



[Browse All Oral History Interviews](#)

[Oral History Program](#)

2-10-2015

Interview with Terry Plumb

Terry Plumb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/oralhistoryprogram>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Plumb, Terry, "Interview with Terry Plumb" (2015). *Browse All Oral History Interviews*. OH 230.
<https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/oralhistoryprogram/298>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Program at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Browse All Oral History Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact bramed@winthrop.edu.

**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #230
PLUMB, Terry**

PLUMB, Terry

Terry Plumb is a Rock Hill resident and the former editor of *The Herald*, Rock Hill's daily newspaper. His service years as editor (Feb. 1987-March 2007) covered the majority of Dr. DiGiorgio's tenure as Winthrop president (1989-2013.)

At Winthrop: Yes

Interviewed: 2/10/15

Interviewer(s): Rebecca Masters and John Gaston

Index by: Rebecca Masters

Length: 1:12:29

Abstract: In his interview with Winthrop History Project staffers Rebecca Masters and John Gaston, conducted on Feb. 15, 2015, the retired editor of *The Herald*, Terry Plumb, recalls: how the Winthrop campus was viewed when he first arrived in Rock Hill in 1987; issues, opportunities and changes in the Winthrop campus over the 24 years of the DiGiorgio presidency and *The Herald's* approach to reporting them, the role of regional and state politics and political philosophy in higher education funding in South Carolina over the years, and his observations regarding the 11-month presidency of Dr. Jamie Comstock-Williamson. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: The Herald; Presidents; Martha Piper, Phil Lader; Jamie Comstock Williamson; Politics; State funding; arts; women's college; vote of no confidence; African-American enrollment; facilities; personality; legacy; community expectations; athletics.

Interview Session (February 10, 2015): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:01:45 *Question:* What was the time period you were involved with Winthrop University?

Answer: Well, I was the editor of *The Herald* from February of 1987 through March of 2007, roughly the same time period of Dr. DiGiorgio's tenure. I really had no regular function with Winthrop. I did serve on the Advisory Board of the School [Department] of Journalism for a while. I met with Dr. DiGiorgio a couple times of

year with other key members of *The Herald* staff. Mainly, I knew Winthrop from our (*The Herald*) coverage of it, and I would see Dr. DiGiorgio in the community at various functions (committees, professors, mass communications department events, hired students, interviewed students) as well as worked on the Advisory Board of *The Johnsonian* [student newspaper] for a while. I knew a lot of members of the arts faculty, because of my wife's job as an arts administrator and we would see these people at various events in the community.

00:03:26 *Question:* What struck you as Winthrop's greatest strengths and weaknesses when you came to Rock Hill?

Answer: I never covered Winthrop directly and I was never directly connected to the University. Actually, we had been to WU before and stayed in the President's House when Phillip Lader was President. He had been a personal friend in Hilton Head when he was with the Sea Pines Company and I was with the paper there. He was gone by the time we arrived in Rock Hill, so didn't have the chance to observe him in that role, but the only other WU president that I had any opportunity to see was Dr. Piper, and she did not live not long after I got here. But I didn't know her very well and do not have a lot to compare with. I stay conversant with the political situation in the legislature and the challenge facing higher education in SC and it dismayed me to see our state, systematically underfunding higher education. I saw a number of institutions lose their stature in the state. What they did to ETV was a crying shame. We had one of the best ETV systems in the country and it's basically a hollow shell now. I could go on and on. I think all of higher education suffered, pretty much the entire time I've been in SC.

00:05:41 *Question:* How did Winthrop compare to other institutions? You're a Notre Dame alumni if I remember correctly?

Answer: You know I think it's hard to compare universities. And I wasn't familiar with institutions like WU.... As compared to other "research institutions," it may compare more to their football programs than anything, but the "Big3": Univ. of SC, Clemson, and MUSC. I've always felt when they cut at "the pie" they give them the biggest chunk of it and everyone else fights for the "floaters". I've always felt so many politics are involved in the way things are handed out, you have certain institutions such as the College of Charleston, Francis Marion, you have to contribute a lot of their success in getting money to the political clout they have. Unfortunately, this area of SC doesn't have the political clout they have and the traditional reason they've always used is that WU is so close to Charlotte that they don't want to spend the money up here and if you do it will benefit Charlotte. This isn't true, the power in the state is divided into Charleston, Greenville, Columbia, and so much money is used their, not just for higher education, but things such as roads, and they get the first crack at industrial recruitment. Also, I think WU suffers from being close to

Charlotte and the fact they're other institutions that we might benefit, otherwise benefit from (UNCC, CPCC, Queens) and because of the in-state, out-of-state tuition factor, WU is probably considered too expensive by kids from that area that would normally come here. So I think WU has always labored under that disadvantage. Also, I think the tradition of being a "Woman's and Teaching" school, and what's happened with public education/higher education hasn't gotten the funding. And what is traditionally WU's trademark...the School of Education, was not necessarily the driver it could have been if it had been another specialty...I don't know what that might be, but we seem to have a lot of little "niches" that even the private schools fill. The Citadel is a unique school; it doesn't have any competition for what it does. Wofford has a unique position, for some reason 60% of the Supreme Court Justices come there, doctors go there. If you want you kid to be a doctor, you might send them to Wofford, if you want them to be an engineer; you may send them to Clemson. And I just think that WU has been at a disadvantage because it hasn't had that unique "card" to play, so to speak.

00:09:52 *Question:* In overall terms, when you first came to WU, and now you see the WU that exists today, how would you compare them in terms of overall direction and recognition from your perspective?

Answer: Well, I didn't have a really good handle on WU before I came, but I think its profile has certainly gone up. No doubt some of it had to do with when Greg Marshall wash here and they beat my alma mater (Notre Dame) in the NCAA Tournament. And that sounds trivial, but my sister, who has been a life-long educator, told me that in one year, Florida State University won the National Championship; they had more applications for students that any other college in the country. It's a terrible thing to say, but it's understandable: kids typically don't pay any attention to where they are going to go to college until half way through their junior year. And they think they are being inspired by God (laugh, laugh), but typically they saw the game on TV the previous week and that's when they sent their application in. Said to say, but it's true. So I think the profile was raised there, but I think the most dramatic change has been the change of the physical plan. I think one of the biggest frustrations Phil Lader told me was that he could get money to build a new coliseum, but they won't fund the money to fix these historic buildings here-at-hand. I think, Dr. DiGiorgio managed to get the old buildings fixed up and managed to get these modern buildings built and clearly changed the whole physical plant for the better. He changed the whole access of the campus and I think that's a bold thing to accomplish, given the economic situation we previously discussed. Now, I understand that most of this was paid for by student fees, and unfortunately, I think it's worked to Winthrop's disadvantage for a public institution in SC is it's more costly in SC, which is a shame, because we are not that rich of a state.

00:12:40 [no question] The other thing is, and is more important for Dr. DiGiorgio's legacy is

the minority student ratio (I believe 27%) which is extremely high for traditionally “white” schools in this part of the country, and I think it’s shown and did that while the SAT scores went up, it shows that you can diversify your student population without suffering the quality of students. And given the fact it’s been 24 years, which seems like a long time, students start coming in at 18 years old and now they are in their 40s, they are just beginning to reach the “top” level in their chosen field. So I’m thinking in the next 20 years or so you’re going to see a very successful people: black Americans, and when they say, “Where did you go to school?” They will say WU. I think that’s going to tell, not only as a lasting legacy to the state, and the nation, as to the region and the county. I know it’s very tricky when you have an integrated student population. In the South, there’s a level where there is a lot of tolerance, but at certain institutions if they get to a certain percentage of minorities, a number of people become uncomfortable. WU, I’m sure there have been tensions, but from the outside, it looks like it’s been handled fairly well. On the other side of the coin, not only black students attending a traditionally “white” school, it’s white students coming in contact with black students on a daily basis in their dorms and classrooms with students of color, that they, otherwise would of probably never have associated with. So, I think it’s probably done as much for the white students as it’s done for students of color. I don’t know how this is going to play out, but I hope it plays out that we become a more tolerant society, and we might not recognize that as something that came from the “Winthrop experience”, but I think it’s something that can come out like that. We had an Africa American newspaper editor who worked for us and he came from California and had a totally different outlook on race relations and was dumbfounded that blacks and whites had nothing to do with each other outside of the workplace, and really frustrated him putting the two together. Just because we didn’t allow black people to eat in our restaurants, go to our churches for so many number of years did not mean that they were sitting around waiting to get invited. They had their own institutions, their own city clubs, churches, etc. And they couldn’t be expected to give that up, just because the whites said, “the doors were open.” Free-range chicken analogy stated here.

00:17:20 *Question:* What were your first impressions of him when you first met him?

Answer: That’s so long ago, I don’t remember. He does have a command presence and in the presence of a leader: forceful, doesn’t quiver. Admirals in the Navy, Bishops in the Church and Presidents of Universities are the most unchallenged authority, for better or worse. Truman: “The buck stops here.” You knew you were in the presence of authority when you dealt with Tony DiGiorgio.

00:18:30 *Question:* Did your views change over the years in any way, you spoke of how you viewed him then and now, did you find it self-evolving?

Answer: No, I don't think that he was any different today...pretty consistent. The thing with Tony DiGiorgio is that you knew what you were getting. Frequently was not real happy with the way The Herald published things, but I think he handled it very well.

00:19:19 *Question:* What was the biggest challenge WU faced during the timeframe of your editorship, and what did you find yourself doing, or not doing?

Answer: A newspaper has a different take on what happens to a university than other people do. We get harsh messages from various Eagle Club members about athletes. Sorrow vs. being victorious in games. What is the best story? Sorrow or victory? What is news? A good story is not necessarily good news and vice versa. It's always a dance. Image, privacy and you work these things out. When the faculty was upset with Dr. DiGiorgio shortly after his arrival in regards to pay of certain individuals. Ironically, this was the same thing that got Dr. Comstock in trouble. Where she gave a big raise to high profile people. It was ugly. A vote of no-confidence. He was a new president and the bitterness probably still lingers till this day and I don't know who to right or wrong on that and it wasn't our (The Herald) place to label someone the good or bad guy on that. That clearly was an issue. I think it got blown up internally than it should have. I wasn't connected internally, but other instances were handled well WU handled scandal well. Embezzlement of money, drinking, etc. Winthrop handled these stories well. Not big stories in the history of Winthrop, but for the most part they were handled well.

00:23:50 *Question:* Are there any other events or experiences that stand out in your mind that you want to talk about that we haven't necessarily asked you about?

Answer: I had a lot of involvement with WU over the years. I think that the bright spots in terms of standing would be the Business School (MBA) only program in this area. Arts Department (as a whole) isn't viewed with the attention it deserves. They encourage the student involvement in creating art around the campus. USC had story about 1 student worked on...come to WU and you can spend an entire day to see all the student art. WU has the courage to put up student art. WU hasn't been successful in getting that message out. The State will not run press on WU in comparison to Clemson, USC, etc. Geographically plays a disadvantage. Neither does the Charlotte Observer. Martha Piper's obituary...didn't make 1A in Charlotte Observer. RH wasn't that important to the Charlotte Observer, but The Herald and went all out. And realized WU and RH was not that important to the Charlotte. In the end, I understood better the area in which I needed to serve and Dr. DiGiorgio understood that. He invited me to events because he knew what we did and how we covered was very important. Only 1 ½ people covering WU full-time. It always bothered me we couldn't cover WU fully (departments, etc.). We didn't mind WU as well as we should have. It would have been better for our readers. Culture of RH and WU,

locals typically didn't go onto campus.
00:31:55 *Question:* You mentioned earlier the fact that history as a women's institution. How do you think this history and being seen as a school for the arts. How do you think this view impacted WU during state funding time?

Answer: That's something I never had the chance to see. People in Charlotte are not going to give money to RH for arts support. It's going to go to Charlotte art. He elaborates....Winthrop didn't do as well as it could for not being out front enough for what's going on in public education. He elaborates....

00:35:50 *Question:* You also mentioned athletics...how did you feel about and how did you feel about the decision not to create a football team?

Answer: The move to put football at Winthrop...most people don't understand what that entails. A few years ago, Furman and PC could play large schools and give them "a run for their money." That world is gone forever. College athletics (esp. football and basketball) is an industry, and you can't get into that. For every success, there is thousands that fail. We have commuter students, kids go to USC and Clemson on the weekends and it would take years to get to a competitive level. USF, Central Florida have so much more resources to get to a high level. No TV money and the minor sports would suffer here. And you're not going to shut those people up with a study. It's just not going to happen.

00:38:56 *Question:* The revival of the football idea arrived with the 11th President of WU, Dr. Comstock-Williamson, did you have any interactions with her?

Answer: I heard her speak twice. I was on the library board. She talked to the library board. After I heard her speak, I thought to myself, oh my, this is embarrassing. The audiences were people who have a commitment to the library, and of course they were there to find out, when are we going to get a new library? I think that's one of the failures of this institution. After all these things and the library wasn't built. Her speech was about when she was a little girl she liked to go to the library. These folks in the audience are academics who have committed their whole lives to research and study and she focuses on her being a little girl and liking to go to the library...it was embarrassing. "That's not what the president of the university ought to be saying!" The second time I heard her speak I was at the Knowledge Park event and she said they (WU) was committed to purchase two buildings....you don't give the impression....without study, this woman, stuff just goes out of her head. That's not what a serious leader would do, that's not what Tony DiGiorgio would do. He would not always be clear of where he was going, but we always knew he was taking us somewhere. She never instilled that confidence. And with all the crazy stuff that went on, it's unfortunate that at a time when WU really needed a leader, it was a disaster. And it's unfortunate that the two presidents who were women, at an

institution that was traditionally a women's college, both tenures ended shortly, one by death and the other embarrassed herself and the university. Because there are a lot of top notch women who fulfill the position of president well. It would be good for WU to have a good woman as president. It's unfortunate.

00:42:12 *Question:* Among those you know in RH, what do you and they feel they expect from the next president?

Answer: I guess the leadership wants to know that someone is accessible and has a vision and will be working for the betterment of the institution. Confidence. Someone who can raise the stature with the legislature. Many of my friends in Charleston, said Glenn McConnell should not be president, but now they sing his praises. If someone like Glenn McConnell could become president, I think that would do a lot. I don't know. I'd hate to be on the search committee.

00:45:20 *Question:* Overall, how do you feel history should view the 24 years on Tony DiGiorgio's leadership, and is WU better off for him being here?

Answer: Well yeah, I think you have to argue that because you can look at other presidents that did so badly, here and elsewhere. People thought he was steering the ship the way he felt it should go. With the economy, student indebtedness, and the state of higher Ed. He put the physical plant in place for WU and the next generation. If he had not taken care of that business, buildings would fall. He had a positive overall influence on the university. Some people though...people didn't like him when he came and people didn't like him when he left.

00:47:25 *Question:* In his case why do you think that was?

Answer: Personally, Tony isn't a warm and fuzzy person. There are probably other college presidents who are probably more approachable. He explains a story about his president while a student at Notre Dame...he made a profound impact on his life. His experience at Notre Dame. Long story about the impact of his college president. He compares this man to Tony DiGiorgio. He was a standup person. He never blamed anyone for his mistakes. If there was a problem, he took care of it. He speaks of the businesses in RH that are no longer here. He says WU is one of the only big employers' still employing people who are still here. Winthrop is now more important than when DB Johnson was here in terms of its purpose for RH, and you have to give credit to Tony DiGiorgio for that. I think he's certainly done what can be done to make RH a better place. Economics have changed.

Rebecca spends a segment on the Forum on Leadership and RH community; not related to the archives.

Terry Plumb: (#230)

01:08:00 Segment on Performance Funding.

01:12:29 *End of interview*