INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM DECKER

Date, place, and circumstances of interview: August 29, 1975, in Mr. Decker's office on the campus of Abilene Christian College, Abilene, Texas.

Date of birth: July 20, 1926.

Position: Regional Director of Estate Planning for Abilene Christian College.


Honors, offices, memberships, etc. President of the Student Association at Abilene Christian College in 1949; Listed in Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities, 1949.

Education: B.A. in New Testament Greek, Abilene Christian College; M. A. in the New Testament, Butler University; doctoral work at the University of Southern California.

Legal restrictions on use of interview: None.

Reason for choosing interviewee: Decker worked closely with Don Morris during his years as Chancellor of Abilene Christian College.
COSGROVE: This is Owen Cosgrove. I am in the office of William Decker at Abilene Christian College, August 29, 1975. In preparation for a dissertation on the administration of Don Morris at Abilene Christian College, I have asked to interview Mr. Decker about his association with Dr. Morris. Bill, may I say in the beginning that I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you about the life of this man who has meant so much to the life of this institution. What was your relationship with Don Morris?

DECKER: My first relationship with him began as a teacher in 1955 in the Bible department, and this continued for about ten years. Then for the last ten years I have been in the area of public relations and development, and worked with him primarily in fund raising and student recruitment activities for the college, but main emphasis with personally has been more in the area of visiting our major gift prospects and our estate planning prospects on behalf of the college.

COSGROVE: How much did Don Morris have to do with the developing of this department [Development Office]?

DECKER: Well, he was primarily the department back several years ago, but since 1962, we have had a rather well-staffed Development Office in which he was
the leader in everything that we did whether by com-
mittee action or individual presentation to him. He
passed judgment on and weighed very carefully all of the
suggestions that were made and was actually a vital part
of every decision that was made for fund raising and
development.

COSGROVE: How important do you consider this department
now for the future development of the school?

DECKER: Well this is, as Brother Morris put in his own
words trying to convince me to see the importance of
public relations development as opposed to classroom
instruction, said Bill, you're going to have to see the
big picture, said there are a lot of people that can
teach, but there are few people that have the desire
and the ability to meet people and raise funds. And
the financial success of this college is a vital part
of the ongoing of the total institution. It is just
as important as the instruction that is given.

COSGROVE: Did you work closely with Don Morris during his
last few years after he became chancellor of the school?

DECKER: Yes. After he became chancellor, I was one of the
primary drivers for Brother Morris. Actually, I was
more than just a chauffer, but his health was such that
the doctors did not want him to drive, and someone had
to chauffer him. His wife did this considerably. Robert Hunter did also, but the last two years of his life particularly I did most of the driving on all of our out-of-town trips. So I spent many miles and many hours with him.

COSGROVE: Bill, can you give me something of a description of one of your typical trips with Don Morris?

DECKER: Yes. One of the main areas in which we were traveling in the last year. We made about every six weeks a trip into the western part of Texas between Pecos and El Paso, and we did this about every six weeks because we were cultivating particularly two friends of the college in that area. We normally would leave Abilene about eight-thirty or nine o'clock in the morning, would drive pretty straight to Pecos maybe stopping for lunch, but going into Pecos and there visit with some of the Pecos people, waiting to see a gentleman on a ranch where we had to see him between sundown and dark, and this would be, depending on the time of the year, somewhere between five-thirty to seven o'clock in the evening, and would visit with the man and then return back to Pecos, usually getting to bed about nine-thirty or ten o'clock at night.

COSGROVE: That would make a hard day, wouldn't it, for a
man of his age?

DECKER: It was a full day for a man of his age and his health.

COSGROVE: Then what would you do the second day?

DECKER: The next morning we would get up and leave (he was an early riser). We would leave sometimes by seven-thirty or eight and drive then to El Paso, which was about two hundred miles away, and visit with people in El Paso, again making contact with three or four people and spending the night, and many times driving almost all the way back from El Paso the third day, back to Abilene.

COSGROVE: Can you tell me something of what he did out there on some of those long, lonely stretches in West Texas? Did he visit quite a bit or read or what?

DECKER: He visited most of the time, reminiscing about the college. There were two things that were of primary interest other than his family: and those were Abilene Christian College and the Church of Christ. And during these long periods he would reminisce sometimes about things that had happened in the past, about the great men that made up the board of trustees and the faculty and administration, the recurring problems of expansion and development of the institution.
Occasionally he would get into personalities, and occasionally he would say, "Now pardon me Bill, but I am going to be very pointed about this person, just stating facts though about his life and not meaning to criticize." He was very generous and very careful about reference to anyone in a derogatory way. And many times he would just roll with laughter as he remembered some of these painful but thrilling experiences in the growth of Abilene Christian College. He many times would talk about the current problems. He had just retired as president and was very much aware of the continuing problems that face private education today, and we would discuss at length some of these matters. On occasion, he would be concerned about the transition that was taking place between his administration and the new administration, but always with an air of optimism and compliment, he would think of Abilene Christian College, and its better opportunities and its progress that lay ahead.

COSGROVE: Can you remember any of those things which caused him to laugh?

DECKER: I'll try to do this without making reference to an individual's name, in fairness to them, but there were certain peculiarities, eccentricities of people
that would cause him to say, at the time it wasn't very humorous, but as we look back on it, it would be. There were times that he made reference, most of all, to a feeling of some of the out-of-town trustees toward the in-town trustees, in which he thought there might have been a little jealousy as to the influence of power, and he made reference to an occasion or two when something would be said, someone would do a particular thing, and at the time he didn't know whether the board was just going to split down the middle or just what. And then after it was settled and he smoothed things over, he said not only would he but some of the people involved would laugh over how foolish they had acted under the circumstance. It's really difficult to give you the full touch of this without involving some personalities, which I am not sure that he would want me to betray.

COSGROVE: No, I understand. You know, beside having such a sense of humor, he could get a great laugh out of other things and out of himself, but he thought very deeply at times, and sometimes he was a man that could be very sad about problems and about conditions that existed. Do you remember anything, in your association with him, that worried him or grieved him particularly?
DECKER: Yes. During the last year that we were together, he made a speech in connection with the anniversary of Thorp Springs. I think it was their hundredth anniversary. And at that time he delivered a speech in which he reviewed in great detail, there were several months that he spent in preparation for this speech researching information concerning the division of the church as is identified in 1906, although in his speech he clearly points out that the avenues of division started earlier, and even as early as 1893 some of this division was taking place in a rather pointed way; but as he researched this, as I said over a period of several months, I know specifically because he would bring me bits of this information and want me to react to it, he grieved particularly over the division that was present in the church, and the present circumstance of the church today, the threats of liberalism, the lack of patience and understanding of people, the lack of tolerance (and yet, in his sense of tone there was in no way an expression of compromise), but he grieved over the division that was present in the church in and related it even to the present time, and was really concerned about the moral and spiritual growth of our young people and the [moral] deterioration that he felt was
present in our nation as a whole in this area.

COSGROVE: Do you remember any of the things that we could talk about here when he made contact with these people out say in West Texas? About his method and what he told them?

DECKER: Yes. One of the main things that he would emphasize, I'll give you two illustrations. The approach was essentially the same with a friend of the college that was a devout Christian, very active in the church as with the person that was just a friend, who would not be a member of the Church of Christ, and maybe not even actively involved with any religious group, but a person whom we had been given their name and had begun to cultivate. With the church member, there was a common beginning. He would not spend as much time in relating the emphasis of Christian education at Abilene Christian College, the stress of the Bible and first things first, this type of thing, but he would always make reference to this and stress that many of the students of Abilene Christian College were involved in the communities in which they lived, in the church as preachers, elders, Bible class teachers, wives of these men; he also stressed that many of them were leaders within the community in various capacities in
their local communities, and that this was the work of Christian education. He would tie the whole concept of Christian education to the growth and development of the church, together, and then he would make the appeal that we want to tell you about either a specific item at the college where the need was felt for further growth and development or something that was a continuing need, such as the annual support, the operating expenses that were necessary, or occasionally as he would think in terms of their general estate planning. Always it was the very soft sell kind of thing where he was expressing, this is what Abilene Christian College is, this is what we need, you have an opportunity to participate in this, and we would ask you to do what you can, and many times he would say, if it was an estate planning prospect, "We're not asking for a gift today, but as you think about your estate plans, we would want you to consider Abilene Christian College as you make those plans."

Now as he would deal with the non-Christian, just friend of the college, he would take the time to build early in his conversation the emphasis that Abilene Christian College stressed good character, we were trying to train young people to recognize the value of work, the respectability of work, the importance of being
dependable, punctual, doing well the job that was delegated for them to do, the sense of loyalty to the corporation that they would be working for, stressing such things as character and citizenship and all of the qualities that go with that. And then he said even to the person that was not necessarily a Christian and maybe not particularly interested in these things, at Abilene Christian College, in addition to this, we believe that there is a relationship that every person has with God, and we strive to encourage that relationship. Then he would follow the same routine: here is a specific item that we need help with at Abilene Christian College, or here is the general field of estate planning. Sometimes he would ask specifically, we need so much for this project. We'd like for you to give to this specific project. He would never suggest what amount, but he would very pointedly ask specifically for a given project. Many, many times in our estate planning, he would simply say, "We are not asking for a gift, but whatever you can do as you make your estate plans, whether it be a child's part or some other percentage, please remember Abilene Christian College."

COSGROVE: Now Bill, let me go back a little bit before
this. How would he set up these contacts to begin, before you would take a trip. Would you know pretty well the ones you planned to see?

DECKER: Yes, we always planned our trips. There are two things about Don Morris, well really, three things that stand out in the area of development. First of all, he realized the importance of planning well our trips just for the sheer economy of time and money. So before we would make a trip, he would have at least one, two, or three prospects contacted where we had specific appointments to see these individuals. Then we would review several other areas in which we would try to see people if they were available. The second thing that as we made these contacts, he took minute notes, and as he came back he would make full and careful reports for our file. In the Edwards trial one of the things that was so important was that he had an exact accounting of every visit that he made with Mr. Edwards, not only the date and the time, but the essential salient remarks or happenings of that visit. The third thing was that when he would return, he would always write a letter of appreciation to that person with whom we had visited. And in all of this, there was always a note of appreciation, gratitude for the person giving us
the time to do these things.

COSGROVE: Bill, you mentioned awhile ago in our interview about how that on occasion Don Morris would laugh about how he got two or three of the board of trustee members together, and after a board meeting they would just get a big laugh over some foolish thing that had come up in a board meeting. Can you tell me without giving specific names or instances how he would go about getting two board members that had been crosswise with each other back together?

DECKER: Well, there is one occasion he made reference to in the board where some point of difference had come up, I think it was primarily over the influence of the local board members to the president as opposed to some of those who lived away from Abilene, and during this discussion, one man from out of town made a motion and it was pretty well carried by the board and another man that had been in a different position just stood up and said, if that's the way it is going to be, I resign, and walked out. Well, Brother Morris immediately followed the man out and talked with him in the hallway and explained to him, you're just too much of a Christian gentleman to let something like this happen, and we need your influence and we need your ability, and your support, and you just can't do this. And so Brother
Morris went back into the meeting and a few minutes later this gentleman came back in, and when he had an opportunity, he apologized to the board and continued to serve as a trustee. And this was pretty much one of the great strengths of Don H. Morris was that he was extremely fair and understanding, and he understood human nature, and many times as he would prepare a particular program and direction for the college to go, he would take the time and several weeks before board meeting to talk with the board members to get them to see the importance of what he was trying to put through, and especially if he felt that there was going to be any opposition to a particular project. He would try to anticipate this and to be sure to go visit those members to be sure that they understood what was taking place, and as a result most of his policy decisions, requests were immediately accepted by the board.

COSGROVE: Do you think of any time (it would be difficult to think otherwise in twenty-nine years of administration as president), do you think of any time that the board just flatly turned him down or opposed some program that he brought before them?

DECKER: I don't know that I can say that there was a time that he actually was turned down flatly. There have been some times in the history of the college when you'll see
that there were occasions when something would be deferred for further study on a given point. I think as we would look at some of the decisions that came immediately after World War II when there were some needs present as to housing and policy decisions, particularly as they relate to integration, and a few of these things that, there were times when the decision was deferred for further review by the board. I don't think of an absolute rejection or refusal, but I think there have been times when action was delayed by the board.

COSGROVE: He never left any impression though that he had the board in his pocket, so to speak?

DECKER: No, this was never that way.

COSGROVE: Now, on these contacts that made out in West Texas or wherever, I'm sure on a few of those contacts you were able to come home with a good report from one of them, that something definite would be done or had been done. What was Morris' general reaction?

DECKER: Yes. Well, Brother Morris is a man that I feel is filled with emotion and is not ashamed to express that. I have seen him cry, this has been very seldom, but I have often shared the exultation that comes from having had a successful trip. He would mention it several times. It would even reflect in the reports that
were made and many times even when I may not have gone with him on a trip, when he would return, he would give me a call and tell me that such a thing had been consummated by a certain person. He was always very enthusiastic, very grateful, and always bubbling with emotion about the gifts that would come to this college.

COSGROVE: And I would also think that there would be a few times when on one of these trips you would find something very disappointing.

DECKER: Oh, this is very true.

COSGROVE: How did he react to this?

DECKER: Yes, many times as we would return from a trip, we worked with one man for almost two years together and sometimes we would be very optimistic about our visit, but occasionally he would just say, "Well, I don't know if we got that man's attention at all this time. What did we fail to do?" We'd often review what we had said and the man's reaction, and raise the question, did we do this properly, and what do we want to do when we go back next time? There was always this kind of soul-searching that he would do when we had a failure, and particularly he would express this if someone simply refused and would even say that we don't want to receive your information from the college. And
this has happened occasionally. I don't think it was so much as a result of our particular interview, because Brother Morris was always very low key and never pushed, but sometimes as a result they would simply say, "We have been receiving your materials. We appreciate your visit, but we're just not interested in Christian education at Abilene Christian College." He would always be concerned about this and always ask us to review what do we need to do next time to make a better impression or to be more sure. He reviewed every case very carefully, and he kept records of people that he worked with for future reference. He always tried to remember the families of people, and he had a tremendous capacity of remembering the names of children and he took great delight in our later visits as he would find someone's child that, or grandchild, that had been in school, and we would visit with that grandmother, or mother, or father or so on.

COSGROVE: Bill, I'm sure at times in seeking out people to help in Christian education that there would be occasions when your efforts to secure funds for the college would be running parallel with those of other people, say at other Christian colleges, to get contributions also. How would Don Morris handle this? Would he encourage contributions to these others as
well as A.C.C. or what would he do?

DECKER: Brother Morris, I think without exception as I visited with him (and it's true, this comes out--in West Texas we have a number of people that have been generous and their names have been sought out by various worthy causes such as orphan homes and the other Christian schools and so forth) and many times as we would talk to these people they would make reference to Brother so-and-so from such a place who has just been here recently and was telling us about their needs, and if they told us that they had helped to support one of the other schools, Brother Morris without exception would find something good to say about that institution, or that school, or the individual that had come to see, and we left very clearly the impression that the cause of Christian education was larger than Abilene Christian College. But there was no question in that person's mind that the primary interest of Don Morris was Abilene Christian College. He always would encourage the other schools, and this is not in connection with this question, but you probably have found that he was one of the prime movers in the Association of Presidents of Christian Colleges getting together once a year to discuss their mutual needs and problems. Practically every new school
that's come into existence since Abilene Christian College was started and while Don H. Morris was president consulted him before they actually opened their doors, and he gave many hours of his time in giving advice and counsel to each of those schools. This was his feeling. The cause of Christian education is a larger cause than Abilene Christian College, but in his thinking, Abilene Christian College was one of the primary forces that was moving Christian education in our present time.

COSGROVE: Would these other schools consult him for information through the years?

DECKER: Yes, periodically. He was asked to speak on several occasions to the various schools, and I think the record will show that many times some of the presidents or some of the officials of the other schools called him on specific matters, and he has always given much of his time to answering on the phone and later would send information by mail trying to help them.

COSGROVE: I can imagine a situation arising where he might in a search for prospects for Abilene Christian College, to help the school, might find a person who would be a prospect to help another school and that school would not be aware of it. Was he one to share
information with other schools, that maybe they
should contact this person?

DECKER: I am not aware of that specific thing, Owen. I
do not question this would be the generosity of his
heart and his interest. I think if he had done such
a thing, and I am not aware of this, but had he done
such a thing, I am sure that it would have been done
with the prospect's consent. I don't think he would
have done this without having asked the person, "Would
it be all right for me to mention this" to whoever was
in charge of this specific school. He was not in any
way selfish in trying to maintain a select group that
was exclusively Abilene Christian College. Now he did
feel that wherever Abilene Christian College alumni
would go that they were our prospects. If they lived
in Nashville, in Oklahoma City, in Lubbock, or in York,
Nebraska, if they were Abilene Christian College alumni,
he felt that we were right to see them personally and
write to them. Now we may not conduct annual fund
campaigns or specific capital campaigns in Nashville,
or Oklahoma City, or Lubbock, or York, but we would
reserve the right to see the alumni.

COSGROVE: As it came out in several cases of litigation
about finances in the school, one of the very grave
dangers that can threaten a will or a bequest is the charge of undue influence. What conscious and conscientious efforts did Don Morris make to be sure that this could not be charged against him in vigorous fund raising?

DECKER: I think one example that would illustrate this.

Don Morris tried to keep abreast of the laws that govern our income tax and estate tax laws in the nation and in the state. His whole approach to fund raising and to public relations at Abilene Christian College was, we have something of value. Let us tell people about it, give them the opportunity to invest in it, but let them make the decision as to when, and how much, and by what method. But let's just keep giving them the opportunity. On one occasion, he was called by a man to come and to visit his wife with regard to her making a will. The man was not present, and as Brother Morris visited this lady it became obvious to him that her physical health and that her emotional state was such that probably she was not capable of knowing what she was doing in making a will. And after a period of interview and discussion with her, he went back to her husband and told him that he could have gotten her to have written the will, but he felt that she was not in a state of mind conducive to writing a will by her self— that if the two of them
wanted to sit down and work out something, that he would be happy to do so, but that he would not write out the will for this woman who he felt was incapable of making a will. This is the kind of attitude that he had about this. He would many times express to them, "Now are you sure this is what you would like to do? We appreciate your thinking of Abilene Christian College. Are you sure this is your wish?" In the Edwards case for example in the ranch, a contract was made by the college and taken by Brother Morris to Mr. Edwards, and when he read it over, he said, "I don't think this is quite what I want. Can you fellows come back by in two or three days?" Brother Sherrod was with him. So they extended their trip and came back by, and he had drawn up a new proposition in which he made a proposition to the college as to what he wanted to do with the Edwards ranch. This ultimately was adopted and accepted by the board of trustees. So, never has he tried to pressure a person into doing anything. This matter of undue influence is a very serious charge, and he was most careful and encouraged all of us not to be involved in this kind of thing, and where possible bring husband and wife together, bring children in and let them be advised what their parents were trying to do.
COSGROVE: Was there ever a case where, after a will had been made or a gift had been made to the school, that the children did contest it seriously and Don Morris would compromise with them in order to keep their good will?

DECKER: Yes, I know of one particular case in which, while the couple were still living, that this was worked out. And the college still was the recipient of a nice gift from the family, but an arrangement was worked out where the children were also more completely satisfied with the way it was done.

COSGROVE: Did they have good toward the school after this?

DECKER: Yes, I think so. They're still on our mailing list and are considered friends of the college. I think in just the last year, an annual contribution has been made.

COSGROVE: In almost every report that Don Morris made to the board of trustees, this was one thing that he mentioned, the good will of the college that he was so concerned about. Do you think of anybody that ever really got angry at him for his work in helping the college that maybe he felt that he had made a mistake, and he made some effort to placate their feeling?

DECKER: I don't know of any specific instance where a
contribution wasn't made, I do know there have been a few times where critics of the college have brought to him criticism with regards to their feeling about certain individuals who were teaching on the faculty and particularly in reference to the Bible faculty a few years ago where, I don't know that the person was really angry at Don Morris, but they were not persuaded by him; and I think there have been a few occasions where there have been some contributions that may have been withheld during this time. But I know from Don Morris' point of view, there was always the expression, "I'm sorry that a certain person has not agreed with us, I regret that I have not been able to convince them of what I believe to be the truth in the circumstance, but they are fine people, and maybe one day they will understand and appreciate our position."

COSGROVE: Bill, I appreciate so much your help. Is there anything further that you would like to add to our interview?

DECKER: I, Owen, would like to say this. I don't know that there has been any person that has had a greater influence on my life, I don't know of any person that I feel has tried to be fair and reasonable and understanding, patient in his position as the president and
then in his later life as chancellor of the college, I believe he always tried to do what was right in the eyes of God. And there was a very fervent love of the church of Jesus Christ and Abilene Christian College.

COSGROVE: This is one question that I probably should have asked at the very beginning of our interview, but I would like to ask it now. Can you give me just in rather capsule form what Don Morris' duties were as chancellor of the school?

DECKER: Yes, his primary responsibility as chancellor was to visit personally with a select group of major gift prospects, and these were assigned to him by the president, John Stevens. And these were people that he had worked with for a number of years when he was president, and John assigned them to him specifically. Secondly, his primary task was to work in the field of estate planning. Many times these were the same people, but there were additional people that he would see with regards of their having a will and their including Abilene Christian College in this will. These were the two primary tasks, then his general good will wherever he was in meeting any person that would come to Abilene Christian College.

COSGROVE: I would like to ask one more question, if I may.
How did Don Morris go about convincing people who had read of these various gifts to the school, and considered Abilene as just rolling in money and exorbitantly rich, how did he convince them that the school still needed money to operate?

DECKER: All right. This was not as difficult a task as you might think, Owen. When you know the facts of the circumstances at Abilene Christian College, we are a non-profit institution, and all of the income that we have is for the on-going of the college. He would deal with these things that, whether it be the building of our endowment (and during his presidency our endowment was somewhere between two and seven million dollars—extremely low for an institution of its size), he would point to this and stress that whatever is not needed for operational needs, here is a definite need, an endowment, that's always present with us. If we are to upgrade the quality of our academic program to provide better teachers, more teachers, better facilities, better equipment to do our instruction with, we just have to have these funds. And he would point to our financial status, that as far as short range obligations, we had very few of these, but our long-range needs were always constants in our building program. He would try to show
them that we were not spending money foolishly for large salaries and staff and administration or even faculty salaries, that these were below the average. And then he would point out that in order to keep these teachers, we just needed more help, and that, although we had many things for which to be grateful, there were still so many more things that we could do better if we had the additional funds.

COSGROVE: I suppose that he always had these facts at hand, and charts and data.

DECKER: He always had his facts well at hand. He always did his homework before he did anything.

COSGROVE: Bill, thank you so much for your help.

DECKER: Happy to do it.