanlin, [the] former mayor of Greenland. Then we had someone who—Doc Norton, although he was a Cornell graduate—went back east to Ohio State University and is still on the faculty, I believe.

DG: Tell some of the most memorable events that happened to you while you were teaching here at the U of A.

JR: Goodness, that's a hard question. I think one of the significant things was the appreciation of the work I had done with the college of agriculture, and that did give me a great deal of satisfaction. I was very pleased that I was honored when I retired with a really lovely party. Just the other day, I looked through that booklet.

DG: What was teaching like? Tell me some of your classes and what teaching was all about.

JR: Teaching was something I enjoyed very much. Unfortunately, we didn't have the equipment that was necessary, but I had adequate equipment to deal with. It wasn't until I was about to retire that we found that it was as adequate as it was. This was a tremendous boom—that I carried chalk with me sometimes when I was going out to schools because they didn't have any chalk. As a teacher, I covered most of the state, and one of the things that I appreciated very much was my design. I wanted to teach incoming freshman in Changing American Schools and then see them as they were prepared to go out to do student teaching in their last class and to see the tremendous development that had occurred in just four years. One of the interesting things—even today, when I meet them sometimes, they remember many things. One of the things that always impressed me was that we did have one session in Home Economics, as it was called at the time, where you'd learn some of the social graces that might be needed and necessary for employment—going to lunch or to dinner—and

this evidently got very high marks when it came to the utility of gaining employment. So that was one thing. But there were many, many things. Some of the students have done immeasurably well. Unfortunately, in our travels we've found that there's great disparity in the quality of schools, and on home visits it was quite disheartening sometimes, but hopefully we can overcome those.

DG: What do you remember most about the students here at the university?

JR: I found them very enjoyable. I remain in contact with any number of them. Just the other evening I went to an event, and someone called out my name. It was a student, and we reminisced for a little while. Many of them have done very, very well in research and so forth. I taught a number of classes, I guess, that no one else wanted to teach. I remember one class in measurement and evaluation. I was the only one that was left standing, I guess. I didn't know to keep my hand down.

DG: So you took on assignments that no one else did?

JR: Yes. I think one of the qualities is a team effort. I think this is true in any department—interrelationships and the team effort with students. That's what it's all about. Research is fine and it's needed, but one cannot overlook research, and the ability in our particular domain and department [was] how you get the message across to those that could profit from that information or those techniques. So, that was rather a physical point I think—the wealth of the particular department.

DG: What were some of what you consider the most significant changes that occurred in the college or in the university while you were employed at the U of A?

JR: I think there was more recognition for teaching at the time. I think that it's still important and probably even needs to be improved upon. While I said research is important—and it is—it also has to be tempered by research. I think the land grant institution legislation is extremely important [for] research, teaching and extension. I think more attention is placed today on the whole of the curriculum and diversity. We haven't had much diversity here as a land grant institution to date, anyway. More attention is being paid to that aspect.

DG: You've had a lot of international experience. What value do you see [in] that for today's student in the curriculum?

JR: I think that travel is extremely important. I was very fortunate to be able to do a lot of travel when I was single, and also when I was married before we started raising a family. But, exposure to different cultures, different ways of doing things—and sometimes we get quite smug here in America thinking we are the best in the family and the first in all aspects, but in reality there's a lot to be learned because a lot of other places on the globe are first in their respective areas. Many things, a variety—it's a recognition that other people have their cultures, too, and we can profit by learning some of those things.

DG: If you were to give advice to faculty that was being hired this year, what advice would you give them?

JR: Well, I'd hope that they'd be able to have more contact with other members of the university, for one thing. Just on the basis of your own specialty area is not enough. Today it's multidisciplinary that is extremely important. I think this holds true for university personnel as well as teachers in elementary and secondary schools. You have to have acquaintances and friends outside of your discipline area and outside of the university—outside of your discipline area, for sure, in order to gain a better insight as to the whole of a problem that might persist. I think that's probably one of the overall aspects that is extremely important, because today it's awfully easy to get wrapped up in your own discipline without exploring other people's problems and successes and learning a different viewpoint, in many respects.

DG: What about students? What advice would you give the students?

JR: I would advise probably to keep plugging on, but I hope that they would take some different courses, also. I always thought that quarter courses were the best because entering freshman could have a diversity of experiences before zeroing in on—and you could probably grit your teeth to make a go of it even if you got into something that wasn't your cup of tea. But in any event, taking some different courses in different colleges is a broadening experience as well, and you'll cultivate some new friends, possibly, that might be very helpful in the future.

DG: Well, since we've been talking about advice, what advice—now that you have retired—would you give back to the administration of how function of the

university system or the college should—what would help you—if you look back on that, what would you have done different?

JR: I think that administration, university-wide, has to pay more attention to its retirees. From whence comes possibly a good section of financial aid, eventually. They're supporters of the university, and we have been very active in the retirement association and supported the university. One of the things that I hope has changed in exiting the university—attention needs to be given to making it as smooth as possible. You shouldn't have to revert to freshman status again in a sense of having to do things like bringing in your keys and then coming back three or five days later to get the same keys back again. Things like that and—even though you haven't been to the health service, why you had to go over and actually sign off that you hadn't been there, even though you'd never been there before. Minor things, but they [retirees] can be one of your best ambassadors that there is. They have everything to gain by supporting the university as well. From my experience, that could be improved, and hopefully it has been improved.

DG: While you were here, you talked about branching out. I remember you were a TV star, a movie star—tell us about that experience.

JR: Well, goodness. As an educator, it was supposed to be an object lesson for the youngest daughter. She fancied herself as being interested in becoming an actor or modeling, and I wanted—she wanted me to go with her finally to audition in Springdale. And it was a hot day. We spent all day in the hot sun and finally got up to the door about 4:30 in the afternoon and she said, “Daddy, why don't

you come in and there's air conditioning in there, anyway." We stood out in the hot sun for all day, so I went in and went to the next room. She was to go down the hall to be interviewed. And my interviewer asked, "Well, what qualities have you, I had to read something." I said "Really, I'm here for my daughter who's across the hall and we've waited all day and I wanted her to know that if you walk the streets of Hollywood or New York City a lot more than you have parts, and this was to be an object lesson. I'm really here on that score." And she responded. And what I'd said also—I had only part in the junior and senior high school play. She said—when I said "That's all the experience I've had," she said, "Well, you're a professor, aren't you?" And I couldn't deny it so I...and lo and behold, I was in a conference in Atlanta and got a phone call [that] said, "Could you be here tomorrow or tonight?" And I said, "Well, I guess if it's absolutely essential, I guess I could be." So I came back earlier, and switched from the plane into the wardrobe, and that night I was involved in *The Blue and the Gray* [television miniseries].

DG: What was your role?

JR: I was the Secretary of War Stanton in President Lincoln's cabinet. It was [a] tremendous experience, and I must say that I have a greater appreciation for actors and actresses than I ever had before. They earn their money. It was very—even lines that I had—and they had to be exact—and there were very funny instances that happened to a novice that became a part of the cast. It was a tremendous educational experience.

DG: Do you think teaching at college level or high school level is much like being an actor?

JR: It might be. I think discipline-wise—I probably would be in jail with discipline. I administered it when I was a secondary school teacher. But, you know, it's very interesting; those that you had to be pretty tough on, even at the university, have come back years later and said how much they appreciated you holding the line. And I thought that was rather amazing and interesting and very gratifying for me to know that after some years of being out they understood a little bit more clearly what we were trying to do as teachers.

DG: What do you think was your most significant contribution?

JR: I don't know. I guess I was a team player. I didn't seek it for myself, but I did seek it for the department and the university. That, I think, was my hallmark, and a number of my students have been very successful. The head of the Education Department of the State of Arkansas—and two of them have been thus honored. I've had some researchers early on that have been very prolific in vocational education. I know I've got some quality to my teaching and my professionalism, but there's no single thing, I think.

DG: There's a lot of emphasis, especially at the high school level, to incorporate science. Agriculture is a science, but there's truly an emphasis on this, and as society changes, if it's necessary—but do you see other particular changes that have happened during your tenure that . . . ?

JR: I think in the teaching aids area—the computer has revolutionized teaching in my estimation and grades of the blackboard. I want to think back [to] traveling

the states with chalk in one hand and an eraser in another and broken blackboards and so forth—why, we’ve gone a long way in thirty-something years. It’s been very revolutionary times in terms of change for teaching.

DG: What final thoughts do you want to give us regarding your experience?

JR: I think you need to be true to your profession—professionalism. Sometimes I see where it’s lacking, and it’s easy to get distracted from professionalism and ethics in teaching. I think it’s extremely important. Young people—whatever you do—tend to follow in your footsteps, in a sense. And to give them a good path to follow [is] kind of an important ingredient. So that’s probably the best advice I can give: be true to your profession, true to yourself, true to your ethics and that’s something they can build on too.

DG: Tell me about the log cabin. I have to hear this. Tell me about your hobby. I guess it’s a hobby.

JR: Well, many of my students couldn’t understand or envision me being a pole vaulter. I was a high hurdler for the University of Minnesota. I’d need a helium balloon today, but, you know—the log cabin is something that I promised my wife—that someday if we were able, she would have a log cabin that she loved very much. We were able to buy some land at pre-inflationary prices, and [the] first thing we knew, we had a Swedish cabin—a studio, as they call it. I thought that was it and then she wanted very much a little log cabin. We were given a little smokehouse, but the logs weren’t numbered. Many of us tried to erect it, but [we] were unsuccessful. We needed some professional advice, so we went to the guru of log cabins in Arkansas, and when we were making a contract to

get some help on the roof, that smokehouse was given to us. Then the people were very impressed with the land, and I inadvertently said someday that my daughters might decide to build a log cabin. About three days later, they called [and said] “Could we interest you in restoring a log cabin? We have one that’s going to be destroyed. It’s a governor’s log cabin—Governor John Sebastian Little’s log cabin from 1843—and it’s going to be demolished or burned unless the developer can find someplace—and it will not go to the county or the city where it originated because gentlemen had gotten cross-ways totally with the county of the city, and it would be destroyed before it would be given to them.” On the fourth reprieve, we said, “Well, we’ll take it.” We moved it about 110 miles, and it took us five years to restore, but we finally made it on our fiftieth wedding anniversary. I must say, we’re still married, even after that five years of hell. It was something that we wanted to leave the heritage to the community of Washington, Benton, Madison, and Carroll counties so that retirees could relive some of their early memories of log cabins with their parents [and] grandparents. It’s proved very, very successful. We’ve had any number of groups that were interested in coming and taking a look at it and reliving some of the memories.

DG: A lot of things have changed in fifty years and will continue to change, but that’s a great contribution for you to do that.

JR: Well, thank you.

DG: What do you think agriculture will be like fifty years from now?

JR: Oh my goodness. I still receive *Successful Farming* magazine. I keep at least a little bit abreast of what's going on, and I find it's amazing. I used to take almost two hours every evening when I was actively engaged to try to keep up. It was almost impossible to keep up with so many new changes, and the changes are multiplying just so fast that it's almost impossible to keep up with it all. Everyone's becoming specialized, and that's why I think that the broadening out of your acquaintances and so forth is extremely important. It will increase tremendously, even as we know it today, and I look for regional alliances within the land grant system, much of which is happening in poultry science and in all discipline areas. There's a commingling of activity, which is good for research and for teaching and for extension. I think this will gain impetus as the years go by. So we're interested in the time capsule that hopefully professors today—senior professors—will give some thought to what they think will happen in the future—fifty years at least, and the students as well. The professors needn't worry about being chastised if they make the wrong guess because we'll all be gone by that time. They have nothing to fear. But there will be changes, and, I think, very dramatic changes. As the rural population goes, why, agriculture and related areas become extremely important.

DG: We appreciate your contribution that you have made from our last centennial.

Thank you a lot for coming today and being on the interview.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Artesia Perry]

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