

**Oral History Interview of  
William Curry Holden**

**Interviewed by: Jimmy M. Skaggs  
June 23, 1970  
Lubbock, Texas**

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William Curry Holden reviewed transcriptions of his interviews and approved their release upon his retirement from Texas Tech University in 1968.

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### Recording Notes:

#### Recording Notes:

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### Transcription Notes:

*Interviewer:* Jimmy M. Skaggs

*Transcription:* Jimmy Skaggs, John Clements

*Editor(s):* William Curry Holden, Elissa Stroman, Katelin Dixon

## Interview Series Background:

In the process of conservation and digitization, our Audio/Visual department transcribes existing interviews in the Southwest Collection's holdings for a new generation of listeners to rediscover. Such interviews frequently cover topics relating to the founding of Texas Tech and the settlement of Lubbock.

## Transcript Overview:

This interview features Dr. William Curry Holden. Holden discusses his first experience teaching anthropology and the conflicts that ensued over teaching evolution. Holden also talks about J. Frank Norris.

**Length of Interview:** 00:32:54

| <b>Subject</b>                    | <b>Transcript Page</b> | <b>Time Stamp</b> |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| First time teaching anthropology  | 5                      | 00:00:00          |
| Conflict over teaching evolution  | 6                      | 00:06:26          |
| Interaction with J. Frank Norris  | 8                      | 00:12:12          |
| J. Frank Norris and the community | 9                      | 00:17:12          |

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### Library of Congress subjects

Norris, J. Frank (John Frank), 1877-1952, Texas Tech University. Department of Anthropology, Texas Tech University--History, Texas--religion

### Keywords

anthropology, evolution, fundamentalism, Texas Tech University

**Jimmy M. Skaggs (JS):**

Testing one, two, three—testing—this is Skaggs, June 23, 1970. I'm talking with Dr. William C. Holden. Dr. Holden, why don't you—the fact that we have not gotten on the previous tape recordings an episode between you and J. Frank Norris, and you said that you'd supply us with this story.

**William Holden (WH):**

Well, I haven't thought of this story in quite a long time—and I may not be able to get it all in order—but when I came here in 1929—I think, in previous recordings, I told how we got anthropology started here, as I remember—

JS:

Yes sir.

WH:

I came here under the very—a great misconception, you might say—because I had engaged in just six days of archaeological work up there in the Panhandle—a thing I knew nothing about. But it got a big play in the newspapers before I got here, and so after I'd signed a contract to come—and everybody up here at Tech at that time said, "Oh, glory, they got us a big anthropologist to come," without ever inquiring as to whether I'd ever had a course in it or not—which, I hadn't. They scheduled in the catalog and on the schedule for me to teach one. And that was my introduction into this—at that time, lay out course of liberalism, you might say, and scientific thought. I got a textbook and stayed about two jumps ahead of the class, and never enjoyed anything more than I did that, and the classes became extremely popular. The second term they repeated the thing and had two sections, and pretty soon, I had three sections—everybody was packing the room. So along about the same time—now, of course, anthropology assumes the evolution, you might say, of man along with all the other animals—it just assumes that. There's not argument about it; it starts with that assumption. Then another thing that came along with that—they had a course here called "World History," and Dr. Granbery conceived of it. A general course that would take in sort of a—I believe they call it the history of civilization—where you just took the big things, and you didn't go into all of the political things like nationalities and that kind of thing. We had a term system then—three terms, every nine months instead of [two] semesters—and so when I got here, Bailey Carroll at that time had got his master's degree and was an instructor in the department. And C. D. Eaves was here and he had been brought in to teach European history. And Dr. Granbery was the chairman of the department, and Dr. Granbery was a great liberal, and he was always for any kind of a new and fascinating innovation—educational or any other way—a peculiar kind of man. Unusual of a man—in a way, a sort of a great man, and so the first year that I was here, somebody had the brainstorm that we should write our own texts because there was no texts adapted, really, at that time that we could have got for use. And so it was decided that—I believe Bailey was delegated

to write the ancient period, which would be used in the fall term—and I was delegated to do the medieval period, and Eaves the modern period. We did it and we—oh, what did you call it in those days, where we—the reproduction was very crude, but—

JS:

Spirit duplicator?

WH:

It was a duplicating system—all right—it wasn't—you got nearly the same effect as Xerox, but it was a long, painful thing, of doing it. Anyway, we bound them in those three little volumes—you have some here somewhere, I think—if you don't, I'll give you some, because they are of historic importance—and those were our texts, that we used—we had some supplemental books. Well, in the fall term of that—in the beginning—Bailey, with our approval and counsel—and our urging, I'd say—went back to the origin of man, and we spent about two weeks in that course with man's evolution as man from the time that he was an anthropoid as far as anthropology knew about it at the time. We spent—oh, some of the instructors got over that in one day, but it's in a sense new material, and Earth-shaking to these ole kids who're from the cotton patch who'd never gone anywhere or heard anything, except the revival meetings in the summer. I think they took up two weeks on it, and I think Bailey did, too. Well, that jarred the kids up, and of course, they'd go home and talk about it.

JS:

Go right ahead, sir.

WH:

There was a Baptist preacher—the pastor of the First Baptist Church here in town—named Campbell—and some of his students got quite agitated about this heresy that we were teaching that year. Of course, at that time, they always spoke of it as teaching that man came from ape—that was a fundamentalist concept of what you might call the evolutionary theory. This man, Campbell, preached one Sunday night—he'd learned of this and preached a red-hot sermon against “those atheists out there at Tech” who were teaching that the literal interpretation of Genesis was not true. Of course, that was not true; we never mentioned a literal interpretation of Genesis—we didn't. So he just let us have it, and said the regents ought to have me and the other instructors fired. I think he called the names—that included Bailey, myself, and Granbery and Eaves. Granbery hadn't written the thing, but of course, he aided and abided—he taught the philosophy classes. Of course, he bore down heavily on that kind of thing, and he taught. Well, this created a big stir, and some of his best members in the church were the Baptists here on campus—[W. P.] Clement—at that time was in the education department, later became the registrar. He was a big Baptist, though, and passed the collection plate—and Dr. William A. Jackson [Bill Jackson] was head of the government department—and quite a number of them—

about a dozen or more of them, best families, I guess, and best payers too [**were Baptists**]. At that time, they paid the faculty on what the people in Lubbock gave them, and they didn't have much. Any bank president from Lubbock would have traded places with any assistant professor out here at that time, as far as salary is concerned. Well, they had an indignation meeting then informed, via Campbell, that they were withdrawing fellowship if he didn't hush that up. That's his job, to preach to his brother and about what he's supposed to preach about, and not jump onto Tech—and nearly tore the church in two. And the result was—

JS:

Was this this Frist Baptist Church?

WH:

That's the First Baptist Church. I'll continue what happened then, then I'll switch to Norris, J. Frank Norris. He piped down on us. I believe he had a second go at it. But anyway, in order to keep from tearing the congregation up, something happened—he left. They got rid of him—he went on to some other fundamentalist town and did fairly well up there, but he literally, instead of funning us out, he got run out by his own people. But it didn't end there. J. Frank Norris, the big fundamentalist down at Fort Worth—a man who killed a man in his own office one time—he was coming over to [inaudible] with him about something he said publicly about him—so he walked into his office, and ole Norris just pulled out a .45 and mowed him down—and he was exonerated in court and by his own people. They raised his salary and bought him a new gun. Well, he had a big radio program on Sunday nights, and I think he had an hour's time on WBAP—whatever it is—

JS:

Fort Worth?

WH:

Yeah. It was [**WBAP**].

JS:

It's the *Star-Telegram* station.

WH:

*Star-Telegram*. Anyway, it was the strongest station in all West Texas at that time, and they could just knock all the other stations off the air. Well, he took up the cudgels on the radio programs, and he devoted two Sunday nights consecutively—one hour each—to those atheists out at Texas Tech—and he called names. He said the people should rise up and get rid of them and all that kind of thing. Well, Dr. [**P. W.**] Horn [**Texas Tech President**] was a pretty cagey man, and he certainly knew how to handle instructors. I don't know whether any issue was ever

made about it in the board meetings or not, but if it was, Dr. Horn handled it. He let the board know that Texas Tech was not going to be dictated to by a bunch of fundamentalists of any denomination—it was our job to teach the facts out here, and not to appease any religious sects—teach our classes the way they should. And so that kind of quieted them there. He [Norris] really burned us up—two one-hour programs on two consecutive Sunday nights.

JS:

Did you ever have any dealings with Norris, yourself?

WH:

I've seen him one time, but I'm glad you asked that question. He was, I think, a militant defender of the fundamentalist view, and the literal interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis, and he was the great leader of the prohibition forces in Texas—and everywhere. He was a huge, big, handsome man, and he had a voice that could call hogs from a mile away. He was a sort of a ragged, radical Billy Graham-type. Had he had the finesse of Billy Graham—and Billy Graham is pretty broad-minded in a way. He's dedicated to a certain philosophy and all of that, but Billy Graham is a positive man and not a negative man. He doesn't go around, you know, tearing down. He has a philosophy where he's got a racket; he's got a deal to sell, and he sells his racket on his own base. And Norris was a militant fighter. He wanted to go out and—I guess he would be called—candlelight preacher we ever had in the country—and traditionally they were the great people to take issue and debate and argue and all of that kind of thing. Well, he came from a poor family in Arkansas, and from the same community my father grew up in—I think in Lawrence County. And my father went to school with him in a little one-teacher, log cabin school, and had a little homemade desk, two students to a desk. They were made out of planks. My father was his desk mate for one short term, terms, whatever three or four months in those day, for one year he and Norris were desk mates. He said it would get warm in the spring. There were about four of those Norris kids, and they all had lice in their hair—and it didn't bother them much, and my father used to look over there and see the lice go around on Frank's head, kind of walk around and go back in. But his father—and this helps to explain him in some way, and his great militant prohibition. His father was an alcoholic—in those days, they didn't use that term at all; they just called them what they were: drunkards. He was the community drunkard, and the money he could spend—he went out and get himself soused. His wife must have been an ambitious and capable woman because she tried her best to educate her children. She took in washing and did every manner of thing to make a living, and she was very ambitious with kids. And she pushed them along, and they finally got them pretty well educated in the simple, you might say, the fundamentalist concept of education. It's not what you get at these Church of Christ colleges around over the country, where they carefully shield their students, you know, from anything in accord with their interpretations.



JS:

Like LCC [**Lubbock Christian College**] and ACC [**Abilene Christian College**]?

WH:

Yeah the worst one is the one over in Arkansas.

JS:

Searcy, Arkansas?

WH:

Searcy, Arkansas. They were really militant about it. These out here aren't near as bad as that one. They're over there in those mountains.

JS:

They lead a sheltered life.

WH:

Yes. Norris started preaching at this outfit in Fort Worth. This church in Fort Worth, at one time, was the biggest Baptist church in the south. But he was so controversial in everything that he withdrew from the Southern Baptist Convention, as I recall, and withdrew fellowship from all the others and kind of started his own clique of Baptists. You know the Baptists have been great at that. They can split, then re-split, and re-split; they can go together and have another big merger; and they start splitting again. They just have a wonderful time at withdrawing fellowship.

JS:

What about the local community—what kind of reaction did he get from the Norris speeches?

WH:<sup>1</sup>

I presume they [were] listened to, and I suppose the people in Lubbock who believed in it thought they were great, and the people who didn't, I suppose, it didn't make any difference. Campbell had already set the pattern here; the local situation had kind of taken form, you might say, and so far as I know there were no aggressive efforts made by anyone as a result. Even at that time the Norris Baptists are (and this is, I don't know, and estimate), I think even at that time they were a minority. I know they were not in keeping at all with the orthodoxy at Baylor and Hardin-Simmons, or well there were several other little Baptist schools around. After they got rid of Campbell, let's see, they got another preacher here named White who went to great lengths to

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<sup>1</sup> Please note: from this point on, the transcript was written by Jimmy Skaggs. The original audio tape has such distortion that an accurate transcript and edit by our current SWC staff was not possible.

pull things back together. He calmed things down, and so far as I know since then the First Baptist certainly it has not dealt in such things.

*Transcript suspended due to poor audio quality 00:19:04*

WH:

They are, the Baptist churches, \_\_\_\_\_. Arnie Bennett, \_\_\_\_\_ the pastor of a small little church made up of militant fundamentalists. And what's his name? He took up \_\_\_\_\_, along about 50 over to teach and he was teaching. And doing \_\_\_\_\_ and

*Recording ends at 00:22:00*

*B side is an inaudible speech not directly connected to this oral history*



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