

Robert Grissom, M.D.
Former Chair of Internal Medicine

Interview by Frank Menolascino, M.D.

1980

Dr. Menolascino: It is my pleasure to interview Dr. Robert Grissom as part of the University of Nebraska College of Medicine Centennial history. Dr. Grissom, you came at a very pivotal time in the history of our College of Medicine, the middle 1950s, and there was a move then toward full time clinical staff. Could you share with us why you came, how things were when you came? And then you were Chairman of the Department of Medicine, your history in that.

Dr. Grissom: Well, I remember when Wilson Moody, who had been part-time chairman, came to see me in Chicago. I was then at the Presbyterian-St. Luke's Hospital and his presentation was that things were a little bit undeveloped, but there was a great challenge and there were great people out here and I guess that was what persuaded me to think seriously about it. I was impressed, of course, with the possibility of becoming chairman. When I came I was associate chairman not chairman. And that had a certain excitement about it. There was great promise here. I remember talking to Harold Lueth, who had been dean before Dr. [J. Perry] Tollman, and he was somewhat skeptical that the University of Nebraska was really going to go places but he was wrong, and I've been very pleased that I have come. It's been a happy association for me over these years.

Dr. Menolascino: And you came at the same time as a chairperson in pediatrics, also in surgery, also in obstetrics. I think.

Dr. Grissom: Yes. Now already Dr. [Cecil] Wittson was here as chairman of psychiatry but their location was over at the Douglas County Hospital and there were full time people at the Veterans' Hospital, also, but they were unrelated to us here at the College of Medicine. They ran their own show so to speak. I was the first of those four people that you mentioned to come. Dr. [Merle M.] Musselman came from the University of Michigan and he was an alumnus of our school and had a distinguished military career, mostly as prisoner of war in the Japanese

internment camps. Roy Holly came from the University of Minnesota and was kind of a favorite son up there. He subsequently became a vice-president of the system here. And then Gordon Gibbs came from Maryland, I believe, and his association with the University of Nebraska was brand new and he had no previous connection. Perry Tollman was a great fellow, low-key kind of a person, and very matter of fact. He told us that things were pretty grim as far as budget was concerned and I can remember those days when year after year there would be no increase in funds and we would have to close wards because we didn't have enough money to operate the place, or we couldn't have house staff because there wasn't money to pay them even though they didn't get paid very much.

Dr. Menolascino: Just for a comparison, what was your salary in 1955 when you came here?

Dr. Grissom: I think my salary was \$12,000 but that's a lot more than they paid Howard Hunt in 1930. (Laughter)

Dr. Menolascino: Yes, I think he was talking more in terms of \$200 and \$300 a month, \$3,600.

Dr. Grissom: So it was possible to live and get along all right. My wife, fortunately, made do with a lot of things.

Dr. Menolascino: So you were then chairman of the department.

Dr. Grissom: I became chairman two years later.

Dr. Menolascino: Two years later that would be 1957.

Dr. Grissom: Nineteen fifty-five, I believe. I don't recall, 1955 or 1956. It might have been 1956.

Dr. Menolascino: And how long were you chairman of the Department of Medicine?

Dr. Grissom: I think for fourteen years.

Dr. Menolascino: Fourteen years so you were here then throughout Tollman's reign as dean.

Dr. Grissom: Yes and then Cecil Wittson became dean and then Bob Kugel and it was when Bob Kugel was dean that I stepped down from being chairman and I've enjoyed being one of the people since. The place has really expanded, of course, and our relationships with the private hospitals, I think, has improved greatly. We used to have a kind of antagonism especially in terms of seeking interns with Methodist. You were a part of that, perhaps.

Dr. Menolascino: Yes. I was an intern at Methodist.

Dr. Grissom: You were an intern at Methodist and so it was probably good to have that competition with Immanuel and Methodist and Clarkson, but I think it's better now that we have a cooperative arrangement.

Dr. Menolascino: Yes so changes as far as internships. What about the hospital?

Dr. Grissom: Our department of medicine now has 59 house officers and we train more than that because we have some from family practice and other departments come in. But in those days we tried to run the hospital with two or three or four, you know, altogether.

Dr. Menolascino: What was the hospital like when you came as far as its physical size and what's changed as you were chairman of medicine? What changed in those 15, 18 years that you were chairperson?

Dr. Grissom: Well, the wards were, of course, open wards with beds down either side and in the sections now that are all offices. They were not air-conditioned. It was a fairly pleasant place to work, however, because the nursing staff was seasoned and pleasant and a number of them are still around, had married the interns that we knew in those days and so it was a good place to work despite those problems. We would go down to the dining room downstairs for coffee and the like. It was always a very harmonious situation. Harry McFadden was there and

Drs. [A.L.] Bennett and [A. Ross] McIntyre would come over and we'd have a very pleasant association, as we were so much smaller than we are now. We subsequently expanded into Douglas County Hospital, which has not continued as part of the University arrangement, and the relationship with the Veterans' Hospital has become now integral to the two medical schools. I would say that we had some very fine house officers in those days and I have fond memories of that. But it was tough going in terms of budget.

Dr. Menolascino: I'll bet, I'll bet. When you left as chairperson of the Department of Medicine, what have you done since that time?

Dr. Grissom: Well, I left at the time that we were just building the new hospital. In fact, we opened it at the time that I left and I thought that that was quite appropriate as a new era and so I have identified my relationship with the department primarily as it relates to heart disease, which is where I began my interest and I have developed some of the hypertensive programs here. So that has been my principal areas of investigative interest. However, in the 1950s we were primarily internists and only secondarily people with subspecialty interest and I have been in that groove ever since. I think of myself still as somebody who worries about the other parts of the body as well as the heart.

Dr. Menolascino: So you have been involved primarily in cardiology during the last decade.

Dr. Grissom: Yes, yes.

Dr. Menolascino: Okay. Looking back over the involvement here at the College of Medicine since 1955 are there any two or three key things that stand out in your mind?

Dr. Grissom: Well, yes, although bricks and mortar are not the soul of the University, as I think about the University I can see certain major events making a big difference and when Governor Tiemann introduced the sales and income tax and relief of property tax, all of that allowed us to have a building program which was much more realistic and in tune with the times. And then Cecil Wittson with, I think, considerable imagination and verve, was able to match that with Federal funds and we could get the tremendous physical plant that we have now. So that's one

thing that stands out. And I think, secondly, I would say the union with private hospitals, Methodist and Clarkson, for example, and with the Veterans' Hospital have been major advances in terms of our development as a medical center. Thirdly, I would mention the development of the graduate programs. Our medical student class size when you were here was probably around 75.

Dr. Menolascino: That's right.

Dr. Grissom: And now we have that many first year house officers starting and so it's become a graduate institute, as well as, an undergraduate medical institution.

Dr. Menolascino: And the medical students have doubled class size, also.

Dr. Grissom: Yes. We now have twice as many medical students. There has been much more emphasis on research in the last half dozen years than there was before. There are reasons for that. We didn't have the time or money or facilities to do that. Despite that however, as one looks back over the past years, there was a lot being done here and I think particularly in the basic sciences and that was one of the things that attracted me to the institution, also. Drs. Bennett, McIntyre, McFadden, Latta, [Ed] Holyoke, people of that sort, were doing really very good things. You've interviewed Dr. Hunt. I remember visiting him when I first came here as a candidate for this position and he was impressive to me as a first class person.

Dr. Menolascino: So, it's been thirty years of your life since you came from Chicago.

Dr. Grissom: Yes.

Dr. Menolascino: You seem to have thoroughly enjoyed it.

Dr. Grissom: Well, the University has been good to me and I hope I've done something worthwhile for them.

Dr. Menolascino: I know as one of your former students I can say on behalf of many people you've been very good for it and the key variable we have here are the students. I think it's been a very rewarding career for those you've also served. Thank you very much, doctor.

Dr. Grissom: My pleasure.

Dr. Menolascino: Thank you.