

LUTHER COBB

April 13, 2002

Jeff Charnley,
Interviewer

Charnley: Today is Saturday, April 13th, year 2002. We are in the Union Building on the campus of Michigan State University. I am Jeff Charnley interviewing Dr. Luther Cobb. This interview is part of the MSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the university, coming up in 2005. Dr. Cobb is here on campus this weekend attending the first reunion of the Alumni Distinguished Scholars Program and recognizing the founding of the Honors College in 1956.

Dr. Cobb, you see we are using a tape recorder today. Do you give me permission to record the interview?

Cobb: Yes, sir.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with a little background about your family and education before college. Where were you born and raised and where did you go to high school?

Cobb: I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. The only reason it was Little Rock was because the little town of Keo is just a white spot on the road northeast of Little Rock. My dad was from Arkansas, my mom was from Tennessee, and they married after the war, actually. They met when she was a teacher and he was going to college on the G.I. Bill. Then when I was nine, we

moved back to Tennessee and I spent most of my childhood, the rest of my childhood in Nashville. I graduated from Overton High School in Nashville in 1970.

Charnley: How was it that you came to Michigan State?

Cobb: I won the scholarship.

Charnley: How did you hear about the scholarship?

Cobb: As I recall, it was arranged through the principal of my school, and another student from at least one year prior had gone up and taken the test and told me about the program. As I recall, that's how I heard about it, and then my principal nominated me—I was a merit semi-finalist, of course—to be the one from the school to take the test. I think for out-of-state students you had to be nominated by your principal. I believe that was the routine.

Charnley: What do you remember about the test?

Cobb: Well, I came up the night before. I don't think I had ever flown in a plane unaccompanied anywhere. I believe that's true. I'd been on train trips and that sort of thing, and bus trips. So I flew up here and arrived the night before. I stayed at the Kellogg Center and realized that was nowhere near where the test was going to be. I had this old gray Samsonite hard-shell piece of luggage, and I got up and walked all the way across campus. It was February; it was a howling snowstorm. They gave the test somewhere on the east campus, I don't

remember where exactly, but I remember trudging across the snow thinking I was never going to get there.

In retrospect, it's kind of amusing, obviously a large part of the ADS experience is to introduce kids to being on campus for a little while, and you think of a lot prettier months in East Lansing than February. It's amazing to me, given that wintry experience, that people don't get more turned off about it. I actually found it attractive. At that point I liked winter. I've since changed my point of view.

It was pretty interesting, and the test itself I remember as being very long. The only question I remember very much of was the difference between Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns. They had a question on that which I happened to know the answer to. I remember walking out of the test feeling like I might have done well enough to win. I felt pretty good about it, but over time I can't really remember the rest of the questions. I know it was a very wide-ranging and eclectic test, though.

Charnley: It's interesting, several of the people I've talked with today have had the opposite experience, thinking there's no way they would have won, and then they were surprised.

Where were you when you got the notice that you were accepted?

Cobb: I remember them coming down and seeing me in high school. They came down for an interview trip. I was talking to the guys last night, the ones that did the trips, and they were saying that they stopped doing that because after a while it just became, I guess, more expensive or whatever. But they had two folks in the admissions office that met me in the principal's office and sat down and interviewed me. I remember their last question was, "What can you bring to

the university, and what will you do for us?” Which I thought was a great question, kind of caught me flat-footed. I mumbled something about doing research or maybe acting in campus plays. I can’t remember. I mentioned the debate team too.

When I got the news, I honestly don’t remember. I think they sent it out by telegram, didn’t they? I can’t remember.

Charnley: Some received telegrams.

Cobb: I think it was a telegram. It was a very great boon to me because I came from a family of six boys, and while we weren’t poor by any means, the concept of getting six boys through college—my mother was a schoolteacher. In fact, her claim to fame is she was Oprah Winfrey’s chemistry teacher in high school. I don’t know if John mentioned that or not. My mom was a high school teacher; that’s not a big money occupation. My dad worked for the railroad, not running on trains, but he did legal work for them, claims and stuff. So it was a very modest, middle-class environment, and yet it was always understood in our family that everybody was going to go to college, and in fact, all six of us have graduate degrees of one kind or another.

Charnley: So it wasn’t a case of if, it was where?

Cobb: Yes, it was where. It was, I think, a big boon to me and my family to be able to get an entirely supported college education and not have to rely on them for support. Did I answer your question?

Charnley: Yes, you did. Absolutely. What were other schools that you considered?

Cobb: When I filled out my application for the merit scholarship, they asked where you wanted to send the scores, and I recall the other two colleges I sent it to were Dartmouth [College] and Rice [University]. I'm not sure, in retrospect, why I chose those two. I'd been to recruiting meetings. My mother always wanted us to go to Rice because she always thought it was one of the best schools in the South. I did not want to go to Vanderbilt [University], because it was home. I wanted to go away from home. Not because I didn't like being at home, but there's something about going to college and the separation which is the business of being an adolescent in the first place. So I never seriously considered going to Vanderbilt or Emory [University]. They weren't far enough away.

Charnley: So 1970 was an exciting time on campus.

Cobb: Yes.

Charnley: What do you recall about the events of that year?

Cobb: Most of that happened before I came in, because in May was Kent State and they had a lot of unrest up here, but I was still in high school. Interestingly, that year I won a speech contest from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and so just before Kent State I actually spent a week in Washington [D.C.] as a guest of the VFW, and that was an interesting story, too, because I was president of the Forensic Club. I think John also was. My brother, Louis, who's now an attorney

back in Tennessee, also was president of the Forensic Club and captain of the debate team. We did a lot of public speaking, and that's been an experience that's been very valuable to me over the years.

I won this thing from the VFW to go to Washington, all expenses paid. We went to the House of Representatives, the Senate, I met Senator Al Gore, Sr., in his office. He greeted us. It was cool. That was about three weeks before Kent State. In fact, we had a dinner and I have a picture of myself shaking hands with Dick [Richard M.] Nixon. It's in my office. My wife said, "Don't put that up in front. People will think you're a Republican." So it's in the back of the office. [laughs]

But that was just before everything really hit the fan. By the time I got up here in September, things had quieted down, but there was another incident, the Christmas bombing of 1972, when I was here as a junior. Seventy-two, '73, when they mined the harbors in Haiphong and there was a big campus demonstration. It wasn't really scary, but it was very different. In retrospect, it seems hard to believe that it happened.

Charnley: I was in Fort Benning at the time, going through officer basic.

Cobb: As a draftee?

Charnley: I went to Officer Candidate School, and we were just a couple weeks from being commissioned. I was trained as an infantry officer to go to Vietnam.

Cobb: How come you look so much younger than me? What's wrong with this picture?

Charnley: I graduated from high school in '68. I don't know. [laughs]

Cobb: It's not fair.

Charnley: At any rate, back to your experience. What did you study when you first came?
What were your intentions on majoring in?

Cobb: I majored in chemistry and I pretty much had decided to do that when I came here. I always loved chemistry. My mom was a chemistry teacher, and one of my favorite teachers in high school was a chemistry teacher. I just really enjoyed it. It was an interesting intellectual discipline. I loved the labwork. I figured what I would do would be get a degree in chemistry and go be a college professor, basically is what I had in mind.

I took Dr. Hammer's honors chemistry course. I bet you have other people that took that. He was a wonderful teacher and I still have very fond thoughts of that class, the labs and the lectures. Most of my really good friends in my freshman class were members of that honors chem course. I was also in Lyman Briggs and lived in Holmes. I lived in Holmes Hall all four years I was here. So we would walk from Holmes Hall to the Chem Building nearly every day with the same group of guys.

It wasn't until my junior year that I actually decided that I wanted to go into medicine. Until that time I'd actually intended to get a degree in chemistry. In fact, I did get a degree in chemistry, which is not a bad prerequisite for medicine. But I just decided after, that that

medicine was more interesting, and I think also, in retrospect, I chose it because it seemed like the hardest thing I could do, which is true. It was. [laughs]

Charnley: What were some other areas of interest that you studied besides chemistry?

Cobb: I had a lot of fun taking a lot of courses that had nothing to do with—but that was one of the brilliant ideas of Briggs College. My educational experience here—and I've been thinking about this in thinking about this interview—really shaped, in a large degree, my intellectual approach to a lot of things ever since. I think that the concept of Lyman Briggs as a liberal science education, broadly based, not just with a narrow view on the hard sciences, but what does science mean, what is its place in the universe, where does it fit into the human ecology. That meant a lot to me at the time, and still does.

A lot of the things that I did as an undergraduate, even though they were, a lot of them, based on science, some of them were also kind of remote. I took a course in ancient Near East history; Samaria and Babylonia. That was a wonderful course. I took a course in mycology, which actually has medical applications, as it turns out. It was just because it was an interesting botany course, and the professor was a fellow who chain-smoked more cigarettes—this was back in the seventies—and he would sit and smoke those things, and we would have a different lab project every week. We would grow something edible in the lab. We made wine, we made Indonesian tempe, which is soybeans that are compacted by a rhizopus fungus and we'd grill them up and eat them. It was a wonderful course. I understood he died in a house fire, falling asleep while smoking his cigarettes. I can't remember his name. I still have his textbook in my office.

I took a course on geochemistry, just because it was interesting. I took a course in basic astronomy.

Charnley: Did you continue with your debate?

Cobb: Yes, I was actually on the debate team freshman year when I guy named Cushman was the coach. They were just saying today that the debate team was doing very well.

Charnley: They traditionally have done quite well.

Cobb: I did it for the first year and then it just got to be so much time spent away from the campus and so much hard work that I just stopped doing it. It was a question more of allocation of time and resources than of joy.

Charnley: Your decision to go into medicine, did that surprise anyone?

Cobb: I don't think so. I think, in fact, my mother has always thought I would go into medicine, and I think she tried not to steer me one direction or the other. She was wise enough to know that if you push, kids will probably push back. I think they always expected. I think nobody was surprised that I did that.

Charnley: Were you the eldest in your family?

Cobb: The second.

Charnley: You mentioned a few of the professors. Were there any others that had an important influence on your studies here?

Cobb: In the chemistry department there was Dr. Temnick [phonetic]. Tim McQuinn was a friend of mine from Briggs College and also in medicine now, and I haven't talked to him in several years, but he and I did this project with rare earth chelation products with quinolone ligands and doing what was called spectrofluorometry, basically basic science characterizing the spectra, when you'd excite it and it would fluoresce, in what wavelengths would it fluoresce and what chemical shifts would you get, and each of the lanthanide rare earth elements is just slightly different chemically. So it is kind of an interesting descriptive project.

I really enjoyed taking courses from Dick Schlegel in the Department of Physics. He had the most wonderful lecture voice of any professor. He could have done radio or theater. He had just a beautiful, warm, mellow voice. He was a wonderful, friendly man. I did my senior honors thesis with him in physics on the intellectual origins of special and general relativity. He taught a course on that, and that was a wonderful course.

Hugh McManus [phonetic] was one of my professors in physics when they did the Berkeley physics course before honors physics. He taught, I think, the third quarter, which is electricity and magnetism. It was waves. I still have the textbook somewhere. I think E and M was the third of the four courses, and that was a very enjoyable course. I like physics a lot.

Charnley: You graduated in what year?

Cobb: Seventy-four.

Charnley: Then did you go right into medical school?

Cobb: Yes. Actually, it was kind of interesting, with an ADS scholarship I had full room and board, and then I mentioned I was in Holmes Hall for four years. The last two years I was an R.A. in the dorm. So that gave me room and board too, which meant that the money that I got from ADS for room and board I could keep, which was nice. I kept candy and soda in my room so kids would drop by and feel like it was a friendly place to be.

Some of the most fun I had being in the dorm all four years. A lot of people sort of figured that after freshman and sophomore year—at that time it was mandatory as freshman that you lived in the dorm. I think that was in part because they built so many dorms and they wanted to make sure they were occupied so they could pay the mortgages. But I really liked living in the dorm. A lot of kids would move off campus, but I liked the communal atmosphere of living in a big hall full of guys. We'd sit there and play cards at night and read and talk, and it was just a lot of fun, a very intellectual environment because of the Briggs College connection. Most of the kids who were in the dorm were very interesting, academic, serious-type guys, not averse to having a little bit of fun, but serious students as well.

One of the most fun parts for me was the intramural sports.

Charnley: What did you play?

Cobb: Well, just about everything. The funny thing was, in high school I was sort of this skinny little wimpy kid and hadn't gotten into sports very much. I ran track once as a freshman and that was about the extent of it. But I started to fill out and get a little stronger when I got here to college, and we played football. They call it football, but it's very different from any other football. You have no first downs, you get four downs, anybody can throw a forward pass anywhere on the field. I don't know if you ever watched the game, but it's a really fun game. I played intramural football, softball, basketball, table tennis, pool, bowling, and I think we had an intramural soccer team. I'm pretty sure we did. So there was something going on the whole time and it was just great fun.

The other thing I liked as an extracurricular activity was this group called the Outing Club, and somebody told me that it still exists. In the Outing Club we used to go out rock climbing and spelunking. We would take trips down to Bloomington,[Indiana] which has got a wonderful topography, and go caving. A fellow named Dick Blenz, who was in the engineering department, he had this barn that he would let people sleep in for two dollars a night. So we'd camp out at Blenz's barn and the next morning jump out and go down to the caves, do it on a weekend, and then come back up here. We'd sneak into the Indiana University swim hall to take a shower and nobody ever checked our IDs.

Charnley: Pulled one over on them. [laughs]

Where did you end up going to medical school?

Cobb: Stanford [University].

Charnley: Did you have any contacts with MSU presidents? President [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]?

Cobb: I certainly met him. I'm sure he wouldn't remember me, but we met at various functions. I certainly saw his wife at the concerts over in the auditorium.

I was also, and still am, a musician—piano—and actually took piano lessons while I was here. It was kind of an interesting thing, I had to work through the Honors College to make that work out because I went over to the music department and they said, “You're a chemistry major. What are you doing here?” So I went over to the Honors College and said, “Can you help me get into some of these classes? Because I really am interested in doing it.”

So they got me a teacher named Andrew Froelich—F-r-o-e-l-I-c-h, or o-e—it means “happy” in German. He taught me for a year or a year and a half, the latter part of my undergraduate career. I gave a recital as one of the other students here. I did a piece by Debussy. I started working on “Pictures at an Exhibition” under him. I don't know if you know it. It's a piece by Mussorgsky. It's a wonderful piece. It's a series of twelve individual sketches. It's better known in the orchestrated version by Ravel. He did it as a recital here, and when I first started I said, “I need to learn how to play that. That's just the most marvelous piece of piano music.”

So I started working on it with him. In fact, I bought a piano and put it in the dorm. The practice rooms in the music school were so far from Holmes Hall that to get over and practice on them was just a real chore. So I started practicing on the piano they had down in the basement, but it had the crap beaten out of it by partying kids and it was out of tune. It wasn't in good shape. I actually went out and bought a piano and put it in my dorm room. I had a single so I

could, and nobody objected. I didn't tell anybody I was going to do it, but nobody objected. That's where I practiced, and then I sold that piano when I moved to California and bought another one when I was in medical school. So I've always had a piano. Now I have a grand piano at home.

Charnley: Would you say your experiences here as an undergraduate influenced your later life's work?

Cobb: I think in many ways it was the principal determinant of what I did. I thought a lot about this recently since coming—I'm so glad they decided to do this reunion. I think it's a great idea. In looking back on it, I think that the decision to come here changed my life in a very fundamental way, and I think everything that I did afterwards I owe in a large measure to the fact that I got that scholarship. I think that I would have done something significant or reasonable had I gone to school anywhere else, but this was just a tremendous opportunity. It was a tremendous gift, and it's meant so very much to me.

Charnley: Interesting. In looking back on your years here, is there anything that stands out as maybe most important?

Cobb: Wow. You know, that's an interesting question. I think for me the academic life was really important, but I think the most important thing for me in my development as a rounded human being was the participation in intramural sports, believe it or not. It was just a nice sense of camaraderie and socialization with the guys on the floor.

Charnley: The personal development, where some might need the intellectual boost.

Cobb: I think the intellectual development could have happened most any place. I think Michigan State is a school where you can get anything out of it that you want. If you want to come here and screw off for three or four years and not even earn a diploma, you can slide by. Nobody will make you not do that. At least they wouldn't in my era, and I bet it's still the same. But if you want to be a serious student and you want to drink deeply of the academic cup of life, there's no better place. I really believe that. The fun part for me was the socialization. I was kind of an awkward kid. I wasn't afraid of speaking in public or anything like that, but the socialization experience of living in the dorms, dealing with fifty guys, and rising to become the resident assistant, being in charge of these folks and being their counselor, that's made a lot of difference to me in terms of what I do in my career in medicine.

I'm a surgeon, and it's different from being a primary care doctor because I meet new people every day and I have to teach them what's wrong with them, if they have something wrong with them. A lot of times I see people and they're just fine. If they have a disease, whether it's serious or fatal, or whether just an inconvenience, I have to meet them, gain their trust, educate them, convey them through the experience and rehabilitate them, and get them back to where they were before, or perhaps better. Those kinds of people skills I picked up a lot of here. I think that the sports teams, being in the dorm. I think that was very important to that.

Charnley: I want to thank you on behalf of the project for your time.

Cobb: Have we finished already?

Charnley: We have. They've been short interviews but we can expand them sometime.

Cobb: I'd like to anytime. I'm really gratified that you're taking the time to do this. I think this is a project, the ADS program, it surprises me that nobody else has taken the interest that MSU has done in that. It's obviously done much for the college, and it's certainly done a lot for us. I'm profoundly grateful to it.

Charnley: Thank you again.

Cobb: You're welcome.

[End of interview]

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