

Oral History Interview
with
HOYT E. WALKUP AND RUSSELL L. BABB

Aircraft pilots for Oklahoma State University and, principally, for Dr. Henry Bennett, President of the State University and administrator (1951) of the Technical Cooperation Administration ("point four") in the U.S. Department of State.

Stillwater, Oklahoma
March 17, 1971
by Richard D. McKinzie and Theodore A. Wilson

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
June, 1983

NOTICE

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BABB: Henry Bennett wore us out running back and forth to Tulsa. He'd catch the airline going back to Washington, or held have us fly some of the people here back to Washington for a conference with him, then fly them back and forth.

WILSON: He used a great many people here as consultants...

BABB: He had certain people here. Of course, a lot of it was tending to the business in Washington, plus running the University at the same time. He had different people he would ask to come to

Washington to confer with him on University business or world business or anything else. In addition, he was making frequent trips back and forth. He'd come in on a weekend, and return on a Monday morning.

MCKINZIE: Did he ever talk to you about flying?

BABB: Oh, yes. In fact, an amusing incident happened one time when I flew him to Miami, Oklahoma. They were having a meeting of all of the road commissioners in the northeast district of Oklahoma. Dr. Bennett had been invited to speak at the banquet. When we got there the chairman of the meeting asked Dr. Bennett if he would rather speak first. He explained they would need to have a short business session, and asked if he would rather speak before the session or afterwards. Dr. Bennett replied, "You go right ahead and have your business session and then I'll know how long to talk to the group." He said, "You can keep people sitting in one spot just so long and command their attention."

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They had their meeting first and started arguing about funds for certain highways and bridges, etc. They concluded the meeting and introduced Dr. Bennett to the group. He got up and told them how happy he was to be there. He said he had been very interested in their discussions about monies for this road and that bridge. But he said, "Gentlemen, let me tell you something. You're living in an air age, and I've got one request to make of you. If you build these roads anywhere, build a decent road from town out to the airport, will you?"

He wouldn't drive 15 miles if he could fly. On many an occasion people would say to him, "Oh, Doctor, you shouldn't be flying. That's dangerous." And he'd get indignant. He'd say, "Why don't you wake up? We're living in an air age." He'd say, "Get with it." He believed that way. He'd climb into an airplane, the most relaxed person you ever saw in your life, regardless of the weather or anything. If we, as the pilots,

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said it was safe to go, he'd say, "Fine, let's go.

WILSON: What sort of plane was the University using?

BABB: Cessnas.

WALKUP: It is very interesting how we got started with our own airplanes. Following World War II, when he would fly, he would contract with a fixed-base operator. Then he had the idea that the University should have its own airplane and a pilot standing by. You remember that in World War II a lot of people were killed in plane crashes because of the war. Then following World War II, there was a high rate of aircraft accidents because people were learning to fly and buying World War II surplus airplanes. We started by acquiring one of these World War II surplus airplanes which we didn't keep very long. We only flew it a short time then we bought a used airplane. At that time it was hard to get the staff and administrative personnel to fly; fly airlines, yes, but not in a light aircraft that was University owned.

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I thought it was very interesting how he manipulated this. They had the University motor pool and University vehicles which were signed out to the staff and administrative personnel. He began to call for those vehicles to be put in the pool and you had to check them out everyday. This got to be a nuisance. Then, all of a sudden some of the cars would come up missing. There weren't as many cars as they used to have, and Dr. Bennett would send them to a place where they had no vehicle to go in unless they took their personal car. Then he'd say, "Take my airplane. I'll call the pilot and set it up, and you be at the airport at 10," and he'd hang up. Well, when the president calls and says to take his airplane, they think, "Gee, the president's turning over his pilot and airplane, and I don't like to fly but..." Russ and I were the first two pilots hired at the University, so it worked out well to coordinate this with him. Once he got the University personnel to the airport, then it was our responsibility to finish selling them

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on flying. It was only a short while till they accepted flying, and were ready to go. Then we went from one airplane to two, to three, and by '49 we had four airplanes just for administrative travel. He loved to see his staff fly because they could leave the office in the morning, go to western Oklahoma and be back that evening, for a day's work; whereas, other fellows would have to drive out the night before, do a day's work and drive in the next day and be gone two and a half days.

BABB: He did preach that time is the most valuable commodity that a person has. He said that by flying we can save time, and time is invaluable. He believed in that and consequently he finagled, in a way, his staff and other personnel to use the airplane. Of course, once they started flying with us and saw how much time was saved, and knew they could be home in the evenings with their families, it was no problem selling the program to them.

WILSON: There are a lot of things that came out of

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his experience here that really were applied to the matter of the foreign assistance in Point IV. We might think about Ethiopia today, and what is practically a system of agricultural extension offices.

BABB: You almost have to fly to some of the places; otherwise the meeting would be over before you got there.

WALKUP: He was a great leader in the organization and development of what is now the International Flying Farmers Association, which started here on the campus. He read in the paper one morning where a man named "Heinie" (short for Henry) Baumhoff was using an airplane to kill coyotes, and survey crops and lands. He was an extensive farmer out west of Oklahoma City, around El Reno and Calumet. So Dr. Bennett assigned Herb Graham in the Extension Service to identify every farmer in Oklahoma that owned an airplane and used it in any way agriculturally, and to invite them as his guests for dinner.

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He wanted to visit with them to see just how they used these airplanes. Sixteen people came in that owned airplanes, and they held their first meeting in August, 1944. Today, the Association's on an international scale of 9,000-plus members and operates over 6,400 airplanes in the field of agriculture.

MCKINZIE: This was the beginning of it?

WALKUP: It started right here with his idea that the airplane to a farmer could be another agricultural tool, just as the combine and the tractor and the hay baler are. Today you can see there's a lot of diversified farming where a person has maybe irrigated farms in one area, cattle raising in another area, and wheat growing in another area. He uses the airplane to commute between these areas.

MCKINZIE: He didn't start out as an agricultural specialist but he evidently developed this concern for agriculture and knowledge of agriculture

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as he went along didn't he?

BABB: Yes, he referred to himself as starting out as a schoolmaster in the early days, when he was down in southeastern Oklahoma and southwestern Arkansas. He said that in those days you could hardly raise a family on what a schoolmaster was paid. So he got a job as a rural mail carrier, riding a horse and carrying rural mail. That's when he really developed an interest in the land and the people that raised the crops and fed the rest of the world. That's where it all began. He was born into a family, he said, that came from the land. So it was with him, really, all of his life, and then he got in a position where he could put it all to use.

WILSON: Did you take him to very many places here in Oklahoma, to make speeches to farmers and farm groups?

WALKUP: Yes, he spoke to agricultural groups quite frequently, and encouraged the use of the airplanes.

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I know he set up an annual fly-in in Oklahoma where we would start out in the western part of the state and on to central and eastern Oklahoma. This would be the time we'd take the University planes, and all the fine farmers would donate their airplanes, and we'd get the Chamber of Commerce from each town to pay for the gasoline so it didn't cost the farmers anything to use the gas. There would be 30 or 40 airplanes that started in northern Oklahoma, and spend about two hours in each city, such as Enid, Oklahoma. All the farmers were invited to come out to the airport if they wanted to see their farms from the air, something they'd never seen. So we'd take our plane; the Flying Farmers donated their planes and the Chambers of Commerce pumped the gas. We'd load man and wife in the airplane and fly them out over their farm so they could see it and compare it to other farms. We called this "Save Our Soil Day," SOS. They could see the farm, how erosion was washing the land, and see another man's farm that was contoured, and notice the difference.

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There used to be a lot of programs like this. He'd travel along with them, talking to the farmers and just riding along with them on these flights.

WILSON: Do you have any recollections on when he was asked to become head of Point IV? Was this a difficult decision for him?

BARB: No, I don't think it was, in my experience with him, when he was telling me about it. He told me that he looked forward to it as an opportunity to actually serve not only this country but also other countries as well. He was finally getting into a position where what he had dreamed of and what he had preached all his life could be put to work. I know he was quite enthusiastic about it. I remember I had flown him to a Board of Regents meeting in Oklahoma City and picked him up when the meeting was over. I could tell he was bubbling over with enthusiasm. He said, "I've just got to tell you; the Board of

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Regents are going to make me chancellor of all of the colleges under the A&M Board of Regents." He said, "That way, I won't be tied down to one university and I can spend more time on my job in Washington." He was very happy about this situation, in that he had made plans to be the chancellor which would give him more time to devote to world problems, and not be tied down to one particular University problem. As far as I am concerned, when he talked to me he seemed real enthusiastic about the job and was really looking forward to it. He wanted to put things to work that he'd been talking and preaching about for years and years. I remember when he came back from Ethiopia. First, he was very excited about going to Ethiopia. And when he came back, he was really excited and challenged. He met Haile Selassie and explained to their government how they could eliminate hunger. He was so enthusiastic about it, especially when he was programming what he felt he could do. Selassie asked him how much money he needed. There was no making up a budget, or

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lobbying through the legislature and Congress. He thought that this is going to be a country on the move and he wanted to get the program going.

MCKINZIE: When he came back here after he'd been out in Washington, you never noticed and discouragement? He had a hard time getting the U.S. Congress sometimes to give him the kind of money he wanted and to get the program set up the way he wanted. There were some other people out there who had other ideas about how it ought to be.

BABB: You may have a copy of it. I know Liberty, his daughter, had a copy. I saw a copy of this Congressional newsletter that was sent out. It was about Dr. Bennett; an article in it said that this mild-mannered college president from the Midwest was like a "breath of fresh air." So he carried that enthusiasm with him wherever he went. You couldn't be around him very long until it rubbed off on you. He was the type of person

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who never looked back. He looked to the future all the time; thought so much farther ahead than anybody else did. By the time the problems came up and people were all worried, he already had the solution. All he did was implement the thing. Nobody could understand how he did it, but held thought of it years before.

WALKUP: I think the greatest words that were ever spoken about him, to tie it in, was when Senator Robert Kerr preached his funeral. He mentioned that "he who could hear the inaudible and he who could see the unseeable, and he who could think the unthinkable and just he who could do the impossible." That is the way Bennett looked at the future all the time.

I remember one thing. It's the little things that pop up. He spoke a lot to high school commencement and baccalaureate exercises. We went over to Chelsea one evening for the graduation of the senior class. The town is near Claremore and has a little airport there. This was in about May of 1949, and

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he was talking then about the power that was in the atomic bomb, and the power that could be harnessed, and what all it could do. He was talking about this small amount of energy running the hydroelectric plants, running the power plants. He talked about what power could do for irrigation, what power could do on the farm. Then he got into the space program and ended his speech that night talking about each one of those children in the graduating class. He could easily see the day when men would be traveling to the moon and the other planets.

The funny thing was in coming back. When we departed, we took off south and went over to the left, and there was a full moon. Stillwater is west, and I started to turn to the west and he just took the control wheel and turned it left and said, "Head towards the moon."

You know, he had such a nice way of visiting with pilots and talking about aviation and science,

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and we learned a lot I know. He headed towards the moon, and then he said, "How long will it before man flies to the moon?" He loved an answer, a quick answer. I said, "Doctor Bennett, it'll be about five years."

"Oh," he said, "you're living too fast."

That's the way he answered sometimes. He didn't say that they wouldn't go there that quickly.

BABB: Once he asked me, "Russ, if a spaceship was all ready for Mars, and they were asking for volunteers to make the first flight, would you go?"

I said, "I don't know Doctor. I kind of doubt it; I think they could probably get me up there, but I'm not sure they would be advanced enough to get me back."

He said, "I'd go. I'd be the first in line."

I said, "Is that right?"

He said, "All my life I've liked to be to one to prove something could be done, not the one

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that used it after somebody else proved it." That was his kind of philosophy.

WILSON: You were here of course, while he was in Washington. Did people in this area support the kind of things that he was recommending abroad?

BABB: Quite a bit. People that he knew, who knew the program such as he envisioned, were part of the nucleus around his first Point IV program. As he was talking about when they set up the university in Ethiopia, it was manned 90 percent by the people from this university or who had been with the university that had gone on to some other university. These were people with whom he was directly associated, and he knew the person and knew the capabilities of that person. He didn't just indiscriminately go out and pick a bunch of people. He selected people he thought would go in and make the problem work and until he died, it was pretty much that way.

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WILSON: Well, it is ironic, in a way, that he would die in an aircraft. I'm sure there was a lot of thinking about that at the time.

BABB: I flew him and Mrs. Bennett to Oklahoma City when they left on that last trip. I helped carry the bodies off the plane when they were flown back in. I never thought I'd help them off the plane in that manner.

WILSON: I gather from what Mrs. Preston has said that they were prepared for the sort of thing that happened.

BARB: Oh, yes. It was kind of ironic in a way in that when the plane crashed it split open where their two seats were and threw them, still strapped to their seats, clear of the wreckage. The rest of the wreckage burned, with everybody in it, and the rest were burned practically beyond recognition. But their bodies weren't burned; they were clear of the wreckage. It makes you wonder a little bit.

Then there was the sense of humor that he

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carried with him, and all. He'd call Hoyt and me at 4 o'clock in the morning; get us out of bed. He loved to get up and cook his own breakfast. He'd cook some of the darndest -- I still haven't lost weight that he put on me when he was here. He'd say, "Russell, can you fly me to so-and-so this morning?"

I'd say, "Well, I guess so Doctor. I'll have to check the weather."

"Well, look out the window and tell me what you think."

Well, it'd be so black you couldn't see anything. So we'd call the weather bureau, and then call him back.

"Well, as soon as you shave and get your clothes on, come over and I'll have breakfast ready."

I didn't mind getting awakened that early by him because when you arrived he'd have the doggondest breakfast you ever ate in your life. Hot biscuits, gravy, eggs, everything. A big pot of the blackest, strongest coffee you ever drank. So we'd sit there maybe two hours waiting for daylight, just eating

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and talking. Hoyt and I really got to know him -- probably better than anybody who'd ever worked with him because we traveled with him all the time. To the day he died, I had never flown him anywhere in the whole United States when just he and I were going -- and most always he'd travel by himself -- that he would let me stay in a hotel or motel, in a room by myself. He'd tell the clerk, "Give us a nice twin. This young man and I want to visit." We knew more about what was going on at this university and what was going to go on than anybody else up here, and we didn't dare say a word about it.

WILSON: This may sound like a little gossiping, but do you recall anything of what he thought of the people he was working with in Washington when he would come back? Did he ever say anything to you about working for President Truman or any of the others?

BABB: He greatly admired President Truman and the main

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reason was this: "President Truman's a doer; he's a doer," he said, and he loved a doer. He didn't like a lot of red tape. He liked to make up his mind on something and go with it. Many a time I've heard him say, "Well, if something is worth anything at all, it's worth gambling on to the fullest extent. If you sincerely believe it's worthwhile, it's worth anything it takes to get it done." He believed that way.

MCKINZIE: Was he a political man?

BABB: He said he wasn't, but he was one of the greatest politicians that ever lived.

WALKUP: He maneuvered in the background so smoothly, that you never knew it.

BABB: Every man that ever ran for the Senate, or Governor or anything in this state would come to see Dr. Bennett first and try to get him on their side. They knew that if he was on their side

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they were practically a cinch to get elected. He could have been the Governor of this state by letting it be known that he'd run. He wouldn't have to campaign one lick. He was just that kind of person.

MCKINZIE: Did he ever have any meetings, to your knowledge, with Truman before he got that job out there? I tried to find out where he may have met President Truman or how he came to know the man and how he came to know about him. Of course, he could have met him in a number of places.

WALKUP: Not to my knowledge. I knew he spoke highly of him and admired him, but as to how he actually met him...

BABB: I think that his contact originally with Truman came through Senator Kerr, because he and Bob Kerr were just like brothers. I mean they couldn't have been any closer, both of the same faith. I flew him to Brainerd, Minnesota, to Senator Kerr's summer home when Kerr was running for the Senate

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and they gave me a fishing boat and they took a big one. He and the Senator went out in the middle of the lake for three days to plan his campaign to run for the Senate while I was fishing. Of course, Kerr won by a landslide when he got back. I don't know, but I suspect that Kerr called Truman's attention to Dr. Bennett. Probably, that is the way it came about. Of course, once Truman met Dr. Bennett they hit it off right off the bat.

MCKINZIE: Is there any little story or anecdote that would help us understand Bennett that you haven't already told us? If you haven't met a man it's hard to get to know him. That's what we're trying to do in our work.

BABB: Well., I've got one. In a way, it shows you the kind of person he was. He believed in doing things and doing them right when he did them. We had a new airplane. At that time the radios in any of our airplanes weren't very good. I was going to fly him out to the panhandle of Oklahoma. A fast moving

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front formed -- just a solid line of thunderstorms. I was trying to contact anybody on the ground that could tell me what it was and how bad it was, and the static was so bad we couldn't hear anything. So rather than try to barrel into something, we turned around and came home. On the way back he said, "Russell, don't they make any kind of radios that you can use to hear when it's storming?" I said, "Yes sir, they do. But they're pretty expensive." "Well, you get one and put it in this airplane before we make another deal like this," he said. "I know there's a bunch of people out there that I should be talking to because I promised them I would, and I don't like to turn people down or leave them waiting." So I came back and told a supervisor what the Doctor had said, that we should put a good radio in that airplane. He started shopping around, trying to find something. About a week later, maybe a little longer, Doctor scheduled another trip out in the same place. We took off, and almost the identical situation happened.

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He said, "Russell, where's that radio?"

I said, "Well, I told the man in charge that you wanted it put in and he's been shopping for one, trying to get as good a buy as he can."

He said, "Listen, if I could find the money to buy this airplane, I know I could find the money to buy a decent radio to put in it." He said, "When you get back, you sit down and order one right then and I want it in this airplane!"

"Well, I'll do that Doctor. I may catch hell from the man over me."

He said, "Who would you rather catch it from, him or me?"

And then he laughed and he put his hand over on my knee and said, "I know that's putting you in an embarrassing position; but," he said, "I guess I have to have people do things that I know will get them done." He said, "I'll tell the man that I told you to do it. That'll get it off your back." That's the way he operated. I'll never forget that to this day, when he said, "Russell, who would

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you rather have give it to you, him or me?"

Well, there wasn't any doubt in my mind right then. When he'd get a little mad, those eyes would twinkle, and he'd get it. But before he did anything much, he'd stop and think. He was a great man.

WALKUP: The weather reporting situation back in those days wasn't what we have today. We didn't have any radar or any of the electronics and avionics that forecast weather. Lots of times when he called us we would say, "The weather is good." We'd begin our trip and get into some of those thunderstorms and rain showers, and we might be late or we might miss an appointment. One day he had a meeting down in Chickasha, and it was so foggy you couldn't see half a block. We got him up and told him it was going to be foggy, So he came out and got in his car and drove to Chickasha, Well, a while after he left, the sun came out and the fog disappeared. When he came back, he sent Russ and me the old *Farmer's Almanac*, Every year he'd send us an almanac, a

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new *Farmer's Almanac*, forecasting the weather. It's the little things like that...

MCKINZIE: This has been very helpful.

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