

Interview with Robert Melrose

Tape recorded interview conducted on February 3, 1988 by Dwight Agnew with Robert Melrose. Melrose served for 27 years at Stout as a history instructor and member of the Social Science Department. On five different occasions Melrose received the outstanding teacher award at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. He retired in 1987 and received associate emeritus status that same year.

Cassette 1, Side 1

00:00 INTRODUCTION

01:15 EARLY LIFE

Robert Melrose was born in Duluth in 1925. His father was a reporter for the Duluth Herald. When he was five years old, he and his family moved to St. Paul. His mother died in 1933, so he and his brother came to live in Menomonie with their grandparents. They attended East School for part of grade school. When his father remarried, they moved back to St. Paul. He returned to Menomonie as a high school senior, and graduated from Menomonie High School in 1943. Then he went into the Army Air Force.

03:30 ARMY AIR FORCE

When Melrose joined the Air Force, he expected to become a pilot, but he had a bad ankle from a track accident, so he could not be in the pilot program. He was sent to gunnery school, which lasted about eight weeks. He got into the war as a nose-gunner on a B24. He was stationed in the South Pacific. He returned to Menomonie in Dec. of 1945, was discharged, and enrolled at Stout.

04:30 COLLEGE

Melrose attended Stout for a year and a half. He stated that in those days, men were required to take Shop, and women had to take Home Ec. He was not well-fitted for Shop, so he did not do well. He played on the football team in 1947, and Ray Johnson was the coach. His enrollment at Stout was soon terminated due to poor grades. He then went to UW-Eau Claire, and finished his Bachelors Degree in 1950. His brother, Don, also graduated with him that year.

05:50 FIRST JOB

Melrose took a job at Bruce High School as a football coach in Bruce, WI. He also taught History, Civics, and English while he was there.

06:35 FOOTBALL AT STOUT

Coach Johnson was very active in many programs. They did not have a winning football team, but Johnson had good basketball teams. Melrose feels that Ray Johnson has left a tradition and a mark at Stout. He has also made quite an impression on Melrose. Robert Melrose now tells a story when Johnson told him to go play and he went on the field with only one shoe on. Melrose was so anxious, and he did not want Johnson to change his mind about him playing, so he just went out without thinking.

09:10 MASTERS DEGREE AND WORK

Melrose worked on his Masters Degree during the summers. He went to Superior for the first semester. Then he began to work summers at the University of Minnesota. He was head football coach and assistant basketball coach. After his first year, he taught American History, World History, and Senior Social Problems. Then he came to Menomonie where he taught and coached the same things.

10:15 EARLY TEACHING JOBS

Bill Tarot was superintendent at Bruce High School. After an interview, Bill offered Robert Melrose a contract. He taught for four years at Bruce High, and four years at Menomonie High. For the last 27 and a half years, he has been teaching at Stout. After his first year at Menomonie High, Bill Tarot came to Menomonie. He was principal at the high school. He became superintendent a year or two later. Melrose feels that Bill had a major impact on his teaching career. Bill Tarot was a conscientious person and a hard worker. He was a remarkable leader. Bill was a good friend of Melrose.

16:00 PARTICIPATION AT STOUT

Robert Melrose joined the Stout faculty in 1958. He had been asked to teach at Stout before then, but he had not been ready. He finally decided to take the job at Stout after a while, even though he would be taking a pay cut. He felt he could go from high school teaching to college teaching because he would still be coaching football and he would be in the classroom, but with a lighter load. Dr. Fryklund interviewed Melrose for the job.

19:50

STOUT FOUNDATION

Robert Melrose started with the Foundation in 1983-84. Jack Wile was head of the program at the time. Robert gave talks on behalf of Stout in other areas of the state, so he could do some recruiting. Dave Williams was the next head of the Foundation. Robert was then named to a financial committee. The only funds they had for promising Freshmen scholarships before the Stout Foundation was to sell buttons and things at football games. The Foundation has over \$1 million, and is on its way to over \$2 million. Dave Williams is a big part of that success. Melrose was on the Board for Investments until his retirement.

22:10

COACHING AT STOUT

Bob Bostwick was the head coach. In his first year, Melrose was the line coach, and they had graduate assistants. They had a poor season, but he was impressed with Bob. Bob was a hard worker and a skilled athlete. He came from Iowa where he played Big Ten Football. Melrose learned a lot from winning and losing. After two years, Max Sparter joined the coaching/teaching staff.

23:00

IMPRESSIONS OF MAX SPARTER

Max was big, strong, fast, and has a wonderful sense of humor. In 1965, the year Melrose left coaching, Max won the state conference championship, which was quite an accomplishment. Melrose now tells of a wrestling match exercise that Max had the football team practice. Max paired everyone up and had them wrestle for two minutes. Then he gave them a break and had them wrestle again for two minutes, etc. That was an exercise Max used so the team would not get bored with regular calisthenics. Melrose also tells of a time when he and Max wrestled, and Max won.

26:15

WORK WITH THE TRACK TEAM

In 1958, a track team was started. Track had been a minor sport at that time. Melrose was a track coach for four years. They had quite a good team.

27:55

GRADUATE SCHOOL

In 1962, Melrose went back to the University of Minnesota to work on a doctorate. He took one semester off at Stout, and started the winter quarter at Minnesota. Then he taught at Stout for three weeks. He left Stout entirely for the spring quarter. Then he went to U of M for a double summer session.

29:15 TEACHING AT STOUT VS. BRUCE

Melrose saw a big difference between college and high school teaching.

30:00 END OF SIDE 1

Cassette 1, Side 2

00:04 TEACHING AT STOUT VS. BRUCE

Melrose went from teaching 25 hours a week in high school to 12 hours a week in college. That was a dramatic change. He feels that high school teachers are overloaded. He also feels that there are more chances to help college students when they need it, because they do not usually have classes all day; every day. Melrose liked the freedom of college teaching. Since he did not have class all day, he could take longer breaks with his colleagues. He feels he put in as many or more hours in college as in high school work.

02:10 DISCIPLINE: HIGH SCHOOL VS. COLLEGE STUDENTS

He does not feel there is a big difference in the discipline, although, college students are more likely to be serious and attentive. Melrose never really had discipline problems in high school, so he really does not feel there is a discernable difference.

03:05 RESITANCE AMONG STAFF

Melrose never sensed any resistance between shop teachers and liberal studies teachers. He felt other instructors were just as interested in other fields as their own.

06:45 OUTSTANDING TEACHER

Melrose received the outstanding teacher award from the students five times. He was very humbled by it, and felt there were other teachers that were better than him. He was proud that the students held him in high regard.

07:40 SUCCESS IN CLASSROOM TEACHING

He felt what he taught was important. He taught History and Economics, but he felt that History was his strong suit. He taught History as a story of man's quest to a better life. He let students use their notes during exams, because he did not want them to have to memorize all the dates or to cheat. Many of his students did not even have to use their notes, they could just be

confident that they were there in case they needed them. Melrose feels that knowing when something happened is not as important as knowing why something happened.

10:00 MELROSE ON ABRAHAM LINCOLN

He felt Lincoln was the greatest man since Christ. There are more books written about Lincoln than any other President. Melrose is a part of the Lincoln Fellowship Committee. He felt Lincoln was great because he said complicated things in a clear way.

11:50 ATTENDANCE RESPONSIBILITIES

Melrose felt that his attendance dropped off after a while. He tried to council and help students as much as he could, but he had less sympathy for them if they did not come to class regularly. He never graded on attendance, but he tried to include things on tests that were only in his lectures.

13:55 STUDENTS' ATTITUDES IN THE 60S/70S

Melrose did find there was an era of frustration and anger during this time, but he did not feel Stout was a major agitator. 1968 seemed to be the worst year. There were two teachers at this time that said they were communists. Melrose did not feel the problem was the communism. They were just people that caused agitation.

15:45 TEACHER CONFLICT

Silver, one of the teachers who said he was a communist, came to Melrose's office and wanted to know why he objected to his returning in the fall. Melrose tried to objectively explain his feelings to Silver. Silver just assumed that Melrose was not objective, because he had a flag and a picture of Lincoln in his office. Silver then threatened Melrose to watch where he walked downtown. Melrose grabbed Silver and threw him into the hall and banged him against the wall. Silver never came back.

18:45 FEELINGS ON COLLEAGUES

Tom Ninneman impressed Melrose. They worked side by side for 15 years, and they taught the same subject. He feels Tom is one of the most well-read and stimulating classroom teachers he has ever known. He also mentioned many other teachers he feels highly about.

Melrose also mentioned a teacher named Clark, who did not impress him. Clark had great abilities, but he did not have the temperament, and he caused many frustrations. Most of his colleagues were wonderful people.

21:00 MEMORIES OF STOUT

Melrose went with a few other men to officiate at an important football game. It started raining just before the half. During the last play before the half, one of the players on the home team slipped, and the half ended. That team got a 15 yard penalty, so the crowd was angry. So, Melrose and the other officials went to the car and locked the doors for privacy. Soon there was a bang on one of the windows. Melrose ignored it for a while, but then he looked to see who it was. It was a woman in her mid-60s. He thought she was angry because of the game, but she was angry because they were in her car! They apparently came in a similar-looking Chevrolet. There had been a similar incident at Bloomer when Melrose was officiating. That crowd was also angry, but they meant it. They started jumping on the fenders of his car.

26:50 TRIPS ABROAD

Melrose made trips to Russia, China, and Scotland. The first year they opened the program to Russia was 1969. They took 15-20 students. He found that Russia was a drab and weary society. In 1982, they made a trip to China with students. He felt that Chinese society was refreshing and open.

30:00 END OF TAPE

Cassette 2, Side 1

00:05 TRIPS ABROAD

Scotland was a great experience. They took about 20 Stout students. There were students from Eau Claire, LaCrosse, and River Falls also. He felt Scotland was as open as the U.S. It was free and democratic. They were there for four and a half months. They worked and went to school all under the same roof. Everyone felt it was a very important time in their lives. They were all sad to leave.

11:05 STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS COMMUNISM

Melrose felt that students' apathy towards communism is there because they have nothing to compare it to. They have had freedom all their lives, so they cannot appreciate it, or understand it. He feels it's important to experience the opposite of democratic society. He feels American society needs more direction to go along with the freedom.

13:50 END OF TAPE