

**Oral History Interview with Edmund Morris**  
**Interview conducted by Angela Baker, July 9, 1993**  
Transcription by Jeff Lipton, February 13, 2000

Position: High School Alumnus 1937; Long-standing employee; Vice-President of Finance and Development; Interim President (1970).

Dates associated with Saint Mary's: 1936-1974

Scope and Content: Major topics include: remembrances of life at the Windsor Street High School; changes at St. Mary's during the '60s and '70s; growth of St. Mary's campus; discusses how the student is put first at St. Mary's; Atlantic Centre of Research, Access and Support for Students with Disabilities.

Transcript:

AB: Okay, so let's start at the beginning, a little bit of background information on you. Could you state your full name please?

EM: My full name is Edmund L. Morris.

AB: And your date and place of birth.

EM: I was born in Halifax on the fourth of February 1923.

AB: Can you describe your educational background before you came?

EM: Yes, I, as a child I lived on Brunswick Street in Halifax and I went to Saint Patrick's school. My mother and father were practising Roman Catholics, and I am a practising, full supporter of Roman Catholicism. I went to Saint Patrick's school on Brunswick Street and then to Saint Mary's College High School which was located on Windsor Street. I'm an alumnus of Saint Mary's only at the high school. I went to grades, if I recall correctly, ten and eleven at Saint Mary's College High School. That was in 1936 and 1937. Then I went to Dalhousie University and graduated from the university and came back to Saint Mary's as an employee in 1963.

AB: I see. Well, let's talk about those years that you were at Saint Mary's High School. What was the size of the school when you were there?

EM: The building on Windsor Street, of which there are very many photographs in the present Saint Mary's University archives, and the cornerstone of which is at the Student Union

Building, in the little frontage piece. The late Russell [unclear] went up one day and found it, God rest his soul. We put it up on a plinth right outside the student union building. It was a very small building and the instructing staff were members of the Christian Brothers of Ireland. They were outstanding educators. The whole school was sprung at 10:30 a.m. for a common recess. Our recreational area consisted of two handball courts, upon which of course, even if you played doubles, no more than 4 people could play, and an old, old battered rink with natural ice in it. Not artificial, which was of course, called the Roarum, instead of the Forum. That was our principal recreational outlet. We walked where the present Saint Patrick's school on Quinpool Road is, that was in fact the field with a centred track around it. At recess you all walked around the track or threw a baseball, or threw a football or something, in the centre of the field.

AB: I see. What were your students like, your fellow students like?

EM: What was the?

AB: Were they a completely Roman Catholic population in the school?

EM: I can't tell you that, but you could, you had better find that in the archival resources than my memory. Certainly, it was an institution with a heavy involvement with Roman Catholicism. It was an institution where if you were a Roman Catholic, your faith would be upheld. I'm sure we had others there, and no harm was done them, and no attempt at conversions. It was certainly an institution where if you were a Roman Catholic, there was opportunity to keep your faith and profess it and practise it. There was a chapel and the Christian brothers of Ireland, who presided over class in a full length satin, right down to the floor, and the black cumberbund around it. Their principal disciplinary weapon was a handball, which was lodged in the right hand pocket. If you were out of line as a student, the hand ball came out of that pocket, and an under hand motion and whipped down the length of the classroom at you, and boy you had to duck fast. I don't know how they ever got their hand into the pocket and back out with the ball and threw it. That was their disciplinary weapon. There were also some laymen. The late Dean of Commerce at Saint Mary's, Harold Beazley, among others, Jack Lynch, and there were other teachers as well.

AB: What were the academic programs like?

EM: I was only in high school so I really can't remember. There were fellows ahead of me that were the exalted seniors. We were just high school students. There were very few options. You took what was offered. There are still, even today in 1993, some educators who fancy that there should be fewer options at that level. Education, more compulsories,

and you get a better education. We are now teaching people how to fix automobiles, but sometimes we don't manage to get any values built into them.

AB: Okay, so when you came back to the school as an employee in 1963, what position did you first come in?

EM: I was elected a member of parliament from Halifax in 1957, 58, and 62. And in 1963, I did not share entirely the policy views of the then leader of the party that I supported, right honourable John Diefenbaker, and I didn't run in 1963. I came to Saint Mary's University. I heard that there was to be an opening for position of assistant to the President. The president in 1963 was Father Clair Fischer. By 1963, and indeed years before that, the Christian Brothers of Ireland had given way to the Priests of the Society of Jesus, also known as Jesuits. The Jesuit fathers directed Saint Mary's University. Father Fischer was a Jesuit father, still is. He was also Rector of the Jesuits in Halifax.

Saint Mary's was then located at our present campus, Gorsebrook. There was one building, the front building, the McNally building. We were unisex, boys only, and they went to classroom with neckties and shirts. The Jesuit Fathers lived in the south wing of the McNally building. The President of the university was also simultaneously, the Rector of the order. That is he was the principal Jesuit, among the Jesuit Fathers. He had the rectorship of the order as well as the Presidency of the university. We had, in 1963, when I joined the staff in July of that year, 30 years ago this month, there were approximately 630 students as I recall. You knew every one of them by sight, and probably half of them at least, by first name. The president's duty, gladly born, was to talk frequently to the students. If you were a student, you were invited to come to the President's office. He would go over your scores with you and he would ask you how you were getting on. If you needed help, he'd get it for you. It was very, very personalized. I was then at Saint Mary's until 1974. I was Assistant to the President in 1963. In 1969, I think 69; I was appointed Vice President Administrative. We had a different title for it then. It was called Finance and Development. It was among my responsibilities to help raise the money to build things that are here now, many of them, the older ones. In 1970, the Jesuit President of the University, Father LaBelle left the university some time in the spring, and put a note under my door that he was leaving, literally, physically, and that I should take over and run for the balance of his term. I did that for a couple of months and then I was installed as interim President, while the search committee looked for a President of the university. I'm not an academic. I happen to think I'm a scholar in politics, but I'm not an academic. So I acted as interim President at the university.

At about that time, the university became a fully public university. It had also, 2 or 3 years prior to that, reached a decision to admit female students. That was a major

decision. What a grand decision it was. Looked at in the future, instead of looking over your shoulder at it in the past, it represented a dramatic and progressive move. It took a lot of courage to do it. The university was growing. It had one attribute which was not, I can [unclear] about it, but I'm more concerned to be [unclear] about it.

It is a unique quality at Saint Mary's University, and that was that the student was the centre of the university, not the administrator, and not even the faculty. That the student was the centre of the university, and that everything stopped to help the student. You'll find this particularly evident among the more senior faculty members, and I'm not suggesting for a moment that the juniors don't do it as well. You'll notice that it's inherent in the senior faculty members. Earlier this morning, I was in a faculty members office, now that I think of it, and while we were chatting, three students came to the door, he dropped everything with me as he should have. Went to the door, brought the student in, and handled the student matter. The student comes first, not second, not third, not fourth, first. That was a unique quality at Saint Mary's. It's harder to do, the bigger you get. We still try to do it. If a student comes in any office that I know of in the university and he needs, he or she needs help, you drop what you are doing and help the student. I mean that. If it's a simple thing like directions on campus or if it's a serious thing like "I have no money. I haven't even got money to buy my meal," you drop everything and you find the money. I'm not urging students to do that but I'm saying that I've never known a student to come to Saint Mary's who had the desire and the commitment to get a degree, a way was not found to get them through. Including putting your hand in your pocket to do it. That, to my mind is so integral. I mean that. It's exaggerated by brevity, but university is a willing open mind student and a skilled, dedicated teacher. And a teeterboard, and a book, and all the rest of it is just add on. All the rest of it is add on. You can make it as big as you want to make it but that's the essence of it. It's an open mind, a student seeking to know the world in which they're gonna live, and a teacher who's got the capacity and dedication and knowledge to transfer it. And an intellectual resource represented by a book. I was reading documents last night on Yale University. Four and a half million books in the library. There is so much knowledge, but the principal thing in the university is to get a student and a faculty and a body of knowledge together.

AB: So, how did the resources at Saint Mary's grow over the years?

EM: In 1963, just about this time of year, just at the time I came to the university, I could easily find the date, we turned the sod for the, what is now the Burke Education Centre. That was our first library. How proud, proud, proud the university was. This was the first building that the university had built. The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation, the practising Roman Catholics of the Arch Dioceses, had financed the front building, the McNally building named for the very dedicated former Archbishop. Here was a new

building, the Burke Education Centre that we, Father Fischer had, with the help of some laymen, it had all been pretty well accomplished by the time I joined hands in July 1963. They had raised the money and built, gonna build their first building. We turned the sod, curiously we, the contractor found running water right in the corner of the building, where it was originally sighted. It was supposed to have been further north towards Inglis Street, on the front lawn there. The library was going to be out closer to the sidewalk. When they dug the hole, we ran into Gorse Brook, and Gorse Brook flows throughout most of the south end of Halifax. It empties into the harbour, ultimately. Where the first residential tower is, at the corner of Tower Road, there used to be a magnificent pond, which was frozen over in winter. People used to skate there.

The first building was the Burke Education Centre which was our library. My recollection, which I haven't researched for many years, is that it was about two thirds of a million dollars. We then moved to build the first two floors of the science building. The alumni arena, the student centre we built, I've forgotten, two floors I think, and subsequently put another addition on. Then we went to the residences. The high-rise residences were real leaps of faith. You know, 17 stories, that type of thing. We had to raise funds for that. Goodwill, help from the Episcopal Corporation, consideration and charity from them, and one thing and another. It got to the point where then in the Presidency of Doctor Owen Carrigan, now in the history department at Saint Mary's; he became the President after my interim Presidency. He built a library, and then Doctor Ozman built more buildings, and the sports field. Those were days when all universities were building. We had, as I mentioned to you in 1963, something like 600 students, we now have 8600.

AB: So how did the academic programs at Saint Mary's grow and develop during those years?

EM: I can speak in general terms on that, but of course I'm not the authority because I'm not an academic. We were always identifiably strong in commerce. Engineering was taught at Saint Mary's, the preparatory course, and then you went for your final degree to the Technical University of Nova Scotia, as it is known now. It was then called Nova Scotia Technical College, now TUNS. [As the student] it was both cause and effect. As the student numbers increased, the academic programs increased, and as the academic programs increased and enriched, students came. Students still come to Saint Mary's because of their estimation that you can get a good education at Saint Mary's. We have a strong education faculty, and it did a magnificent thing in the 1960s and 70s, and it's still doing it today. It upgraded all the teacher certificates in the public school system. They all went from a lower licence to a higher licence by coming to Saint Mary's and getting post-graduate, or graduate training. That ripple effect of upgrading the teachers would then go on and infiltrate students, as an enriching factor throughout the whole school

system, and will be for generations. That was an important measure. Saint Mary's always had a dedication to disabled students. It was not patronizing. It came out of a profound belief that every student is made in the image of God, and that each human being is a human miracle. We found that disabled students couldn't get to university, so we made an effort to get them to university. I've the fondest memories of the boys up in what we call the north wing. That's the north wing of the McNally building. There was a boy there by the name of Rogers from Yarmouth; his father ran a furniture store, well-known, salt of the earth local citizen. He was in a wheel chair, and the other boys were just exemplary the way they looked after him. They took him out to every party they went to. They took him everywhere they went. They took him to every class, and out of that grew the overhead pedways that connect the campus. When we built the residences, the thoughtfulness was, make sure that the boys don't have to go out in the snow with a wheelchair. Spend money if you have to, they are human individuals, they are miracles, get them to class. That has grown into that magnificent Atlantic Resource Centre for Disabled Students, that ethos grew into that under David [Leeche's?] brilliant leadership there. We've, it's part of the essence at Saint Mary's and that is that the student was the centre, and disabled or not, we take account of them.

I remember on one occasion, if you're anecdotalizing, when somebody came to me and said to me that his son had a particular mind difficulty, if you placed him, a pen or pencil in his hand and a written examination, he quivered all over, he couldn't handle it. He just could not handle it. The result was the door was barred for his advancement. It's nothing today to have oral exams, but in those days it was quite unique. I said leave it with me and we will see what we can do. The professors met and they said, we've no difficulty. The test is whether it's got into his head, not whether it got into his hand. We'd give him an oral exam. I see that boy today. He's a chartered accountant, and a brilliant chartered accountant, and he's overcome that adolescent difficulty and he's made, he's made a life for himself, his family, and they are fine, fine people. Partly because Saint Mary's reacted. I'm just quoting that particular example for disabled students.

AB: Any other changes or developments that you remember?

EM: Hmm?

AB: Any other changes or developments that come to mind?

EM: Well, gradually, as we grew, we put flesh on some very thin bones. As with any human growth in an organism, we grew to have faculties, and disciplines, new area, astronomical observatory was a pioneering venture, named for the late, great Reverend Father Burke-Gaffney, who was a little leprechaun of a man. Those of us who believe in Sainthood,

he's a Saint. Just a tremendous man, a world famous astronomer. We pioneered in that area. We always had a good football team. I told the boys that there were two ways to go through life. You could go through life winning, go through life losing, as long as you did it fairly. It was a better way. It was a lot more comfortable going through winning, and we taught them to win. I want to tell you that it wasn't just; I've heard it and I've always resented it. I've heard it occasionally referred to as the "Jock School." This is by other, particularly other institutions that don't have anything else to praise themselves for. The provision of wholesome recreation for 8600 students in an urban environment is no small responsibility. Better they play football than some other things they could do. And yes, we taught them to win, play together, and try to win. We used to win national championships, there's a curious syndrome about that. Obviously you need the best facilities you can get and we're going to go on to try to get the best facilities for them. But, it's a curiosity that when we had virtually no facilities, we used to win national championships. The old gymnasium was under the McNally building.

AB: I see. So, after you stepped down as interim President, what did you do after that?

EM: I think Dr. Carrigan became President if I remember in 1971, and I reverted to my Vice-Presidency, took over full-time again as Vice-President in Administration, or as it was called, Finance and Development. When the university became a freestanding public institution, we had no underwriters. There's nobody out there signing notes for us. Other universities not that far away had accumulated deficits. Saint Mary's doesn't have any. Saint Mary's got students out with fine, fine degrees and it didn't owe any, there was nobody backing it at the bank. It was occasionally, very, very tight, and very difficult.

In 1974, I left the Vice-Presidency to run and then serve as mayor of the city. In 1980 I left there and went to the provincial government and in 1988, I left the provincial government as a cabinet minister. In 1989 or 1990, the present President, whose probably the best president in the country, in my book, Dr. Ozman, and Donnie Keller asked me if I'd come in and give the university a little hand with what we call planned giving. Do that on a part-time basis. I'm a very fortunate human being. Saint Mary's means a very great deal to me. Just to be on the campus is a pleasure to me. It's been a part of my life, a very important part. Many of the professors were here when, were still here. Here's a note from one of them today, this morning. On a personal and intimate basis, they were here when I came and they're still here or just about retiring and that type of thing. There's some fine, fine professors. Jack McCormick, Art Monahan, those two men are a historian, and a philosopher. They're internationally famous. Bill Bridgeo in science. If I start, I'm sure I'll forget some, but these are fine, fine people. The Jesuit Fathers, who were at Saint Mary's, were just outstanding. Just outstanding. We all, every day, we'd talk. The older hands among us. Somebody will remember a name, an incident about

some Jesuit father. Some listen. We learned even in our maturity, middle age, they could teach us lessons and they're just outstanding. Father Hennessey and Father O'Donnell, Father Bill Stewart, these were outstanding men. Father Leary, Father Murphy, Father Jim Murphy, here I go again. So, they were outstanding, but there's still some Jesuit Fathers here, but they are declining both in absolute numbers and certainly as a percentage of the faculty because we, I believe we have a total of 5, correct, 550 faculty and staff.

When I came in 1963, the faculty portion alone, I think we were 36. You knew everyone. Father President used to spend a significant amount of time walking down on the corridor dropping into professor's offices. Today, if there's just a slight chance that if you're not careful, you may meet a professor somewhere in the city and not ever have met him on the campus. Or her. You have to be constantly alert as the university grows; it has to grow if it is to serve its students. And it's cause and effect as I mentioned earlier. You try as much as you humanly can to keep that imperishable value of individual contact. That is what made it different. When parents were either making decisions for their children or participating with their children in making the decision about university, the bottom line was often go to Saint Mary's, they're more attentive to the students. They still got the small school capacity and react individually to a student. I think it's very important. Everybody at Saint Mary's thinks it's important. It's just important to me and I keep saying it, because it is. We have to keep constantly aware of that, that was the uniqueness. There's no merit in getting bigger you know, there's no intrinsic value in size, big small, it's what you do with the size that you have. How you serve people who are, and how it responds to people in it. Yes, it's difficult. The university is run, with out, without the, any deficit. We don't have any accumulated deficit and we don't accumulate one year by year. That's not easy. I mean by that, it not only takes effort, but it takes a great deal of skill by those who have the, who have been entrusted with it's management. You need it all the way from the board right through to the staff.

AB: Well, that's about all I wanted to cover unless you can think of anything else?

EM: Right.

Tape ends here