

Interview with Dr. Ira Renay Bowles

Interviewer: James N. Mortimer

Transcriber: James N. Mortimer

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**Location: Dr. Bowles's Office, Room 209 in Music Building,
Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX**

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

James N. Mortimer: This is Tape 2. The following interview with music professor Ira Bowles, who will be retiring in August, is being conducted for the honors program course, Oral History, the spring semester, 1986. Dr. Bowles, you understand that a copy of this tape and a transcript of the interview will be placed in the SWT library, and you agree to that?

Ira Renay Bowles: Yes, sir.

Mortimer: Okay, Dr. Bowles, what circumstances brought you to SWT, and when was that?

Bowles: I was invited to give a concert here for the Allied Arts program. I think it was July 10, 1947, the summer of 1947. I gave a concert here, and at the time there were no motels or hotels that were decent to stay in, so I was invited to stay in the president's home. And the reason I was invited to stay there was I had come down a week early to work with the accompanist here in San Marcos, and they didn't want to pay the expenses for me to come to New York City, and so staying at his home and practicing with the accompanist every day. At night, we sat out on Dr. Flowers's front porch, and we would talk, and he picked my brain about what I thought about education, what I thought about music, what I thought—the future held for musicians as far as public schools—teachers was concerned and so forth and so on. And I gave him my views, and the day before I left, he said, "I'd like for you to come and teach for me." And I said, "Well, I've never thought about teaching before," and he said, "Well I'm asking you if you'd like to." And I said, "I'd have to think it over. I'm going to be married in a couple of months, and I'd have to talk it over with my fiancée." He said, "Well, I'd like to have an answer in the morning." And I said, "Well, I can't give it to you in the morning. I'll have to talk with her first." So, he says, "Alright, I'll give you three days. You go home and talk with her and then you call me on the phone."

So, we talked it over, and I called him on the phone, and I told him I didn't see an organ down here in the school. He said, "Well, we have the money for it," and said the people, the alumni, have contributed a large sum of money to install an organ and, in Evans Auditorium, in memory of the soldiers killed in World War II. Says that will be installed within a year, and he says up until that time, he says, "You could have access to the organ at the Methodist Church." Says, "I'm the chairman of the board of directors down there," and he says, "I ensure you that you can

have access to that.” So—we talked it over and decided to come for two years. So, I told him, “Dr. Flowers, I’ll come for two years.” and he said, “That’s fine. If you’ll stay that long, you stay here.” And I’ve been here ever since. It was a very fine town to bring up children. I’d been living in New York City; it’s no place to bring up children. I had allergies of all kinds up there—tired of traveling and tired of people—it was kind of a welcome change.

Mortimer: Could you tell me what your impressions of SWT and San Marcos area was when you arrived?

Bowles: Well, I’d known San Marcos, I’d lived in Texas as a child, I’d known people who had taught here, I’d known people who had gone to school here. I knew it was a credible institution. San Marcos was a beautiful place, had the river, trees, was so close to San Antonio, close to Austin, and had many things to offer. I’d thought this would be a nice place to live in. [inaudible]—First year I was here, housing was terrible. It was right after the war, and there wasn’t any place to stay, but that worked itself out, felt a little more at home, lived here ever since.

Mortimer: Could you tell me a few things about Dr. Flowers, what kind of a man he was?

Bowles: Well, Dr. Flowers was a great man. He was the man that really made this university. He had great foresight, he was a very humane person, he was dedicated—one of the most dedicated men I think I ever knew—he was kind, he was smart. He had a lot of drive, and if he thought things were going well, he couldn’t do enough for you, but if they weren’t going well, he was going to make them go well, one way or another. Everything should go well. He was a very imaginative man in many respects. I’m not sure he could have coped with the problems of the twentieth century, but he was wonderful for the school at that time. He was one of the most dedicated men I’ve ever known.

Mortimer: Could you please tell me a few notable, or what you consider significant, events that happened during your career here? Things that really stand out in your mind?

Bowles: Oh, my goodness. On the spur of the moment. Oh, things of great interest. One thing was the exchange students from Germany following World War II. Dr. Flowers was on the committee that set up the education for Germany after World War II, and so he had the foresight to bring many of the German teachers over here, and they spent anywhere from a year to—or one semester to a year here—they made a contribution to our way of life. We certainly made a tremendous contribution to their way of life. And it was an exchange of ideas, it was a breaking down of barriers, and it was an exciting time. You had all types of people, you had person-types, you had people who were against World War II under Hitler, and you had some that were for Hitler, but mainly they understood that Hitler made a mistake, and so they were willing to take home ideas that we were offering. They took the ideas that they learned here and took them back to Germany and put them to practice. And many of our teachers followed them over there and

were guests in their homes, and some of them are still corresponding. There was a very wholesome exchange—that was a very exciting program for me.

Well, I think certainly LBJ, his reign, his visitation here, and what he did for education and what he did for the school, was an exciting time—it was unique. A few universities in the country have the notoriety of claiming a president as one of their alumni. I always liked what he did when he came here, and that was to get Cayetano, the Mexican janitor, to come and have his picture taken with him. He had a lot of feeling for this man. He never forgot the people who helped him. He was a sincere man; he would question the students here about their feelings about education in general, about what they needed, what changes to be made. So, there were a lot of good things along that line.

To see the music department develop here was an exciting thing. To see the school develop was an exciting thing. To go from, when I first came here, there were more; there are more faculty members here now than there were students when I came here. So the growth around 1,200 students—or maybe even less than that number—now to the twenty-thousand or above tells you a lot about the growth of this place.

It's a beautiful campus, it's a beautiful town, that's exciting to me. We have wonderful faculty of people. That's exciting.

Mortimer: I noticed that you have quite a few Mexican-type artifacts. Is that an interest of yours?

Bowles: I teach a course in the Arts in Mexico, which was part of the general education block prior to its current standing—that has been changed now, with the new trends going on now set up by the general education committee the past two years.

Mortimer: I read that—

Bowles: It is of great interest to me the relationship between the United States and Mexico, and especially the Mexican art, music.

Mortimer: I read that you had travelled to Cuba—for the Westminster Choir—

Bowles: I used to be with the Westminster Choir. I traveled with them for six years. We were in every state, with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii, and they were not states at the time. We traveled in Mexico, we traveled to Cuba, at the invitation of the Cuban government—it was Batista at the time, not Castro. It was before Castro. We toured in Canada. It was really a wonderful experience. That was prior to my coming here.

Mortimer: I wanted to ask you, outside your door you have a small sign that says: “I am not afraid to face tomorrow – For I have seen – Yesterday – And I Love – Today.” Do you say that’s your philosophy on life?

Bowles: Oh, that's not my philosophy of life, but I surely believe in it. Also believe in the statement from the Quran that's out there, to this day. I enjoy life, I enjoy every moment. I like to look to the future rather than to look into the past, but you have got to keep one eye on the past in the rearview mirror to understand the future—for that matter, even to understand the present. Most of us live in Bonanza Land, but I would like to think that it's possible to think ahead, to anticipate, and to anticipate—and to—I like the excitement of what's to come.

Mortimer: Do you see any trends that have been developing since you have been here that in the future—

Bowles: Trends? I don't know whether I see trends. I see things that run in cycles.

Mortimer: In cycles? Could you explain what you mean?

Bowles: Well, everything runs in cycles more or less. Styles, clothing. Since I was a kid, I can resort back, or look back to peg-leg trousers or to knickerbockers or to zoot suits or to pleated trousers or un-pleated trousers. In education, every time there's a committee that comes along, they just recycle what's been done before. The first year Ike Conan, who was President of Harvard, was going around the country, and when his report came out, why, it made all the upper-level universities throughout the country change their curriculum and what not—upset everybody—then along comes the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, then ENCAP, which is the education and evaluation of the universities and colleges, and then White [Texas Governor Mark White] comes along, and he wants to change education, and some of it is good, and some of it is time-consuming, some of it isn't of that much importance and—it's just like you turn a wheel, influences from one kind of a generation or epoch to another. Not epoch, but oh, decade.

Mortimer: Is there anything you would like to add or say to sum up your experiences here?

Bowles: Well, it's a wonderful town, it's a wonderful school, it's a wonderful faculty, delightful students, and I couldn't ask for any more than that. And I've enjoyed my tenure very much, or I wouldn't have stayed. I would have lived in a place I didn't like.

Mortimer: Do you intend to stay here after you retire?

Bowles: Oh, I probably will. I'm going to travel. I'm not going to sit still. I'll find other things to do, could be I might teach someplace else for a couple of semesters. I don't—going to sit down and take stock of things, and look to see which direction I want to take. Lots of things I want to do. I want to—I'd like to go to school some. Some courses I'd like to refresh myself in, take courses I'd never had the opportunity to take before; I'd like to meet new people and go forward.

Mortimer: That's all the questions I have right now, I'd like to thank you for your time.

Bowles: You're certainly welcome, and if you want more, come back and we'll give you more.

Mortimer: Okay.

End of interview