

DR. WALTER GROVES
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Questions by John LeDoux

This is our continuing oral history series and today is April 22, 1983. Today we are interviewing Dr. Walter Groves. Dr. Groves was a member of the faculty here from 1940 to 1942 and served as president of Centre College from 1947 to 1957. The interview is being conducted in the Grace Doherty Library.

I'd like to start out, Dr. Groves, by asking you to tell us a little about your mother and father, your family, and maybe a little bit about your ancestry.

My parents came from Great Britain. My mother was born in England. I've forgotten offhand the year that she and her whole family came to this country. She was one of twelve children. As I recall, her mother and father and at least ten of those children came together on that famous trip to America. The oldest brother in the family had preceded them by a year and made living arrangements for the family in Philadelphia. My father came from the North of Ireland, County Down, which I have visited three or four times. I have many first cousins still living in North Ireland. In my family there were five sisters and myself. Two of the sisters died in infancy; but three sisters are still living, two of them in suburban Philadelphia and one of them in Avalon, New Jersey. I was the oldest and the only boy in the family. My early days were spent in Germantown, Philadelphia, where I was born. I went to high school, beginning in Germantown, which at that time was an annex of the Central High School of Philadelphia, and for my last two and a half years attended high school in Philadelphia at Central High.

Just for the record, what was the date of your birth?

I was born March 10, 1898. My father came to this country when he was eleven years of age and was raised by his uncle, Uncle John McNeil _____, who likewise had a large family. My father was the oldest of the family, and since there were two Roberts (his name was Robert), he was "Big Robert", and the son of Uncle John, who was his oldest son, was "Little Robert."

I graduated from Central High in Philadelphia in 1915, worked for six months as what they called the "scrub bookkeeper" in a bank in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and in September enrolled at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. That had to be September 1915. I was there for the next three years. While in the midst of a summer job at what was called the Hog Island Shipyard in Philadelphia, I received word from Lafayette that they would like me to join a government program, which meant that I would enlist in the Army, have a course of training at Plattsburg, New York, and become a noncommissioned officer in the new Student Army Training Corps. We spent roughly three months (maybe a week or two less than three months) when Congress passed a new draft law. The previous draft law of World War I had been twenty-one to thirty-odd years of age. This new law, which was to go into effect in September of 1918 was from eighteen to forty-five, and the Army was confronted with a need for young officers for this expanded Army. So the whole bunch of us at Plattsburg were given the option of becoming second lieutenants in the Infantry, or Field Artillery, or Heavy Artillery. I, being near-sighted and wearing spectacles, decided I didn't want to join the Infantry.

I didn't want to get engaged in any hand-to-hand combat, so I chose the Field Artillery. And so we were sent off to Camp Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky. As a commissioned second lieutenant, I had never seen a gun of any description. That remained true. Within ten weeks of our training in Camp Taylor, the Armistice was signed, and I thus escaped actual field artillery practice. I was confined to the barracks with an inflamed foot when my battery was on the small arms training period, so I managed to come out of the Army of World War I still with my commission as a second lieutenant. I had never fired a rifle; I had never fired a revolver; I had never even seen a three-inch piece, which was the usual weapon for field artillery of those days. We were given the option of staying in as reserve officers. Ninety percent of us, if not ninety-five percent of us, chose to go back home as fast as possible.

I returned to Lafayette in January of 1919, and the College made an arrangement for all of us who returned in January 1919 to have an extended semester. In July of 1919 I graduated from the College and then in September of that year went and enrolled at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in preparation for the Christian ministry.

← Princeton

From college days on I was interested in Persia, where a number of alumni from Lafayette College were already serving. At the end of my first year in Princeton there was an opportunity to do overseas work with the YMCA, and I discontinued my studies at Princeton and was abroad in Istanbul (or Constantinople, as we called it in those days) in Turkey with the YMCA. I came back at the first of the year and reentered the Seminary and concluded my studies there, though I still lacked one course, which means I never really received any degree from Princeton Theological Seminary.

I went to Lafayette, my old College, as an instructor in the Bible Department in September 1922 and was there for the next two years. However, when I arrived there, the Dean of the College, who was also head of the Department of History, insisted that he also had part-time use of me since I majored in history. So for the first year I was an instructor in two departments, in history and in Bible. In the second year all my time was given to the Bible Department.

At the end of the second year I was due to go to Iran in that September. But in June of 1924 I became engaged to Estelle Crawford, of Norristown, Pennsylvania; and that delayed my departure for Iran by some six months. We sailed finally on March 10, 1925, for our assignment at the American College of Tehran, the president of which at that time was Dr. Samuel Martin of Jordon, a Lafayette alumnus of the Class of 1898. We were in Iran for the next fifteen years, from 1925 to 1940.

In that interval, it was approximately 1933, that at my own suggestion the name of the American College was changed to Elburz because we all recognized that nationalization was coming on, and they were going to insist on an Iranian name. Elburz was the name of the mountains immediately north of the college, which was a beautiful backdrop for our whole campus, so it was a very obvious name for the institution. We were there, as I said, for some fifteen years.

We had to come home in 1940 due to the health problems of our children. We had four children, three of them born in Iran, one born in this country while we were on furlough in 1930. Our oldest son was really the one with the health problem. The doctors advised us that all the children should be brought back to this country.

Meantime, in 1939 (we had been in this country on furlough in 1938-39) on our way back to Iran in 1939, World War II was eminent. We were greeted with the news that the government in Iran was taking over all foreign educational institutions, starting with all the American institutions, of which Elburz College was the most important. One telegram from Tehran that greeted us in Beirut was not to come any farther. Fortunately, Dr. Jordon learned of that ill-advised telegram, and he sent one twenty-four hours later to come on; which we did, which turned out to be by all means the wise thing to do because I was in charge not only of our own goods, but we had a truck load of hospital supplies and school supplies. The treasurer of the mission in Beirut advised me that those things, given the war which was already eminent, would be worth their weight in gold in a very short time, which proved to be the case.

We had a new Chevrolet automobile which I had purchased in this country for the enormous sum of \$900.00. I had gotten it wholesale from Flint, Michigan. That automobile, by the way, after a year's use in Tehran, I sold for \$1,300.00. It ultimately ended up in the garage of the then Shah of the country.

We came back to this country, as I said, in midsummer of 1940. Negotiations went on for that year for the take-over of the college, which was finally consummated at the end of the year. One of the committee that came out to help in these negotiations was the recently retired president of Berea College, Dr. William J. Hutchins, who lived with us for the several months that he was in Tehran.

We came back on the boat. The war was on. We could not come by way of the Mediterranean; we could not go by way of Russia, which were the two usual routes of travel between Iran and America in those days. So we had to come home by way of India. We boarded the boat in India, as I recall, about the 24th of July at Bombay. We were thirty-nine days on that boat, rounding the Cape of Good Hope. I always said that one more day and we would have equalled the record of Noah.

When we left, we received a ^{McLeod?} Mackay telegram (I've forgotten the date) from Centre College of Kentucky asking me whether I was ready to teach at Centre College of Kentucky. The telegram didn't say what I was to teach, what department or anything else, just would I be willing to join the faculty.

I counseled with Dr. Hutchins, who was on the boat with us and who knew Centre College well. My previous acquaintance with Centre College had been through two classmates at Princeton Theological Seminary. I had never heard of Centre College until I met these two men, with whom I became life-long friends ever since Seminary days. One was Robert Francis Ogden of Ashland, Kentucky; one was William Chamberlain, who later was head of the New Testament Department at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. But, in any event, Dr. Hutchins said, "By all means, take the job at Centre College of Kentucky." The point that concerned Dr. Hutchins was that here I was, the father of four small children, landing in America without a job. He was scared to death for me. I should have been frightened, but I wasn't.

In any event, when we arrived in New York, Dr. McLeod, the president of the College, met us there at the boat. I always joked with him saying that while I was wrestling with our baggage with the customs officials, he was persuading my wife to come to Danville, Kentucky. So a week after we landed in New York, we landed in Danville, Kentucky. I think it was about October 1, 1940, and we were put up by Dr. and Mrs. McLeod in their home. This was a Sunday evening, and on

Monday morning at eight o'clock he had me in my first class here. So that began my career at Centre.

I wonder if I could ask you one question regarding Iran, Dr. Groves. What would you tell people, how would you describe Iran and its people to young folks, to a generation that's known only the Ayatollah and the hostages and that type of thing?

When we arrived in Tehran on May 1, 1925, from the first day both my wife and I thought we had made a wonderful choice of place to live. We found the people friendly and courteous. My wife, within a few days after we arrived there (I happen to have reread her letter just recently), wrote her mother that she was impressed by the welcome and the courtesy and the politeness, not of the educated people only, but of the practically illiterate people. Our initial reaction-- I wrote my mother within a week or ten days after we arrived. I'm sure she didn't appreciate what I wrote, but I said something to the effect, "I feel as if I'm quite ready to spend the rest of my life in Iran." I mean it was a totally different pattern than obviously is prevalent there now. Dr. Jordan

Dr. Jordan was a very interesting person. We were supposed to spend the first year doing nothing but studying the language. Dr. Jordan, being a practical minded farmer from York, Pennsylvania, felt that language studied by itself would be deadly. So he insisted that I start teaching right away. Unfortunately, he turned over to me a class in plane geometry, I think it was, mathematics, which was not my field at all. I think within five or six weeks, by which time the term was over, I had convinced Dr. Jordan and everybody else that I did not belong in the mathematics department. But we did take up our study of language, and the first summer there and for the remaining summers we had a summer camp of our students.

Initially the summer camp was made up of young students who either could not get home to the distant parts of Iran where they lived, or who had failed some subjects which they needed to make up in summer school. Dr. Hutchins was a Lafayette alumnus, and the two of us went out there together in this famous expedition of 1925. We decided by the second summer that the thing to do was to make it a real summer school. So by that time we had a much larger group made up of young men of high school or college age who were anxious to move ahead more rapidly with their education. So we gave the real summer portions.

We had innumerable experiences, our hikes with the students over the mountains and so on. I can't think of any single opposition of any nature that we met on the part of the people. Now, it was there, but it wasn't overt at all.

What went through your mind when the hostages were taken, and the Ayatollah, and all the feelings aroused having lived there for so many years?

It was and even yet is still incomprehensible to me. We had a meeting only Sunday week ago with an Iranian in Lexington, Kentucky, who had just had a letter from his mother in Tehran; and she in her letter to Saied, her son, said that, "Iran is going through the darkest period of its entire history." Now, how her letter got through is interesting. When he told me of his mother's letter, I then recalled a letter, or letters, which we continue to get from a Christian Iranian woman, and she likewise gives details of what is going on. It amazed both my wife and me how these letters got through. We had come to the conclusion

that they pay no attention to the letters the women write. It's the men who are more careful in what they write. So if you want to find out what's going on in Iran these days, find a woman or two to correspond with. Yes, they are the ones that tell us of the long lines for the most ordinary--not just groceries but everything and anything they want. One of them told us of how the government took over the hotel in which her husband worked. His brother owned the hotel, and he was working with him. They took over the hotel without a yes or no. Her daughter works for an importing-exporting firm. She writes in every letter, "No, it hasn't happened yet, but Mariann expects the government to take over this company." Mariann had an opportunity to visit Europe last summer, and when she got back home she had \$1,000.00 left which she had not expended on this trip. For some reason or other, probably because her father's hotel had been seized, the police searched her home, found the \$1,000.00 and appropriated it, saying she had no right to have \$1,000.00.

More recently a young doctor, trained at Harvard, a well-known person (All-American football player about 25 years ago at the University of Virginia), when the revolution occurred he thought, well, this is a new day in Iran and I'm an Iranian (at least his father was Iranian) and I ought to be back there helping out. So he packed bag and baggage, closed up his offices in this country, took his wife and two children over there. He went on a vacation; it must have been as recently as last summer, anyhow, not too long ago. They were over on the Caspian Sea. He advised his wife that she ought to wear a full garb, "Don't go into bathing with any American women's bathing suit." So the wife was properly clothed. But their twelve-year-old daughter, just a little child, went in bathing with an ordinary child's bathing suit. Soldiers saw her, fired a gun over her head, and arrested the whole family. He spent a month in jail. He had taken some of his own money. They appropriated some \$40,000.00 of his money. He didn't expect to get out of jail, but he did after a month. He packed bag and baggage. He won't tell us how he got out of the country. He obviously got across the border somewhere. But he did tell his wife, "We'll just have to take the chance. This may be it; we may all be dead; we don't know." He said he breathed a sigh of relief when he recognized an American-made bus, and he knew they were in Turkey. They had gotten across the border. He is now practicing in Washington, D.C. I've had letters from him quite recently.

There must be at least 500,000 Iranians of the educated, intellectual class in this country right now. Southern California-- When I visited there several years ago, I said, "There are twelve provinces in Iran; Southern California is now a thirteenth province." It's a fantastic story; it's very different. All of us expected it to last two or three years only, but now it is so entrenched. With all the leadership gone from the country, we don't see any possibility of an early change.

Getting back to Centre, what were your first impressions that struck you when you first came to Danville and Centre College?

Having taught for two years at Lafayette and knowing something, therefore, of their struggles (it was an independent liberal arts college), and also having tried for some fifteen years on our furloughs in this country to raise money for our institutions out there, I was immediately impressed by the possibilities, not just financial, but the support that this country enjoyed, in Kentucky at least. I think it must have been my first or second Sunday (we had just moved into our house out on Maple Avenue) when Dr. McCleod, then president, called me

at 10 o'clock at night, said he had a strep throat; could I preach for him the next morning in Maysville, Kentucky. There was nothing I could do but say "yes". I don't know how long I spent reviewing an old sermon. Enos Swain pulled up at the house the next morning at 5 o'clock, drove me to Maysville, Kentucky. We were entertained (Enos and I) by Mrs. Cochran. She was of the Welsh family. I was trying to tell John Frazer. Of course the Cochrans were one of the more influential families in Maysville. I came back from that meeting and that visit that Sunday and I wrote my mother. I said, "Many a small liberal arts college would like to have the kind of support this College has." I was impressed immediately with the whole history of this institution. Of course President Spragens is the one who really developed that aspect of the institution. Now, in my book, the College occupies a place which I thought it would have belonged in 1940.

And I enjoyed the students here. I was impressed, may I say, by the politeness of the Centre College students. I remember my own chapel days at Lafayette College, and at one time I said, "It doesn't make any difference how rotten the the speech is, the students at Centre College give the impression that they are paying attention." Which I knew they weren't, but they performed according to the book, shall I say. I don't know whether they still do or not, but they did in those days.

I enjoyed the associations with the faculty here, and Dean Hewlett.

If a student stopped you on campus, one who walks into his classes in modern buildings, and with the size of the campus now and the mobility students have in this area, how would you help them visualize what the campus was like back then? What would you tell them of the way it looked and what the Centre community was like?

Old Main over here was--I don't know--I didn't think of it as being, shall I say, out of date and decrepit. It was just part of the history of the institution. I later learned that Old Main, like many another college building of those days, was built in the form of the courthouse, and the courtroom was the chapel. So campuses around the country (at least in the Midwest) were peppered with old buildings, Old Mains, like our building here. Well, of course, the buildings of today are in more contrast to the old buildings. Old Main was the main building, naturally. I was glad, as I'm sure everybody is, that that had been preserved even in those days. Of course Old Centre was the College. It's a great thing that we've been able to keep Old Centre right down to the present. For the rest of it, we had, what do you call the dormitory over here which would house the seminary at one time? I can't think of the name of our old dormitory building.

Breckinridge?

Breckinridge! Oh, that was something! When I was president, J. J. Stigers called me over there one morning. The students had uprooted a concrete sign post from one of the intersections. I don't know what their hope was, but I think they thought they were going to get it up to the third floor of old Breck. They got it to the stairwell of the first floor, and it would have taken a derrick to get it any higher. That's as high as they got it. Of course that was a part of the life even in my day at Centre. I'm sure you know the story of an earlier generation who transplanted a buggy up to the roof of what had been Hillcrest, which is now gone.

No, I don't.

Oh yes! Another--well, I could go on with that. Some of the alumni have told me stories of what they did as students. The men who told me these stories are very highly respected citizens of the U.S.A. One of them, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told me what they did in his day.

What were your first impressions of Danville as a town. What struck you about the town itself?

One immediate impression that I think I remember writing something about-- You see, I'd been born and raised in Philadelphia, in Germantown. People just came and went in Germantown. But when I got here my immediate impression was the way people felt as if they belonged here. Without mentioning names, I can tell you that I met very early, prior to World War II, men on our faculty who felt that we should be in that War. I interpreted that to mean that from their point of view the country was in danger. This was their country. I don't believe I ever ran into anything like that in my early days in the East. I remember my high school days in World War I; there was no war agitation. There wasn't agitation here, just a general feeling we belong. Why aren't we along side of Britain and the other allies? That was one of the things that impressed me.

We liked Danville as a town. We made many friends very early. I think one of the reasons we as Yankees got along--we spent fifteen years in Iran, and in Iran when you have a business dealing with a person and you visit him, the last thing you mention is the business that has brought you there. You have a nice, general visit about affairs of the day, and finally, in due course, you get around to what brought you there. We felt that that was a little bit the way people did things in Danville. We got along right away with the folks here in town and the businesses. I understand business in town is not what it was forty years ago. Of course, all the stores on Main Street, there were one or two foreign stores, but the rest of them were all operated by local people. I don't imagine that's quite true today.

You would have been an instructor here on the morning of December 7, 1941. What do you remember of the mood of Centre and Danville after the attack on Pearl Harbor? What effect do you remember it having?

You know, you've asked me a question I can't recall. If I remember the calendar, I think it was a Sunday; and I was preaching in Somerset, Kentucky, that day. I know the shock that hit us down there and the conversation I had with-- Of course, you see, in that church was the Joplin family of Centre College and the Williams family of Centre College. I can't be sure whether we were being entertained by one or the other. There was a doctor there who had been a missionary in China. By the time I got back home, I think I have a vague memory of Monday morning, a group of students on the steps of Old Main just discussing the thing back and forth with a kind of apprehension of what the future meant and so on.

Were there young men shortly thereafter, in 1942, dropping out to enlist into the service?

Once again, I think I recall one student whose family lived out on Maple Avenue. I think he just felt that we should be in it right now. I remember that kind of a remark from him. I'm pretty vague, as I said, I really don't register immediately what the reaction of the students was. Was there an exodus? I can't be sure of that either.

You were at Centre two years, and then you went to the Seminary?

I went down to the Seminary in 1942 and was on the faculty there for four and a half years.

How did you happen to leave Centre to go over there?

Well, Dr. Caldwell was president of the Seminary, and he and Dr. McCleod were very close friends. To me it was a kind of promotion. I never worked harder in my life than I did during those four and a half years, because, as I've already told you, I did not receive my degree in theology (I told Dr. Caldwell that) in Princeton. I hadn't thought that my two and a half years at Princeton were the happiest two and a half years of my life. But I felt there could be something done about that, and so I worked as hard as I could to do a decent job of teaching down there.

However, I didn't take long to make up my mind when I was asked to come back to Centre as president of the institution. Although officially I returned again January 1, 1947, I moved over here in December. Dr. Caldwell, again, you see, was a trustee of the College. I told the committee; I said I felt I had to complete the year at the Seminary. But later on they must have conferred (I assume they conferred) with Dr. Caldwell. And Dr. Caldwell said, "They need you now, and you are going to go at the end of the year. Let's make the transfer right now." So I came over in December and lived over in McReynolds Hall (Do you still call it McReynolds?) with my son Bob. He went to high school here. And then I guess, officially, my family moved over in February. We had to get rid of our house down there. So that was the beginning of things here.

I said to someone this morning, I think Dean Reckard is consulting with the president of Kentucky State College. I suppose he's helping him find out how to operate Kentucky State College. I had to find that out for myself. The first summer we were here I took the best part of the summer off and visited eight colleges in Indiana and Illinois. Hanover was one of them, Rose Hulman was one of them. All in all there were eight. From president to president I went to them and picked their brain as to what were their problems and what they had to deal with. That was my way of finding out how to run a college--to try anyway.

Was it a difficult job to learn?

No, I didn't think so. You see, out in Iran, which was a different kind of administration (I think any college president will back me up), your major problems are all personnel. I went back to Iran in 1957 as head of an engineering college. Jokingly, I said, "Why do you want a Presbyterian preacher to be head of an engineering college?" They said, "Well, we can't afford to waste an engineer, so we turned to you." This was my way of a joke. But when I got back there, of course, we had engineers galore in the refineries. If I had an engineering question, I could go to them. But really, all the problems of running that institution were personnel. We didn't have any financial problems there. That's another matter.

Raising money, for me, was a kind of a chore, I found. I can't say I ever really enjoyed it. But I knew it had to be done, and I did the best I could.

With young men returning and you returning about the same time, how would you describe Centre in the post war years? How was it different from before the war?

Well, in the first place, we had an overwhelming number of GIs returning for their college education. There was quite a scramble to find living quarters for them and faculty to meet this expanded enrollment. Dr. McMullen had started with that problem, and we had to continue with it for the next couple of years. That was a major part of life for about the first three or four years that I was here. Then as those fellows all graduated, there was this terrific sag in enrollment. Not only at Centre, but all across the country we had all built up our institutions to meet this sudden surge of students, and then there was a letdown. One of the trustees said to me, "You certainly were president during a pretty difficult period in the history of Centre College." I would say that was true of other colleges, not just Centre, during that period. I think of Maryville. I think Maryville (if I'm informed correctly) never really was able to come back the way it had once been. Maybe they are on the rise now. I hope so; they ought to. But that was the way it was represented to me at the time.

Tape 1, Side 1 (Part 1) Dr. Walter Groves Interview
Transcribed June 12, 1985
Retyped May 1, 1986