INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD SCHELLENGER
DIRECTOR EMERITUS, BUREAU OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

NOVEMBER 6, 1984

(Mr. Schellenger was deceased and did not edit this transcript.)

Q. Can you give me a little bit of background about your service at the University? I think you came to the University about 1930, am I correct?

A. 1932. I stayed until 1947. And I went in as Assistant Director of the News Bureau, as they called it at the time. James E. Pollard was the Director and he had been chosen to be Director of the School of Journalism. So they got me in as an understudy for him for a year and then I became Director of the News Bureau in ’33. At that time, there was one office girl. That’s all there was to it.

Q. And she was clerical staff?

A. Secretary and typist. She typed the news releases.

Q. How long had the News Bureau been established, do you recall?

A. It started in the late teens. I don’t know, before 1920. And it started with the publicity in the Athletic Department.

Q. That’s around the football team period?

A. Yea. And then they got into the campaign to raise money for the stadium. And then came into that. Well then they started this work for the University and somewhere along the line, the University News Bureau was set up as a University rather than the Athletic Department’s function, with Pollard as the Director. He had been an AP man, I believe.
Q. Had he served on the faculty or was the School of Journalism just established at the time he was …

A. Well, this had no relationship with the School of Journalism. Entirely independent. Administrative function. And he had not been on the faculty, no. He just had been the publicity man until he was chosen as Director of the School of Journalism. With all due credit to him, he was kind of a fair haired boy, with a business major in the University, Steve. So they picked him as an outsider to head up the School of Journalism, rather than anything within the ranks.

Q. Who did the News Bureau report to?

A. The President.

Q. It reported directly to the President.

A. Never anything other than that. Of course, as a matter of practical consideration, it was often the Vice President. And President Rightmire in those days often called the Vice President, Lou Morrell, and me into his office and said, “I don’t know anything about this. This is public relations. You fellows take care of it.” So, the Vice President and I were usually the ones that handled it all and took all the public relations projects of the University. Lou Morrell, he was another old newspaper man from Scripps Howard.

Q. What was your relations to the Board of Trustees? Did you do news releases on the Board of Trustees meetings?

A. Well, in those days I was not permitted into the Board of Trustees meetings. I had to wait until it was over and go over their papers and get out whatever news I could see in the papers. And it got kind of embarrassing at times when President
Bevis was appointed President. The Board of Trustees had met that morning and about noon I got a call from the Dispatch and they said, “What about Howard Bevis being named President of the University?” I said, “I don’t know anything about it.” No, wait a minute, it was AP that called and said the Dispatch had got it. And I said, “Well all I can do is check it because no one’s told me anything about it.” So I went and sure enough it was true. And one of the members of the Board of Trustees had slipped out of the meeting and telephoned the Dispatch to give them the scoop on the thing. But I had to just get anything catch as catch can. Now they’re open. But not in those days.

Q. Can you give me an idea of what was the kind of news that you were involved in, in terms of public relations projects you were talking about. What were the kinds of things that you were most involved with?

A. Everything. Everything that the University did in all the departments. And we periodically made a report to the Faculty Council which gave the numbers of releases for various colleges and departments during the stated period. And more and more, we got into things other than news releases down there. Just picking up loose ends around the University that nobody else was doing. And so one year I was asked to make a report to the Faculty Council and I thought, “Well, am I going in there and just give them these numbers of releases or really let down my hair about the public relations in the University?” The more I thought about it, the more I thought the time had come to make a break. And I was encouraged by the information that Bevis would be in that meeting. So I really gave them the works. I’ve still got a copy of it here somewhere. That nothing I wrote could
make the University any better than it was. That they, the faculty members, were the ones that made the University what it is, and all I could do was report what they did, for good or for bad. And so Bevis was right there and heard it all. He was kind of blushing all the way through ’cause it was kind of raising some questions about how things were handled. Then at the close of the meeting, after I gave my report, for the first time they had a pause for a report in there. And one man got up and made a motion that that be printed and sent to every member of the faculty. Someone else jumped up immediately and amended it to make it sent to every member of the University staff. So that was passed and in the next week or two I had requests from Stradley, who was then Vice President on behalf of Bevis, to tone it down, to not say all that I said. And I said, “No, it’s the Faculty Council’s official business now. If anything needs to be taken out, it’s their business, not mine.” So at the next meeting of the Faculty Council a month later, nothing had been done and they went on the warpath about it and demanded that their motion be carried out. And it was printed then and sent to every member of the staff and eventually the thing was printed and sent to colleges and universities all over the country. And to a certain extent, it was a big milestone in the maturing of public relations for colleges and universities in the country.

Q. Since it wasn’t a matter of polishing an image or couldn’t you sell an education the same way Madison Avenue sold soap?

A. Well, I didn’t make any such comparison as that. I just kept it in the educational, that I couldn’t make the University glitter when it was not worth it. That they were the ones to decide what the quality of education was and all I could do was
report things as they were. And if there were to be improvements, they’d have to make the improvements first so that I could report the new levels of achievement there.

Q. What were some of the primary ways that you were involved in getting the news out? One obviously was news releases, you responded to calls from the news media. Did you have any relationship with WOSU or were there efforts made on behalf of …

A. My office had a weekly news report on WOSU and they got copies of all our releases that went to newspapers too, so they could use them during the week. And I was the Secretary of the Radio Education Committee that had to do with the policy of WOSU.

Q. The weekly news report on WOSU, were you involved in producing that?

A. I wrote it. And I gave it most of the time. Once in a while I used the girl when I had a conflict, she would give it. But I always wrote it. Fifteen minutes was all there was to it. But that was long enough.

Q. In most cases it was pretty much a summary of the releases and other material that had gone out that week.

A. That’s right. Of course, there were always things that were suitable for radio that weren’t suitable for newspapers. And worked them into, maybe a little lighter touches that wouldn’t stay in the news story, but would brighten up the news broadcast.

Q. News broadcast?

A. Yea.
Q. You’ve got to excuse my voice. I’ve got a cold that’s settled in my throat. I should go back on one thing that I didn’t ask earlier. What had you done prior to taking the position?

A. Well I had graduated from the School of Journalism at the University in 1924. And then for eight years I edited a newspaper in Jackson, Ohio. And then I came directly from there to the University. One of the reasons I came was that Carl Steeb, the Business Manager of the University, was a small town man from Medina, Ohio. And he thought that the University News Bureau would profit by having a small town newspaper editor in there handling the publicity rather than just taking another reporter from off the city paper and give him the job. And I think he was right. A little more maturity for a person who had some editorial responsibility than there would be for somebody who had just been a reporter for a while.

Q. Did the staff in the News Bureau grow during your tenure?

A. Yea, it did. Somewhere along the line, I don’t know just what year this was, I made a request for the President’s office and threatened to resign if it wasn’t carried out, that the thing be changed from the News Bureau to Public Relations. And President Bevis didn’t like it very well. He practically said that he was the public relations man. Couldn’t change that. So we finally compromised that they made me Director of the Bureau of Public Relations, rather than Director of Public Relations. And even the morning of the meeting of the Board, when that was to come up, why the Vice President came down and wanted me to withdraw that demand. And I said, “No, that’s the way it is. ‘Cause we’re doing public
relations. We’re doing a lot more than just writing news releases.” And so they adopted it. Things changed that way. But then Bill Rounds was the first man to come into the office. Up to that time I had expanded a bit on the girls, maybe two or three. And it went on until I left in ’47, there were seven full-time people and seven part-time people. And much of the work that was in the nature of public relations because a lot of requests came to the University after the offices were closed. People would come in at five minutes after five and find every door slammed shut and nobody would take care of them. Parents would get the word that their son was missing from his fraternity house and they would come to the University and want help finding him. Nobody there to help them. So we set up things so that we operated there in the Administration Building from 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. every night. And on Sunday afternoon.

Q. One of the things that falls under the area of University communications is the Visitor Information Center.

A. Well, we did that. We were that. And the word went out to every office on the campus that anybody that came in there, anybody that telephoned in there, or anybody that wrote in there with a question that didn’t come within their immediate capability, to telephone us and send it over to our office. And we’d take it over. I got into a joke about that when I really formalized this information service and started a young woman in as information clerk to head the thing up. And I said, “I can’t give you many instructions on this ‘cause it’s a new job. You’ll have to find your way through it. One thing, I don’t want to ever hear of you telling anyone that you don’t know the answer. Many times you may have to
say you’ve been unable to find the answer, but if it’s serious enough for anybody
to call or write or come in here, you’re to make some effort to get it.” Two days
later my wife saw me and said, “What kind of a place are you running down
there?” I said, “What do you mean?” Well, she had heard that my new
instructions to the new girl had been that no matter what anyone may ask you, you
must never say no.

Q. In 1947, you said there were seven full-time and seven part-time? Many of the
part-time folks were students.

A. Yes, all of them were.

Q. Of the seven full-time, how many would have been clerical and how many
professional?

A. Well, I’d say that there were two in addition to myself that could be considered
professional. The rest were not clerical, they were typing and helping at the
information desk, and a lot of things rather than just clerical work. That was a
minimum. Another difference in those days, the newspaper had no regular
reporters on the campus. They depended on me and Bill entirely for their news
from the University. Now if they heard that something was going on up here,
they’d send somebody up. The first thing you do is come to our office and ask for
help in getting the story. And I had those 15 years there and never once asked
them to keep anything out of the paper. We tried to play square with them and get
them to trust us to the point that we didn’t have reporters nosing around all the
time looking for something.
Q. What were some of the toughest public relations situations you faced? Or not toughest, but most memorable?

A. I don’t know of anything in particular. We had cases of murders on campus and disappearances of students and robberies and once, one afternoon I had a sudden call from the administrator at University Hospital saying that something was wrong. That ambulances were pouring in there with students from University School. Well, I used my two professional people. I sent one of them to University Hospital, the other to University School to find out what was going on. And then they’d telephone it to me in the office and I’d pass it on to the newspapers downtown. And these kids had been poisoned by some kind of turkey salad that had been fixed up for lunch that day and had been left out of the cooler longer than it should have been. So they poured all these suddenly into University Hospital and had them laying on the floor and all over the place over there. But we kept on it. And I always went on the theory that when something bad happens, the best thing is to get the news out, so it won’t be repeated day after day and being in peoples’ memories. So we got the whole thing cleared up by 7:00 that night. And the next day there was practically nothing in the papers about it. I think one or two kids were kept overnight. I suppose that was about the most strenuous workout that we had for the office staff.

Q. When you left in ’47, the Bureau of Public Relations was still reporting to the President.

A. Oh yes. Never any change there.

Q. How were the dealings with the level of newspapers? Were there good relations?
A. The best, the very best. We sent out a packet of stories each weekend to all the non-daily papers in the state. I usually didn’t direct mail the dailies, would depend on them to get what they needed or wanted through the wire service. But we did send about four mimeographs every week. And the big town were home town stories.

Q. Would you have individualized those packets in some way for those weeklies?
A. Not as a rule, no.

Q. The material that went out primarily to the weeklies on a weekly basis, that would have been a whole gambit of things from faculty research to new appointments?
A. Well, the gauge for all of it was that I tried to remember myself as a country newspaper editor and use what I would have used in the paper and not send them anything else. And I think there was some benefit from looking at things that way. I tried never to put anything out of the office that I wouldn’t have used as an editor.

Q. What about internal communications? Was there anything during this period, some mimeographed sheet or something for faculty?
A. There was virtually none when I went there. And after a few years we started a faculty review which was a printed publication of eight to sixteen pages once a month. And we gave the faculty their first reports of Board meetings, summarized that. And had summaries of Faculty Council meetings for the benefit of those that didn’t go. And I had a reporter in each department who gave me a report from his department every month with an emphasis on publications and speeches that faculty members had made. And there I ran into one little problem. Some faculty
members thought there wasn’t anybody important on the campus under the rank of Assistant Professor. And I insisted that we had to bring instructors into this too, who were on their way up and listing the publication or speech by instructor. Meant a lot more to him than to a full professor who was doing it all the time. But that went out every month. I edited it.

Q. What was the name of it again?
A. Faculty Review.

Q. You were the editor?
A. That’s right. All these things I began to bring Bill Rounds more and more into as he was there. I don’t think the thing ever carried my name as editor, but that’s the way it was. We got out the program for WOSU every month. And we started a parents news that went to the printed paper about once a quarter I guess it was. Maybe four pages, eight pages. Eight and a half by eleven or nine by twelve pages. It didn’t go to all parents, but we had worked through the Dean of Men’s office and Dean of Women’s office in setting up parents associations in as many counties as we could throughout the state.

Q. One or two mothers clubs still exist.
A. Does it?
Q. Yes.
A. We had a dads association too at that time. They had state offices. They came to campus all the time for meetings. There was a dads day every fall too. Football games. But that was a printed publication. I don’t know, several thousand copies went out once a quarter.
Q. Would that have been in the 30’s or 40’s?
A. More likely around ’40, I have no way of knowing.
Q. I have another way of asking. When you came to the University, it had to have been at least financially one of the worst times.
A. That’s right.
Q. Can you tell me a little bit about how things changed from that period until the time you left? You were beginning to see the influx of GI’s from WWII and the enormous growth.
A. Well, I went in at ‘32, in the depths of the Depression. And they paid me less than half of what they had been paying Pollard on the job the year before. But I was kind of frightened of the whole thing just coming from a small town, where I might not hold a job. So I put in a lot of overtime, worked Saturday afternoons, Sundays. And _______ did a lot of subbing in his office all the time. So when the Depression hit, he called me into his office and started telling me about all the cutbacks the University was going to have, this many jobs abolished, salary cuts. And I began to wonder what this was going to do to me. When he got through, he said, “Now as for you, we’re going to give you $600 more next year, but it’s not a salary increase at all. It’s just payment for overtime.” He had seen me working in there Saturdays and Sundays. They didn’t do anything in those days like merit increases. The only other substantial increase I got was when Charles Stillman, for whom Stillman Hall was named, was Director of School Administration, and he had been the fellow who had trained most of the community chest directors in the state. Cleveland Welfare Federation called him one day to organize a meeting
for public relations for them and he said, “Yes, I can recommend the best man in
the country. You can get it right here.” Schellenger is the Director of Public
Relations for the University.” Go ask him and get it.” He got them interested and
as soon as that telephone conversation was over, he called Bevis. He said, “I just
found out that the Cleveland Welfare is trying to get Schellenger away from … If
you think as much of him as I do, you won’t let him go.” So I went up there and
they interviewed me and offered me the job. And I came back and told Bevis.
And he said, “Well, we can match what they offered.” So he did and I don’t think
he ever knew what went on (and I didn’t for years) concerning the background of
that offer. But that’s the way you got ahead in the University in those days.

Q. What were some of the changes by the end of the 30’s and the war came and then
immediately afterward? I remember seeing somewhere when I was looking
through the history not too long ago, it seems to me it was in ’45, ’46, the
University had asked for an appropriation because they expected that over the
next year they would have an enormous increase in enrollment. The legislature
said there’s no way that’s going to happen. We’ll get you some more and it turned
out the University had more than they had projected.

A. I don’t remember the details about that. Of course, we got down to a very low
level there. Virtually no men students during the war and they put girls in the
men’s fraternity houses and opened up all the dormitories for the Army’s
specialized trainees. And we had as many as 3,500 specialized trainees on the
campus at one time. And there again, we got in one of our little public relations
gestures. I got one of the first automatic typewriters in the city. The rototype they
called it. And we sent a letter over the President’s signature to the next of kin of everyone of those 3,500 specialized trainees there saying we were glad he was here and we’d do everything we could for him and call us or write us if there’s anything we can do. And it had a whole lot of interesting sidelights. Someone in Denver got one of those letters. Her son was a specialized trainee at the University. She was blind. He had been working for an essential industry there and she couldn’t understand why they took him away from her when she needed him so much. So she wrote a letter to Bevis in response to our little note. Bevis turned it over to the ________ there. He checked it out and they discharged the boy and sent him home to take care of his blind mother. Some of those things were little rewards for what we were doing. It was a grind to get out 3,500 letters.

Q. I would think so.

A. Another little story along the way. I told you about sending girls into the men’s fraternity houses. And the Dean of Women told me this. One of the girls got into her new home and started out to explore the thing and got to the bathroom. And she let out a squeal that brought other girls to her. And she said, “Just look girls what a wonderful place these boys have for washing their hair.”

Q. What led you to leave the University in ’47?

A. Well, a man came along and said, “Would you be tempted to leave the University?” And I said, “Yea, I would.” He said, “Would you be interested to take 50% more salary than you’re getting now?” I said, “Yes, I would be interested.” So, I went. I kind of reached the point where I wanted a little different experience along the way. So I took it and headed up the public
relations department for an advertising agency downtown. We had a variety of clients and so on. It was good for two or three years. Then in ’51, I took another job as Executive Director of the Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges, which was a fundraising activity for 34 Ohio colleges and the first of its kind in the country. So we set a pattern that was followed by 40 other states and regions in the next year or two. I kept that for 15 years.

Q. Most of your career has been in higher education in one form or another.
A. Well yea. My last two years of active work was Administrative Assistant to Congressman Wylie in Washington. So most of it was higher education.

A. He followed me and served 1947-1961. There was kind of the last of several months there and I thought I was important enough to the University that I should give them time to give them a successor. So I gave them six months before I went to this job downtown. At that time, he was _________ to get a successor. And I think Bill Rounds had to carry it for a while. And one day I was back at the Faculty Club and one of the members came over and said, “We’d like to meet your successor.” He took me over and introduced me to Bill Wilcox who had come along at that time. And that it was ______________ after Bill Wilcox, I guess.

Q. Question unintelligible.
A. I don’t know. The day he was appointed to the job he called up the house and I wasn’t there. He talked to my wife. He said he’d like to talk to me and find out what that person should be doing. What the job was like.
Q. I think he came on __________

A. Well, I think so. And I think one of the reasons was that he had been the Executive in the inaugural festivities for Fawcett and Fawcett was impressed with him and brought him over to the Administration Building.

Q. I was wondering, what’s your impression of Bill North.

A. Great, good. Perfect. Nothing unpleasant. He was the campus policeman. They got 50 or 60 down there now. But he was the policeman in those days. I don’t think they even had a night man. They had these inspectors who went through the buildings at night and that was the extent of the night force. But Bill was just a congenial character, always talking to people, always friendly. Once he picked up a couple down on the riverbank in some sexual activity and somebody asked him what he’d done with them, why he didn’t report it to the Dean of Men, Dean of Women, and he said “Well I didn’t need to because the poison ivy gave them all the punishment they needed.”

Q. Elizabeth Stevens. I remember her as being the information person.

A. I’d forgotten. She came on about the time I left. When we started out we really had a top flight person. She had been the daughter of a man who had been Superintendent of Schools here in Columbus for years, Esther Colcott [name unverified]. And Stevens didn’t quite live up to the caliber of Esther because there just wasn’t anything she wouldn’t try to do. Someone would come up at her quitting time and she’d just take her coat off and go back to work and see the thing through like some of these law students and so on. She really took it seriously. I’d forgotten about Stevens but she did come along about that time.
Q. What about Charles Kettering. Any stories relating to him that you can think of?
A. Well, I didn’t have any personal relationship with him. The University never got out of him what they wanted to. And one of the reasons was he had given them money to set up a homeopathic medicine college. And they built Kinsman Hall over there, which may be torn down now for all I know, as the headquarters of homeopathic medicine. Well apparently there was so much pressure from the regular MD’s that after so long a time, the University cancelled the homeopathic setup and gave Kettering his money back. And he never warmed up to the University after that. He served on the Board of Trustees, but his greatest money went to Antioch.

Q. You had some interesting relations with ____________.
A. Back during the days when Martin L. Davey was governor of Ohio, the Board of Trustees got to be much more political than it had ever been before. He appointed several pretty cheap war [new?] dealers, including one M.D. from Marion who was more a politician than an M.D. And so this man from Marion called up Carl Steeb, the Business Manager one day, and said he had a protégé that was about to flunk out of the School of Journalism and he demanded that the University give him a job. So Steeb called me in and said, “Can you use some more help down there?” I said, “I always can use more help.” He said, “Take this boy on and see what you can do with him to satisfy this trustee of his.” Well things went along pretty well for a while. And then I discovered that he was riffling my mail when I was out to lunch and he was listening on extension telephone to some of my conversations. Every weekend he gave his trustee in Marion a report on the
things I had done that week that should be causing me to be canned and him to be
given my job. So every Monday I would call up the Business Office to give my
defense of the charges that had been made against me. Now the Business Office
wasn’t taking him seriously but they had to go through the motions of keeping
this trustee satisfied. It went on until the end of the year. I did an unheard of
thing. I asked them to reduce my budget enough that I could abolish his job. So
that’s how I got rid of him. But it was a pretty mean operation to try to do things
under that kind of a cloud.

Q. Steeb was the Business Manager?
A. Yea, for many years.

Q. And was he succeeded by Louie Stevens?
A. No, he was succeeded by Stevens. Somebody else came in there. And the Vice
President in charge of business. I think he was the immediate successor.

Q. Could I ask you to reflect a bit on, I guess this is really a philosophical question,
but on this type of college public relations. And could you see some evolution in
it from that period in the early 30’s to the time you …

A. Absolutely.

Q. Can you talk a bit about what that evolution was?
A. Well it’s just what I’m saying. That public relations went to more than what the
University is and what it says about itself. And in 1946, the American College
Publicity Association changed its name to American College Public Relations
Association, and I was the first President of the American College Public
Relations Association. I traveled all over the country that year preaching the idea
that it wasn’t publicity anymore; it was dependent on what the colleges are really
doing. And one school after another in those years changed its name from
publicity to public relations. And I haven’t been particularly happy about this
latest thing that’s going on now. The Case Council for Support and Advancement
of Education and all the fancy titles that come in now that conceal the fact that it
is public relations that they’re really concerned about.

Q. Now even the office at Ohio State became the Office of Public Affairs.
A. Yea.

Q. The Vice President for University Communications and Development. Our office
is now University Communication. But you’re right; it’s really all public
relations.
A. And I never knew why they should be ashamed of the fact that they are concerned
about their public relations, but there’s just been that attempt at concealment all
over the country. I think part of it too is an attempt on the parts of directors to
make themselves seem more important in the scheme of things. But I was invited
to colleges all over the country to come and talk to them after this episode at Ohio
State where we put out, published that report of Faculty Council. I even talked to
the faculty at Notre Dame University one day in public relations.

Q. Now that report sounds like a rather key thing that I ought to try to get. Do you
know what year?
A. I think maybe I’ve got a copy. Let me look and if not, I’ll do some more hunting.
I had 60 people employed to do these exhibits. (Unintelligible). Move everything
out there as much as we could to demonstrate the work of the department. For
Fine Arts for example, we had live models and students doing the drawings and electrical (unintelligible). We moved the whole WOSU operation out there. They were the first station to operate at the fairgrounds. But that was another big job.

Q. There’s never a lack of things to do.

A. Never did. My wife was pretty unhappy about the state fair because I was working all summer and by the time the fair was over and I had a chance for a vacation our son was in school and we couldn’t go. She was very delighted when I gave up the University but the irony of it was it was in connection with this job at the advertising agency. I had all of the state fair publicity. I was responsible for the whole works. (Unintelligible).