

ORAL HISTORY 01-83-05-11

Edwin Hewitt

Fairbanks, Alaska

Steve Lay, interviewer

Series: University Focus series

Edwin Hewitt talks about settling into the University of Alaska Fairbanks and teaching. He is also working on a book and a research project which he is collaborating with James Burnum. He talked about meeting the students and faculty.

He talked about the classes he is teaching. He is teaching calculus and a graduate course on Fourier analysis. He is teaching the honors calculus class at the freshman level and talked about the student's reaction. He discussed the difficulty of learning mathematics and compared it to running a marathon. He likes his students. There are activities under the term mathematics but that doesn't make you understand what is going on. You need to know the whys as well as the hows. He believes that the students will profit from learning this. He compared the students at Alaska to students in other places. Many of the high schools in Alaska don't offer very good mathematics but that is true in other states, too. He discussed school in New South Wales. The graduate students have a varied background and he is enjoying teaching them. He has taught for 41 years. He began as an instructor at Harvard, taught as a civilian scientist for the United States Air Force, he flew during the war, was at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, taught at Bryn Mawr, the University of Chicago and started teaching at the University of Washington in 1948. He has served as chairman of the faculty senate at the University of Washington. He has had guest appointments in Sweden, at Yale, the University of Texas, the University of Moscow, Australia and in Japan.

His doctoral thesis was in 1941. It had some original ideas in it. He broke new ground in his work at Princeton. He worked on rings of continuous function. He left the field for a period of time. He went to the Soviet Union in 1971 and met the Chudnovskys. They were extraordinary mathematicians. He talked about one of the papers he wrote and set theory.

He talked about teaching at the University of Uppsala and how Sweden has changed.

He was decorated for his combat flying. He did not wish to talk about his other honors. He did enjoy being university marshal at the University of Washington. He talked about a visit by John F. Kennedy to the University of Washington. They were undergraduate classmates at Harvard. They were on the swim team together. Dr. Hewitt talked about his climbing experiences and car racing. He plays the French horn and was able to play in Russia and Australia. He plays in the Seattle symphony. He talked about his publications. He has translated many books from Russian to English.

Steve Lay asked about his upcoming public lecture. Dr. Hewitt said the title of his talk will be "Even mathematicians are odd." He said that title only makes sense in English. The theme is what is

mathematics like. It has remained unchanged throughout recordable history compared to other sciences. He has given the talk before. He discussed Euclid's work. He has written and published 135 research papers. He wrote one of his papers with Herbert S. Zuckerman who was a good friend. His paper on rings of continuous function is still well known. He has written on music theory and mathematics.

Steve Lay asked about his work with people in the Soviet Union. Dr. Hewitt said the people are wonderful even though the government is terrible. The change in their government has not changed his working relationships. The Soviet Academy is an arm of the government and they control science which is unlike anything in the West. He talked about travel in the Soviet Union. He said the Reagan administration has cancelled the exchange program with the Academy of Science. Dr. Hewitt said he was a visiting professor in Germany. He loves mathematics and loves being around mathematicians.

Steve Lay asked why he came to Alaska. Dr. Hewitt said he has known some of the university mathematicians for some time. He was here about five years ago. He has a leave of absence from the University of Washington. He talked about his family. His oldest daughter is a banker and his youngest daughter is a Russian translator. He discusses college football and its problems.