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## **Raymond Bruce Strom Memoir**

### **Strom, Raymond Bruce**

Interview and memoir

Digital Audio File, 37 min., 14 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Strom, a 1977 SSU graduate and former Springfield Alderman, discusses his experiences at Sangamon State University. He obtained a master's in administration-generic that was one of the choices available as a graduate degree. Some professors he remembers include Stan Sokolik, Bob Kustra, and Geoff Cornog.

Interview by Lorrie Farrington, 2009

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Narrator: Bruce Strom

Interviewer: Lorrie Farrington

Date: January 14, 2009

Place: Illinois State Library, Springfield, IL

Q. This is Lorrie Farrington, class of 1972, interviewing Bruce Strom, class of 1977 on January the 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in the Illinois State Library. I'm just curious Bruce, how did you happen to go to this training when word got out that they were going to do this archival thing for the library on the students' experiences?

A. Well, I am on the board for the SAGE committee so we had been talking about doing these interviews to create the oral history for the University for some time now, maybe a year and I wanted to help out. So primarily my objective was to be an interviewer rather than be an interviewee, so that was my – my real purpose was to assist in getting these oral interviews.

Q. OK. But your name is on that list of people they wanted to interview, too.

A. Well, somebody had obviously put my name down there as a potential candidate for being interviewed.

Q. Oh, right, all right. Well you were obviously in the early group and as Cullom said the administrative part of the University opened in 1969 when he said he got paid. And so they were collecting things, legal documents and so on and so forth, from then. OK, why did you go to SSU?

A. Well, at the time which was in – my first class was in the fall of 1971 – but at the time I was interested in extending, I guess, my educational credentials because I was early in my career. I'd only been working about six years and at that point in time anything was likely or possible in terms of where I might go and I thought that building some additional academic credentials might be helpful.

Q. So you had some other college before SSU, because it was a senior university.

A. Yes. I'm a graduate of Eastern Illinois University with a bachelor of science in business administration and I graduated in, well I finished my course work in 1964 and was in the graduation class of 1965. And then as I started my career with state government in 1965 I was finding my way into information systems – at that time it was referred to as data processing – and I had taken some classes to assist me with the technical skills out at Lincoln Land Community College. So I had had some course work. I wasn't really working towards a degree but rather trying to get some background to assist me with my responsibilities working for the state of Illinois.

Q. What department did you work in for the state?

A. Well, I began with the Illinois Department of Public Aid but at that time I was in their personnel office. And then in 1967 I was recruited to go to the Department of Personnel in their data processing division.

Q. Oh, OK. And you needed – felt like you needed more training or something?

A. I needed some credentials. I really didn't have any background or experience or training with data processing at the time.

Q. So you have two degrees? Are they both bachelors?

A. No. My degree at Sangamon State was a master of arts...

Q. Oh, by the time...OK. So refresh me, when they started they had some master's programs, I guess I had forgotten.

A. Right.

Q. I didn't get my master's until 1980 so...

A. OK. Yeah, my master's degree was in administration and I chuckle because back then you had some choices to make and I think you had business, public, and then they had something they called generic. So it was a master's, an MA, in administration-generic. It actually appears that way, I believe, on the diploma. But in any case, what that was was a mix of public administration and business administration course work.

And the reason I did that again was because I was early in my career and I wasn't clear whether I'd be staying with state government or not – you know, I thought there was a possibility that my life could go in another direction – so I wanted to get some credentials and some training that would qualify me in either direction. I was already in state government which would imply that maybe I should have taken a public administration curriculum but there was the possibility because I was early in my career that I could leave state government and go elsewhere.

Q. What did you want to be, an artist? [Laughter] I'm just curious. You're not a lawyer, never have been?

A. I have not been.

Q. OK.

A. But it's interesting just as a side note, that in my life here in Springfield – and I've spent my whole adult life now here in Springfield – but I've been involved in a variety of activities and I

would bet you that I have been asked thirty or forty times whether or not I am an attorney.  
[laughter]

Q. Well that was my first question when I met you that day at training.

A. There's something about either my appearance or my demeanor or – I'm not quite sure  
[laughter]!

Q. Your analytical mind. But for all of this that you've done a law degree wouldn't hurt...

A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. ...but it sounds like – I'm kind of concerned about that red light on our recorder. Could we pause a minute and see if we're recording?

A. Yes.

Q. OK, so what were your first impressions of SSU say in comparison to Eastern where you had gone before. I mean the way – the theory of education, was it different?

A. Well, I really didn't know what to expect. I'd been out of school for awhile, and Eastern Illinois University was a small school but it was a traditional college. And there was all this sort of talk and rumor that Sangamon State University was different because of their public administration sort of ilk, their interest. And so I didn't really know quite what to expect.

Plus, going at a graduate level also there was an unknown sort of entity there for me personally about whether or not I would be up to or how I would perform, so those are some of the things that were kind of on my mind when I enrolled and when I started. And so it was, it was different.

It was different one, because even though Eastern Illinois University was small it was ongoing and it was organized and in place for many years whereas this was a start-up university and I think they were just trying to find their way and you had a different kind of sense of the classroom instruction because the classes, the number of people in the classrooms were small. The instructors seemed to be more – as a rule – seemed to be a little more informal in their demeanor and their methods.

Q. Well, yeah. For one thing the mandate of the University was public affairs and then they attracted – I think the University attracted faculty that wanted to teach rather than publish. I don't know if Eastern was a publishing kind like if you had – in order to stay on faculty you had to publish something? Whereas at Sangamon State it was more, the emphasis was more on teaching and experiential learning, I think. So did your impressions change as you went through your program?

A. Well I...not a lot. I think my later impressions of the University were pretty consistent with the experiences I had early on with the University. As far as you know, again, impressions of the University, it was the campus was small, it was barren [laughter].

Q. [Laughter] Yeah!

A. It was desolate.

Q. In a cornfield.

A. It was in a cornfield, it was dark, it was windy – for me it was dark because my classes were always after work or in the evening.

Q. Oh yeah, OK.

A. So for me the experience was always being out at night going to a class in a rather desolate, isolated area with a lot wind.

Q. So you had a wife and a family by this time?

A. Yes.

Q. Because a lot of people did.

A. I did, I did. And so that kind of affected my participation but, you know it was informal, the classes were more informal, they were smaller in size. And one of the things that was peculiar for me was that there was an option made – allowed to students for pass/fail versus grades.

Q. OK.

A. And because I was more accustomed to a traditional academic environment I opted for the grades rather than a pass/fail program.

Q. OK. Well, you probably did the right thing because later I took the pass/fail. And later when they would send transcripts to places they did not do what they said they were going to do. At first they did but the written evaluation by a faculty member was supposed to go with any transcripts and my experience was that later – so pass/fail...and of course with SSU becoming part of UIS then it did become more like a traditional university.

A. Well my sense of it at the time, you know, it just – it was that, I wanted to one, have the grade because I was, I felt that perhaps pass/fail was an experiential kind of approach to education. I mean, that maybe the emphasis or the interest there was to take away the focus or the concern on grades and try to put it on learning...

Q. Right.

A. And I think that maybe that was the philosophy that they wanted to take with that but I wasn't – I didn't feel secure with that so...

Q. Well, you know I don't think – I don't know if Governor's State is still around but Evergreen State in Washington state is still viable but SSU and I think maybe Governor's State are gone by the wayside, so you probably made the right decision. Anyway, what – can you tell me about some professors, any in particular that are memorable that really influenced your life or your career? You said, was Bob Batson one of your, Bob Batson?

A. No he was not.

Q. Well I'll let you mention the names.

A. No, that's OK. There were none that really stood out greatly, but there were some that come to mind.

Q. OK.

A. For example, Geoff Cornog was my very first class – and of course going in with all this uncertainty about what the experience was going to be, whether I was going to be up to it and so forth – was my very first class and that was in the Evaluative Research for Public Administration. But in any case, I ended up getting a 'B' in that class, that was the only 'B' class that I did not get an 'A' in, which I kind of...

Q. [Laughter] It hurts doesn't it?

A. Yeah, but I wear proudly. But I mean the fact that I did get 'A's though the rest of my course work but that was my first one. And he made an impression on me because he was, to me he was older, he had sort of a rugged appearance, kind of a rough cut appearance. I didn't know, ever know him personally. He was the type that would challenge you and the class in the classroom.

But on the other hand he seemed interested, truly interested in helping guide students in their learning. And I think that was – that he may have reflected very much the philosophy of the University at the time, that what they were trying to present and the type of classroom experiences they were trying to provide.

Q. In other words not just a pabulum approach to education but making you think or giving you an opportunity to think rather than what do they call it, a pedagogic approach?

A. Yes, I think so. There was another instructor I had – Stan Sokolik – I had him for two classes, actually, Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management. He was more academic compared to say Geoff Cornog who I thought worked more on the practical side, trying to help people understand. But Stan Sokolik was to me more of an academic but he believed very much in the concepts that he taught and he and I – or I seemed to feel very comfortable in his classrooms because I bought into, or maybe I already had a mindset that was consistent with his philosophy on organizational behavior and organizational development and so forth.

He was – one of the classes he taught spent a lot of time on management philosophies and at that time in the 1970s there was something called Theory X and Theory Y in management. And one was a very authoritarian, which was considered Theory X and then Theory Y was participative.

Q. Oh, OK.

A. And the idea was that the participative was the better choice for a manager to choose and I'm comfortable with that and he was very much committed to that.

Q. OK. Did you ever take part in any of the intersessions that were in between semesters or on spring break? They would have these experts from across the world, really, come and do an intense, maybe a PAC that you got two credits for if you attended all week when the school was closed, per se, for break they had these what they called intersessions. Do you know what I'm talking about?

A. No.

Q. OK, all right.

A. No I did not participate in any of those.

Q. OK. Did you have a favorite classroom? You talked about – were the classrooms pretty traditional, desk and chair or...?

A. Yes.

Q. OK.

A. They were they were pretty traditional. All of my classes except for two or three were on the main campus. There were a few that were downtown at the former Leland Hotel building.

Q. You said your first class was in 1971, maybe, didn't you?

A. Yes.

Q. So well right. In 1970 they did start downtown...

A. Uh-huh.

Q. ...and some of them, because the classrooms weren't ready apparently. Did you, since you had a family and a career you probably didn't spend a lot of time at an off-campus meeting place like Crow's Mill or what's known as Bootlegger's now. You probably went out there at night and had your classes and – when did you do your homework if you were...?

A. Well, yeah. I did not go to meeting places. I know Crow's Mill...

Q. Socially, yeah.

A. ...Crow's Mill was always mentioned as a favorite spot. I'll tell you what, I think on my very – I want to say my last class – there were a group of us after the final exam, went out to Crow's Mill.

Q. Oh, hey! [laughter]

A. [Laughter] So after about six years taking classes with the University I finally ended up going out there with some classmates as sort of a celebratory event.

Q. Right. Have you stayed in touch with any of your classmates or faculty?

A. No I have not.

Q. Socially or professionally?

A. No I have not. I really didn't make personal associations either with faculty or with other students out there and this gets back to the fact that I was basically a commuter student.

Q. Right, as many were.

A. And I was employed full time. I did have a wife and daughter, and the work that I was involved with required actually quite a bit of overtime.

Q. Oh, OK.

A. Because it was in – I was getting into the information systems business and at that time we were non-union although we were in technical entry-level professional positions and so there was an expectation that we would spend whatever time was required in order to get the job done.

Q. Oh, OK.

A. And we were in development in both the Illinois Department of Personnel – was in the development of a new system when I was there. And then when I changed in 1973 to go to the Illinois Department of Public Aid we were also in the development at that time of the, what they call the Medicaid system – MMIS – the Medicaid system for the state of Illinois which required a huge amount of overtime over a long period of time, over years, because that system took... six or seven years to develop and we were putting in lots of overtime.

Q. OK, do you have anything else you want to say before we move on? I was just going to ask did you get what you wanted from SSU? I mean, the value of your education in the years you spent there, was it consistent with what you'd hoped it would be?

A. Well, it's hard to say. I can't look at the education and say it immediately or directly translated to something beneficial in terms of a career – choices or advancement. However, I'm sure that it probably, as I went along in my career with the state of Illinois, I felt that it provided some weight as supervisors were considering me for different positions that having the credentials of the master's degree in administration certainly had to be taken into consideration.

Q. Sure. Did you participate in graduation when you graduated – the ceremony?

A. Actually I didn't.

Q. OK. And why?

A. It – well you know somehow because I wasn't into the University life so to speak...

Q. Right.

A. ...that when the time came for that, you know, I just – didn't seem that it was critical or important. I mean, I was trying to get the credentials so that I could have some additional background for management and so forth.

Q. That was probably typical of the student population because the average age did bring back family people that were – already had families and careers and night school, so on and so forth. So it was pretty typical.

A. I think another reason why the academic training may not have been significant, I guess. I think it contributed to my advancement as I moved on in my work life.

Q. Right.

A. But, it may not have been significant – was I did not actively pursue employment outside of the state of Illinois, the public sector. And so I didn't – and within the area in where I was

working which was data processing and information systems the focus and the emphasis there was on technical skills as opposed to management and administrative skills.

Q. OK. What kind of work do you do now? Or are you retired?

A. I am retired.

Q. Oh! Congratulations! It's wonderful isn't it?

A. I did retire from the state of Illinois. I was a manager for many years, at least ten in my last years with the state of Illinois in the area of information systems.

Q. What do you feel is the most significant contribution to your society that you've made in your career? The bigger picture of – if you were telling your grandchildren how you participated in your world and made a contribution what would be your most significant...?

A. Interesting question, when you first presented it you mentioned career but now we're talking about life [laughter].

Q. Well if we separate them and go for both of them or amalgamate them and tell me how you see...

A. Well you know, in my work life I feel like I was helpful to people. Like I had mentioned earlier, I really did believe in a participative kind of management style within an organization and I like to think that because of that I facilitated other people being productive within the workforce that I was responsible for.

Q. OK.

A. And again I spent many, many incredible number of hours over a long period of time – years – putting together components of the Medicaid Management Information System for the Illinois Department of Public Aid and that system you know, continues to operate today. In terms of my life, I guess you know, I did become an alderman for the city of Springfield and I think that, you know, when you do have some academic credentials and some background you do feel good about yourself. You feel more confident and comfortable because you have some basis for the things that you do.

Q. Uh-huh. So aldermen are elected?

A. Aldermen are elected, yeah. And I was an alderman for the city of Springfield for twelve years.

Q. OK.

A. And you know, it's hard to say, it's hard to point at a single thing that you might say this is your, this is the thing that you want to be – you want to remember yourself for, you want to be remembered for. I did actively participate in getting the Springfield City Council to approve a comprehensive smoking ordinance which probably is the thing that got the most notoriety of things that I did. It was an uphill battle but it was the type of thing that I – you know, when I get into something I guess *it* personified how I normally do things and that is, I do them with fervor and I do them with commitment and staying power.

Q. You dig in and fight.

A. I dig in and go for it. I'm not in and out.

Q. All right, OK. Anything else?

A. No I don't think so.

Q. Do you have, have you had any post-graduate training or seminars or do you go to things that the University offers like I saw in this morning's – I guess it was online, maybe I was online at the University – there's a Lincoln Leadership Conference coming up sponsored – because it's the bicentennial year, or the centennial year I can't remember which – but do you participate or do you feel like your career is over and you want to forget it or do you have ongoing education, continuing education things that interest you, that you attend?

A. Yeah, I do attend things that come along even though my work-life career so to speak seems to have stopped in terms of being committed to a specific employer. But in terms of learning I'm always interested in continuing it and the University does provide opportunities to participate in learning. One of them – I'm forgetting the title of it right now – but is where they're having a series of six presentations about why people settled, why they came, why they settled in central Illinois, central and southern Illinois.

Q. Oh.

A. They had three this past fall and they've got three more scheduled in the spring.

Q. Who sponsors that?

A. Well the SAGE, which is the alumni association for the University...

Q. Oh, OK.

A. ...is involved with scheduling that. And so they bring in speakers who have you know, backgrounds, who have studied these things. Some of them are academic people who have studied various aspects of the migration into central and southern Illinois. But that's an example of the type of things that I think the University offers and is good for the community.

Q. Where were you from originally? Why did you settle here or have you always been here?

A. No I have not, I am not a native of the Springfield area although I have spent my entire adult and working life here. I was born in the city of Chicago. When I was two years old I, my family moved out to a suburb ten miles west of Chicago called Elmhurst so I grew up in Elmhurst. I went to grade school and high school there – York Community High School – and then I, as I mentioned earlier, I did go to Eastern Illinois University which is in Charleston, Illinois and spent basically four years there, finishing my coursework in December of 1964 and included in the graduation class of 1965.

Began working in the Chicago area, only worked there for about six months when I first got out January of 1965. And worked there for six months, had an offer to come to Springfield to begin working in something I thought I was interested in at the time and that was personnel management and I had an offer from the Illinois Department of Public Aid to come and work in their personnel office. So, that's my background in terms of where I came from and so I'm not from here. Originally I lived in, for the first five years, I lived in Lincoln, Illinois and commuted into Springfield like many –

Q. ...Couldn't quite leave Chicago altogether.

A. [Laughter] Like many people do. And so then that was in 1965 – the summer of 1965 – moved into Lincoln. Commuted for five years and then in – I'm sorry – in...yeah, that's right. In June of 1965 I began work with the state of Illinois and was living in Lincoln. And then in 1970 – actually June of 1970 [laughter] – I moved to Springfield and have lived there – here, ever since.

Q. OK. That job that you were offered in Springfield, did you seek that job or did you have connections with or networking with people down here or how'd they... [inaudible].

A. No, actually I didn't have any networking. As I was in college near the end of my time at college I came to Springfield and took the civil service examination because I didn't know where I'd be going to work.

Q. Oh, OK.

A. And that was one that got my interest. I really can't even tell you where I got that lead but it was probably out of the Eastern Illinois University offices to do that. And they had my examination grade on file and when they needed somebody I was called. And it is interesting that, you know, I was not connected, I didn't know anybody in state government, I wasn't political, I didn't have a sponsor. But my father-in-law at the time who lives in Chicago who was an avid horse race fan [laughter] believed that anybody who got a job with the state of Illinois in Springfield probably knew the governor on a first name basis [laughter]. And so...

Q. [Laughter] What a myth!

A. Yeah, oh yeah! And he was trying to get me to talk to the governor or somebody on the governor's staff to get him a pass. Apparently there are passes that are available or had been at that time where you could have admittance into the racetracks around the Chicago area for, I guess you know, no admittance fee or something. So anyway, he would ask me periodically if it would be possible for me to get that for him and it's kind of a family joke because... [laughter].

Q. [Laughter] Yeah, OK. That is funny. Well I was going to ask you if you had any situations while you were at the University that were particularly memorable because they were funny or ironic or negative or positive, anything that comes to mind? Or just take some time and look at your notes and see if there is anything else you want to bring out that I didn't ask you about.

A. Well we've, let's see... I guess one of the things, one of the things that comes to mind is I took a class and I believe it was International Comparisons of Public Policy. And there were actually two instructors, I can't recall their names. One of them may have been Bob Kustra but in any case, we were given an assignment for the end of the term or that needed to be completed by the end of the term. And it was a twenty-five page paper on a topic of our own choice but it had to be you know, related to the coursework obviously. And I did an evaluative paper on comparing the health care systems, the funding, and the comparative, I guess, quality of delivery of service of the health care systems for Sweden, England, and Canada, and the United States.

Q. [Laughter]

A. Anyway – because I thought that there would be contrasting information on various systems...

Q. Yeah, there would be.

A. Yes. But the funny thing about it, the thing that makes this funny is that when I turned it in the instructors kind of looked at me, a little bit askance-like. And they made some comments to the effect of, was I trying to really impress them. And I didn't understand what they said but – why they said that. But they went on to explain that the twenty-five pages did not need to be single-spaced.

Q. [Laughter] Oh! That is funny!

A. So effectively what I had done...

Q. Oh my gosh!

A. ...was written a fifty page paper when they were only asking for a twenty-five page paper because I had done it single-spaced.

Q. Oh!

A. So I had given them a twenty-five [laughter] – and so it was sort of like, “What is this guy trying to do to us here? Is he just trying to overwhelm us and impress us with all this stuff?”

Q. Well, I’m sure they learned a lot from that!

A. Well, but I fully...

Q. From the content.

A. They never, to my recollection today, they never were clear about that but maybe they presumed that the standard in classes when they asked for a paper is it’s double-spaced.

Q. I see.

A. And I didn’t understand that and since I don’t recall them telling me that specifically, I figured single-spaced was it, you know? [Laughter]

Q. Yeah. Well that’s a good one.

A. Yeah, so I always remember that.

Q. Well a twenty-five page paper would be an undertaking in and of itself, but yeah. So well, you said you did everything you did thoroughly and with fervor.

A. [Laughter] Well, exactly! I mean that was – yeah that would typify you know, how I would approach doing something.

Q. So OK, anything else that we’ve left out? I think that’s probably all I have unless...

A. I think we’ve covered everything.

Q. Well all right. So we did good.

A. Yes.

Q. OK, well once again then it’s January the 14<sup>th</sup> at the Illinois State Library in the reading room. Unless you have something else we’re signing off. It’s Lorrie Farrington interviewing Bruce Strom, class of 1977. Thank you very much!

30 minutes 6 seconds

End of Interview