

**John White**

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Amy Dugan

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**White, John**

Transcript – John White

**Interviewee:** John White

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Marist College Social Aspects

**Summary:** John White reflects upon his arrival to Marist College as a Professor of History. He discusses his most memorable moments, the social changes throughout the years on campus, how his perception of his role on campus has changed, as well as Marist's biggest assets and liabilities.

**Speaker 2 (11:56):**

I'm interviewing Professor John White. He's a professor of history at Marist college. He's been here since 1963. And we'll start off with the first question. What initially brought you to Marist college? What was your first contact with the college?

**Professor John White (12:16):**

I was in graduate school at Fordham in the spring of 1963 and I had finished my graduate work and I was looking for job. One of the professors at Fordham, Joe Callahan went to the medieval academy dinner in Waston. And by coincidence, he sat next to Dr. Walsh who was looking for someone to teach European history, medieval history. So Joel Callaghan told me to write Rosco. I came up here in June 1963, actually May, probably May and then again in June and I started teaching in September.

**Speaker 2 (13:08):**

Did you here of Marist beforehand?

**Professor John White (13:11):**

Yes, I knew of it because where the culinary is now used to be the Jesuit house of studies at St. Andrews and Fordham is a Jesuit school. One of my graduate professors following me.

**Speaker 2 (13:34):**

What is your most memorable moment or event witnessed or involved in while you were here at Marist?

**Professor John White (13:42):**

Well, I've been thinking about that since you showed me those questions yesterday and there are two actually, and I think one of them would be answered in the second, third question about social change. I'll use the other one then. I think the events that surrounded the Kent state problem in 1970 which not only did we witness the student reaction to that, but I think ultimately that also rather dramatically changed the method and manner of the structure of the college education wise. We stopped certain requirements, we moved into certain other areas and I'm not terribly sure that that was for the best, but we did it.

**Speaker 2 (14:35):**

What kind of reaction did you see from the students?

**Professor John White (14:37):**

Well, I remember distinctly there were a whole series of meetings. The cafeteria in the campus center, there were a whole series of statements and protests, there was a suspension of exams. I understand there were plans for all kinds of marches. It was another dramatic event.

**Speaker 2 (15:07):**

Was there much protesting during the Vietnam War on campus? Or was it quiet?

**Professor John White (15:13):**

It's interesting that we look back on the Vietnam War now we make certain observations about it and certainly as a history teacher, we become aware of the fact that we view that now in a certain different light than those of us who experienced it. I certainly ultimately became most sympathetic to the attitude of the students but I came off a different perspective initially. I came here, I came to graduate school after five years in the Navy. And so my approach to military was a little different, but ultimately what I think created a great deal of difficulty for me and I think that some of my colleagues was the fact that as

the Vietnam War progressed, and so many students had student affirmance then it became a very real issue for any number of us as to what kind of grades we'd give out, because if a student failed then in a certain sense we were sentencing him to military and God knows what would happen. So I would suggest that problem plus the growing disenchantment with the government. And I think, I guess there's in my mind, there's nothing that strikes me more graphically regarding the problem of Vietnam. And in that same spring of 1978, the famous March on Washington, the students were going around and I'll never forget being absolutely disgusted with the arrogant pose of the John Mitchell attorney general, as he was standing on the balcony outside, outside his office, in the justice building and the look of scorn on his face. And I never had any great love for Nixon anyway and that administration, but that certainly reinforced my position. And now, as I look back, certainly seeing what happened with Watergate and John Mitchell's role, the arrogance of that reinforced.

**Speaker 2 (17:35):**

The third question, what social changes have you witnessed?

**Professor John White (17:40):**

That was the one I was gonna say to go hand and look, I think the really significant social change I found is when I first came, this college was all boys. And I think it was in '68 or '69 that we shifted over to coed and it was, it was very amusing as a background, they could have girls in the night class, but couldn't have women in the day class so there was a separation. The night school was separate, but then in preparation for it, there were a whole series of of meetings. I remember going to a couple of them over in the fireside round. And Tom Wade was then the Dean. He was all for this change and what made it not so funny was the very guys who I thought would be supportive of women, were all the ones that got up and said, no, we don't want any women here. That's gonna ruin the character of the college. And one kid got up and said and I found it so amusing because the juxtaposition of something, one guy got up and said, well, if we have have girls then Jerry White can't tell raunchy stories history classes, and that'll be ruined. And I remember sitting in the class and I said, but I can. I said, because I just, by coincidence that semester, I was teaching group of novices over at mother Cabrini. And I was telling them the same stories I was telling the guys. And I said, no, it's not true, but I found that so strange that there would be such reaction. And now I understand I can come perhaps come to grips with problems let's say that exist in those eating clubs in Princeton. Now all those guys want to keep those male S but the other thing was, Tom Wade was convinced that if girls came on campus, I'll never forget he said to me, what that's gonna do, he said, it's gonna raise the level of dressing. Everybody's gonna be gonna be dressing better or no jeans and that sort of thing. And I said, yeah, good luck. But I think that was a great event. Okay. And I haven't stopped telling Roger.

**Speaker 2 (19:48):**

How has the perception of your role here at Marist changed since your first involvement with the college?

**Professor John White (20:04):**

You were asking me to tell you about what I did... .

**Speaker 2 (20:07):**

Well, when you came here, what was your role then? And now, how do you see yourself now?

**Professor John White (20:12):**

Okay. When I came I was with Roscoe, I think we were the only two who were teaching medieval history. We also taught, I taught more European.

**Speaker 2 (20:28):**

Or I'll give you a better one, how have you seen the history department of Marist College change since you've been here?

**Professor John White (20:36):**

One of the the problems as I just alluded to answer your second question of the change in the curriculum as a consequence of the whole revolution in the sixties and seventies. One of the things that happened then was that there was a downplaying of core courses. When I came here, students took medieval, moderate, American, two semesters of American history and there were a substantial number of majors if I remember correctly. We in the history department along with English, had the largest number of majors in the school. One of the problems that followed the the change in the curriculum was that there was a downplaying of the core courses or what we now call core courses. And as a consequence of those survey courses that were either dropped or they were changed or they were combined with other courses. As the as the number of history majors declined, as you go through the end of the seventies and the eighties, that meant that we here became much more service oriented so far as then fulfilling the new curriculum in the core and we don't have as many history courses as we used to. I remember when I was teaching, there must have been about six or eight courses that I had to handle. And now I'm not doing that many, but I had, we had medieval art architecture, we had special course in the Renaissance, we had a special course in form ideas and middle ages and that sort of thing.

**Speaker 2 (22:25):**

So do you think now you're more specific? Your teaching role has become much more narrowed.

**Professor John White (22:31):**

Well, it's been narrowed. I mean you still have to teach the core, but to me there's a terrible problem. I find that we're given three, possibly six hours of the student's life. And most of my students who come in don't know that much history and so I then have the problem of trying to figure out what they can do to fill in the blanks from their high school and that becomes certainly it's a challenge every year that I've taught this core course, we've changed the name of that four times in the past 10 years. But each year it comes more and more of the challenges as to what you do, how you handle all that material and the responsibility is to me, at least I think the responsibility gets greater and greater in realizing you have just so little time to get so much without putting them to sleep.

**Professor John White (23:29):**

I was also chairman for three years, '60, '65, '68. I hated it. I don't know why I did it, but I do remember my desk. I ran the department in fashion and I got the word of advice from a friend of mine who was then chairman of the of the history department at Fordham, Roger Wines. Ran into him once at the American star association convention. And he said, Jerry, I got a whole batch of papers that fell off the end of my desk in September. I never found out about them and I didn't discover them until December, nobody needed them. So I figured the same thing, be important. One other comment I would make about the social aspect of things that changed when one of the things that endeared me to this college initially was the fact that it was smaller. I went to a small college. and there was great contact and when I first came here, let's say through the the sixties and seventies there was a great deal of interaction between the students and faculty. We used to meet, go to dorms and wrap to go across here. It was where Skinners is, another bar, and we'd sit there, walk down to the big watering hole here was for the brown Derby that was Marist off campus. In fact, I remember one year it was the guy who was the

student body president spent most of his time down there. In fact, I think there were any number of student body meetings that took place in the brown Derby and the bartenders were all Marist students and there's a whole series. I think the the last chance was actually originally performed by a bunch of guys who had worked at the brown Derby and talented. And there's one group that they used to have a banjo band or something that sat up on top of the juke box... i'm trying think of the guy Larry Clover that's Larry Clover he was an English major and he played his guitar or banjo and he and another bunch of guys found at the ground the last chance and also the Renaissance was originally established by some Marist people, it was also the old Coke was on management street. No, it was on market street. Bill that's his name... playwright, you know, lots of lots of interaction now, as the school seemed to get bigger. I don't know what happened to that but you mean you could always go wandering it wasn't called a Renaissance. It was called that place. It was called up to house. In fact, I remember one of my students, I was an attorney George esky, and I had a, was sitting on top of a, a hood of a car in the parking lot, drinking beer, about two o'clock in the morning. And we got into problem. He didn't like my approach, constitutional history liar. And I said, right, let's prove it. We became good friends. Really? Yeah. But there was a great deal of opportunity interaction, I mean yeah, outside the class. Yeah. It was, it was marvelous. You could, but you didn't know that to do all those bars. No, man. Little mayor's history. In fact there was another, I knew one guy who used to be on security. I'm not gonna tell you his name. Cause when get back, he used to be a football player. He, he was a linebacker and he was working here for a while and he had one of those walkie talking, well, that could carry as far as the the circle bar across the river. So he could go out there and could hear, oh, security. The fifth question. What do you view as mayor's biggest asset and its biggest liability?

**Professor John White (28:14):**

I've been thinking about that one. I think our asset is still at least even though what I've just said about the loss of that kind of, I still think, I still think that majority of us on the faculty still afford cause student body the opportunity to meet and I think that's important. Cause I think really, if we don't do that, then it's a, it's a waste of your money. You need to then go to a, a state school, pay less. I think that the great asset is that we have the student body has the opportunity to constantly meet with faculty. There's still that personal thing. I like to think there still is a personal relationship. But cause of these stupid rules about drinking, you can't go out to a bar, at least you're not supposed to see that they're drinking. But that's very important I've always thought plus the fact that I guess there's an ambiguity. On one side I think it's one of the great assets is that we are making use of so much that's available to us here in this area as far as let's say computers and IBM and that sort of thing. On the other side, the liability to that I see is the possibility that we'd cease to be a liberal arts school and we'd cease to have a liberal arts tradition and we could get into the traffic of becoming a trade school, which I think would be terrible. And in fact, you could put that down as the problem, the biggest liability. The other side is, I must say, I think in the past 10 or 11 years, the longest he's been here, I think Dennis has done a marvelous job in building up the facility of the campus. I think the place, if you could've seen it, when I came, Champagnat wasn't here, I think it was...

**Speaker 2 (30:23):**

The cosmetic part.

**Professor John White (30:24):**

Yeah I mean, he's done a splendid job of building and making the place much more presentable as it were much more attractive. And as much as there may be difficulties between the faculty and the administration, that comes up, I think in the long history of any institution, that type of thing. Well, it may give a couple of people, hypertension. I think it's a very useful thing because it keeps everybody on

the toes. There's always something going on and that type of an interaction. Well, I talk about that in specific classes. If you can constantly get things bouncing off each other.

**Speaker 2 (31:07):**

All right, professor, that's it. Yep. Thank you for your time. Appreciate it.

**Professor John White (31:12):**

I'm not convicted of anything?

**Speaker 2 (31:12):**

No, I'd tell you (laughter).