

BILL WATSON INTERVIEW

DATE: December 18, 2002

SPEAKERS: WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.; Interviewer KAY HAMNER

TOPIC: Interview with Bill Watson; Carter Center Oral Histories Project

[Tape 1, Side 1]

KAY HAMNER: This is Kay Hamner; I'm at the home of William C. Watson, Jr., 1145 Mason Woods Drive, in Atlanta, Georgia. The time is approximately 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon on December 18th, 2002. The purpose of this recording is to conduct an oral interview.

Well, I guess we want to start by asking you when was the first time that you heard of The Carter Center, and how did you hear of it?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well, I read about it in the newspaper, and would ride by the construction site on the way to the airport. And that's how I first learned about it.

KAY HAMNER: So when did you actually first become associated with it?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well that was when it first opened in the year – what year would that have been?

KAY HAMNER: That was 1986, I think, the facilities opened.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right. 1986. Just before the dedication. Actually, Dr. Bill Foege, who had been director of CDC, the Centers for Disease Control, and I had started a non-profit corporation working with United Nations agencies in public health, trying to get immunizations around the world. And President Carter had heard about this, and he was taken with the idea, and actually helped and worked with us, in some of the countries like Colombia and Africa and so on.

And so he invited us to bring the Task Force for Child Survival, as it was called, to The Carter Center. And we accepted his invitation; we looked at other possibilities, including the King Center, by the way, and we decided we'd go with The Carter Center, which was a wise idea, particularly since it was associated with Emory, and we were, too.

We moved there as a rent-paying tenant the year the place opened.

KAY HAMNER: And what was your position with the Task Force at that time?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: I was the Deputy Director; I was the number two person; the Chief of Operations. Dr. Foege was the Executive Director, and I was the number two person.

KAY HAMNER: So at that time, the only association with President Carter's activities was that the Task Force was a rent-paying tenant there.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Tenant, right.

KAY HAMNER: So who was the Director of The Carter Center at that time? I believe it was The Carter Center of Emory, it was called.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right. Well, George Schira was the Chief of Staff, and was, in effect, the Director – the paid executive to run the place.

KAY HAMNER: If I remember myself, there was a separate entity called The Carter Center of Emory.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes.

KAY HAMNER: And then there was another organization called The Carter Center, Inc.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Right.

KAY HAMNER: Along with two or three other organizations.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Right. There were several official, legally constituted entities in The Carter Center.

KAY HAMNER: And why was it set up that way? Do you remember? Were you involved in that, or were you there enough to know why it was set up that way?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: All of that had been done before I got officially involved. But it's my understanding that they wanted to have the

affiliation with Emory. President James Laney of Emory and President Carter had gotten together, and agreed that President Carter would come to Emory. And so that was the reason for the Emory label. And the employees of The Carter Center at the time were Emory employees; they were on the Emory payroll. As were all of the employees of the Task Force for Child Survival.

KAY HAMNER: Now, that was the case with The Carter Center of Emory, but in 1986, when I first came there, there were employees of The Carter Center, Inc., who still weren't on the Emory payroll.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's true. There were a few people paid other ways, including George Schira, by the way. But many of the employees were Emory employees as well. And it's my understanding, from what I've been told – not that I was involved in it, but George Schira wanted a separate organization that would be under his control, and not Emory's control. And so he set up The Carter Center, Inc. Is that your remembrance, too?

KAY HAMNER: Yes, I remember hearing those – I wasn't there either, but I remember hearing that was pretty much it, and that all of the – The Carter Center of Emory was going to be programmatic, and The Carter Center Inc. was going to be the operational arm that raised funds and provided certain public relations services and things like that, and ran the facilities, that kind of thing.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right. Ran the facilities, that's right.

KAY HAMNER: Well, did you get to spend much time or get to know George Schira?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, I did. And he was a very interesting person. He was a former parish minister, and I don't think anybody ever really determined why George, or under what circumstances, he left the ministry. And he had left the ministry and gone into the fund-raising business, and came to The Carter Center with an organization that Emory had engaged to help raise money for them. And that's how he met President Carter. But he was already on board when we came.

And one of the things which I remember, when we started moving in, George wanted to charge us more rent than we thought we should pay. He wanted us to pay for some of the public spaces as well as the office spaces that we were in. And we had a disagreement on that, and as I remember, I won, and we ended up paying just for the office space. But we were a rent-paying tenant at the time.

KAY HAMNER: Was George Schira the one who began the relationship between The Carter Center and BCCI?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's my understanding, yes.

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KAY HAMNER: And was he asking for money from BCCI? Or BCCI was the bank of The Carter Center at the time? Or what was that relationship exactly?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: They were a contributor, a donor, for agricultural projects and other projects in Africa, and a major donor. And Mr. [Agha Hasan] Abedi, the man who founded the bank, is listed on the engraving of – the entrance of the library in The Carter Center, as the first of the major donors to help build the place. So yes, and incidentally, that turned out to be a rogue bank, but it was being billed at the time as a Muslim bank that would take a large part of their earnings and invest it back into Third World, do-good, projects. And they did some of that.

But they also subsequently – books were written about them, and they were involved in all kinds of shenanigans that weren't so reputable, like arms dealing and so on. But they assigned a young Pakistani – Mr. Abedi was a Pakistani – and he assigned a young Pakistani to work with us, who was a real honorable person, and who was just devastated when the revelations came out about how bad the bank was.

And a lot of people lost a lot of money because the bank folded, but Mahmoud Hassan worked very closely with us, and he was a good steward of the money that they gave us. The money, incidentally, was important, and somebody had said to me once, "The only thing wrong with tainted money, there tain't enough of it." And I don't subscribe to that, necessarily, but that money we used and did important and good things with it, and Mahmoud Hassan really represented that bank very well, and looked over our shoulder to be sure that we weren't engaging in any shenanigans with it.

KAY HAMNER: Was there a personal relationship between the owner of the bank and President Carter that developed out of these activities?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, there was. He was very fond of Mr. Abedi, and Mr. Abedi apparently was very fond of him. And Mr. Abedi had serious heart problems – later, a little bit after all of this went on, and President Carter was helpful in getting a surgeon in London to do a heart transplant for Mr. Abedi. So there was a close relationship, and at times the bank would let us borrow their airplane, which was a real nice jet – I think it was a 737, but I may be wrong about that. But well-appointed, as private jets tend to be. It was a nice way to travel, and it was very helpful to us.

So yes, there were very close ties, and personal ties. And I didn't see a lot of Mr. Abedi, but he was described in some of the reports that were made later as a man that you could see angels and devils in his eyes at the same time [laughing].

KAY HAMNER: When did The Carter Center sever its relationship with the bank? Was that after all of these revelations?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, um-hmm. Incidentally, they owned an American bank, and there was a lot written about that at the time, too. And what was the man's name in Washington – a very senior person with --

KAY HAMNER: Uh, Clark Clifford.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Clark Clifford was involved with that. And got – his reputation was damaged by his relationship with that bank.

KAY HAMNER: There were some other colorful characters, I believe, through the years at The Carter Center, and I use that word advisedly, but – one of our major donors was Mr. [Ryoichi] Sasakawa from Japan.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, right. And he was – that was an interesting operation, too. Mr. Sasakawa goes back in Japanese history to World War II. And I have been told that he was actually tagged as one of the war criminals in World War II, but he never was tried and he never was convicted. But he made a lot of money in post-World War Japan, and in endeavors like gambling and racing – racing was a big thing in Japan; boat racing, I think it was.

And he made a lot of money. And he was trying overtly to get a Nobel Prize for all the work that he had done in Africa in agriculture. And he supported the agriculture project of The Carter Center, and that was helpful, too. The money was well spent. And he never got the Nobel Prize, as we know.

KAY HAMNER: Was Mr. Sasakawa's organization also a donor source that George Schira brought to The Carter Center, or how did they come, if it was not that way.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: I think so. I think George started that, yes.

KAY HAMNER: As I recall, Jim Brasher made a special trip, when he came as fundraiser after George had left, to Japan, to try to smooth over some of that bad feeling.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, he did. The working relationship, though not always without tension, continued, and the support continued. But the relationship was not a real happy one at the functional operations, day to day operational, level.

KAY HAMNER: By the time you came, the facility had all been built. When it comes my turn to be interviewed, I'll tell a little bit about what it was like when I came there and had to settle the final accounts with the contractor and the architect and that sort of thing. But today we'll move onto some other things.

We had the Global 2000 project. Was that one that – it was such a good project – who originated that project?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: George Schira.

KAY HAMNER: Well, the point is that by the time the Arthur Anderson and, I believe it was Scott, that came over from Emory, that worked on those books, we felt like we had a really fair accounting of what was going on at The Carter Center. By the time Iris Frank came there, things were – there was still a lot that needed to be done, but we knew that what was there was an honest record of what we had and what we were spending.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's true. Oh, yes, that's true. Well, Kay, when I went upstairs to work for The Carter Center, we didn't have a large staff, as you remember. And we didn't have experts in a lot of the areas that any non-profit institution, particularly one that could be as visible as one of a former President, needed to do their work right. Accounting is one of them, and you're right, when we finally got some good, competent professionals in, and straightened it all out –

So we were in good graces with Emory by that time.

It wasn't just accounting, though. We didn't really have a good development office; we didn't have a good – what did Carrie Harmon –

KAY HAMNER: Public information.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Public information office. And we gradually filled those slots and we also, incidentally, didn't have anybody to run the physical plant. And luckily, I discovered somebody named Kay Hamner, and she agreed to do that, and she's done it very well ever since. And I've often told people, "Kay saved my life," because I had been responsible for running large physical plants at the Centers for Disease Control, but I always had somebody who knew what they were doing to do it for me [laughing].

KAY HAMNER: There were times when that job extended beyond running the physical plant. As you say, when you have a small organization, you have to wear – everybody wore a lot of different hats, just to get the job done, just to keep the place going during that time. As I recall, you wore more than one hat, because you were still involved with the Task Force.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right, exactly.

KAY HAMNER: Now, Bill Foege was still very – was very involved there. I know that there used to be regular meetings between Bill Foege and you and President Carter. And if I recall – maybe my memory doesn't serve me well – didn't the Atlanta Project first come up at one of those meetings? As an idea?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right, it did. Um-hmm, yeah. Well, the relationship that we had with Emory had deteriorated considerably with George. He didn't want that relationship. And would have been happy to have terminated it. He wanted to run The Carter Center, and he and [President James] Laney and Temple, John Temple, the Executive Vice President of Emory – he and Temple didn't get along very well at all.

But the relationship that President Carter and Bill Foege and I had with the senior people at Emory was excellent. And John Temple was very supportive. And I remember that during that time when we were so much in debt to him, he never once called me and asked me, "When are you going to pay me back?" I would try to keep him informed on what was going on, but there was a trust there from the beginning, and I will always be grateful to John Temple for the support he gave us at the time.

KAY HAMNER: Well, at that time, how did people think the relationship between The Carter Center and Emory was going to be in the future? How did Emory and The Carter Center see that relationship evolving?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well, there was a whole spectrum of thoughts about that. There were people who thought that The Carter Center should be a part of Emory, and there were people who didn't think that was appropriate at all. And there were people who, on both sides, who thought the other was using. There were people at Emory who thought The Carter Center was using them, and the other way at The Carter Center itself – they thought Emory was.

And there was always the question of, you've got two Presidents here now. You've got the President of the University, and you've got a former President of the United States, and how do those two get along? And on a personal level, they got along very well. But it was not a smooth merger in many ways. And there were all kinds of proposals written – there were reports, formal reports made – of what ought to be done. And none of them really ever congealed.

And I don't know that – has it yet? I left some time ago, so –

KAY HAMNER: I think it's quite different today than it was then. When I first came in 1986 and early 1987, President Carter gave speeches in which he would describe The Carter Center as another department of Emory University, just like the history department or the medical school, or something like that. But within a couple of years, that was no longer a part of the speeches that he gave about what the relationship was, and it evolved now, into something, I think, that is a very different and workable relationship. And sometime when we – after we complete this interview, I'll talk to you a little bit about that. I think what's happening now is working well.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well, good, all right, I'm pleased to hear that.

KAY HAMNER: But during that time, what would – you were very close to those meetings and so how did the idea of the Atlanta Project emerge, and who was the first one to bring it up?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well, Kay, my memory of that is not too good. I'm not sure I know who started the Atlanta Project. But it didn't turn out to be what it was billed as, at first either, we all know. Did Jim Brasher have something to do with that?

KAY HAMNER: Not that I recall.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: My memory is a bit hazy on that.

KAY HAMNER: Well, from what you witnessed during your time there, how would you describe the relationship between Bill Foege and President Carter?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Oh, excellent. President Carter respected Bill Foege, as just about everybody who knows him does. And he, of course, is a real heavyweight when it comes to vision and looking at things, the large picture of things, in a global sense. And the wags in the World Health Organization in Geneva refer to Bill Foege, or they used to, as the Pope of Public Health. Much to the dismay of the executive director of the World Health Organization.

But Bill Foege has as big an ego as anybody with his abilities, but it's a very different ego. And he does not have to have personal acclaim for what he does. And so he was very fond of President and Mrs. Carter, and respected both of them, and they liked and respected him, so far as I know. I think it was genuine on both sides.

KAY HAMNER: Working in the relationship role which you did, with President Carter, how did you find him as someone to work with, given your role at The Carter Center?

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Well, I too, have a great deal of respect for President Carter. What has been said recently, after he got the Nobel Prize, is true. He in many ways is a driven man. He is ambitious, but he also works hard. He earns his way. And you won't find anybody who works harder than he does. And when he believes in something, he'll go to bat for it, and stand by it. And work hard at it. And so my personal relationship with him – I can't say we were

ever real, real close. But I had a great deal of respect for him, and I think he respected what I was doing, and most of the time would give me leeway to do it.

Now, when he found out what we paid for a copy machine [laughing] he started second-guessing, but most of the time he left Bill Foege and me to run our program. So I don't have any complaints. And my relationship with Mrs. Carter was even closer, because she had an interest that I was interested in, and subsequently got very much involved in, and that is childhood immunization. And she was always so kind and so supportive, and so important to those kind of things. And she, too, would work hard.

And I have an anecdote about Mrs. Carter that I'd like to tell for the record.

KAY HAMNER: Sure.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: One day, she came to me – and I was outside of my office at the time, and she said, "Bill, I'd like to see you this afternoon. Could we arrange that?" And I said, "Well, I imagine we can." So I went in and looked at my calendar, and we set up an appointment. And she also looked at my calendar. And then she went out and came back in just a minute or so, and said, "Bill, I noticed your afternoon was real full. Do you have enough time to have lunch?" And I said, "Yes, Mrs. Carter, I'll take care of that."

But I thought that was really a class act, that she would come back and ask that question.

And then later, when she got involved with setting up a formal organization to work in childhood immunizations, I was fortunate enough to have enough money in the Task Force for Child Survival to help her get it started, and make a contribution to it. And then I was on the Board, and she was on our Board, later, in another program that I was involved in. So I worked very closely with Mrs. Carter, and have a great deal of respect for her as a person, and for the position that she holds in the world. I think she's just wonderful.

KAY HAMNER: Well, I remember your saying that when you first came there, and the same was true when I came there, in late '86 – that the entire – the in-house telephone directory listing all employees, could be done on one piece of typing paper.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right, exactly.

KAY HAMNER: So it was really just getting off the ground.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right, exactly.

KAY HAMNER: Prior to that it had been over at the Emory campus.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: That's right.

KAY HAMNER: But you didn't get involved with it until it was at the current location.

WILLIAM C. WATSON, JR.: Yes, I came just as they were moving into the new building, that's right.

KAY HAMNER: Well, Bill, the way these things are usually done is that we conduct an interview for about 45 minutes to an hour, and then go back and transcribe it, and give me the chance to look at and see if there are areas that we want –

[End of Interview]