Professor of Drama, SDSU
Oral History Draft Transcription
E. Kingsley Povenmire
Interviewer: Michael Milligan
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John and Jane Adams Humanities Minigrant

Michael Milligan (MM): This is an interview with E. Kingsley Povenmire, Professor of Speech and Drama from 1946 to 1971. This interview is being conducted on August 11, at his home in Chula Vista. The interviewer is Michael Milligan for the San Diego State University Faculty Emeritus Oral History Project, supported by a John and Jane Adams Minigrant.

Professor Povenmire, you were born in 1904?

E. Kingsley Povenmire (EKP): That's right, in Laurelville, Ohio, a town of 425 souls, a country town. My father was a druggist there.

MM: What got you interested in speech?

EKP: I think it opened up in high school; I took part in two or three plays. In fact, I was headed for the ministry at one time and was a student pastor at the Garrett Biblical Institute, which is the theological sister to Northwestern University. This was in 1927 and 28.

MM: Where did you go to college?

EKP: Ohio State, "Buckeye." And Yale. I was privileged to get to Yale for a three-year post-graduate degree, master of fine arts. My degree, and everyone else's, was evidence that the aim was to raise the standard of theater production on Broadway, for writing plays and all of the production elements--acting, directing, so forth.
MM: What did you do during WWII?

EKP: My War service was not in the military, it was in the Armed Services YMCA. I was a program secretary in San Diego. We were allowed to say where we would like to go, but we had to say also that we would go wherever the USO sent us. And I said I would go far west or southwest, and they gave it to me.

MM: How did the Great Depression affect you?

EKP: I was very fortunate that the three years from '30 to '33 I was at Yale. I missed the direct effect of the Depression. But the Depression was a ghastly experience for anybody who was alive during that time.

MM: You came to San Diego State in 1946 and took over from Miss Sybil Eliza Jones?

EKP: Well, nobody ever took over from her [laughing]. She was a wonderful lady brought down from Pasadena Playhouse. She and Paul Pfaff were drama, speech, and radio. Heroically, they gave students a good solid understanding of and experience in the theater, in all the branches.

MM: You taught under Presidents Hepner and Love. What did you think about Hepner?

EKP: I liked him very much. He was a man of vision, and not only that, he was a practical man who could make his dreams come true given the resources. When he was given the chair of the presidency of a growing, burgeoning institution he responded very well.

President Love brought the school from a struggling state
college to a major university. Ohio State had 10,000 people when I went there; we thought it was such a tremendous institution. But when I retired from San Diego State we had 34,000 and we could have that many again, I think, if we had the money for it.

MM: You were hired the same time as Hunton D. Sellman. What can you say about him?

EKP: Oh, he knew the theater. I used to think this man doesn't have any other thought than the theater. He was always thinking about it, planning for it. He was a solid motivator and organizer of the theater.

MM: Did you, or the department rather, have any ties with the Old Globe?

EKP: Oh yes. We all went to the Old Globe. And I was privileged to teach a course in theater speech there. We met once a week, and there was quite a lot of interest in it.

MM: In 1970/71 you switched from Speech to Drama. Verse choir had been in the Speech Department, then in 1970/71, I noticed in the catalog, it was now in Drama. What was the reason for that?

EKP: I always felt that it fit better in a theater department; I'm surprised that it was in the speech department for so long.

MM: What can you tell me about the National Summer Workshops—the Reader's Theater, Mime [?] Theater?

EKP: Oh, Dr. William J. Adams was the one who developed Reader's Theater. It started out as a group of people who just wanted to get better acquainted with a play, and they would sit in a group and read the lines, taking various parts. It was so attractive.
and so interesting that other people wanted to hear it, so they came and there was the audience. Then they found out that after they had gone over the play three or four times that they knew the lines, so it became a hybrid kind of a thing. They did the plays with very little scenery. They used it as a tool to take back to their students.

MM: Why isn't the Verse Choir still at San Diego State?

EKP: When I knew I was going to retire, Bill Adams and I talked. And I told him he could take it and do anything he wanted with it. . . . "I hope you don't drop it, but you can build it in any way that it takes off." My idea of the Verse Choir was a campus-wide organization as compared to a departmental unit. And at one time we had twelve departments represented in the Verse Choir. The athletes, incidentally, were very strong in it. The coach one time told me that one of our men was doing the vocal exercises in the shower. That was Coach Coryell, we were great friends.

To get back to Dr. Adams and the Readers Theater. We both realized that Verse Choir was more closely related to Readers Theater than to the theater at large, or it appeared to be so. And the times that he developed a Verse Choir within the Readers Theater was proof that he understood it and could have taken on where I left off. And he did for a semester or two, but Readers Theater grew so beautifully and made such demands on his time that he had to slack off on the Verse Choir and it eventually just fell by the waywide. That was within the expectations--I
told him he could develop it in any way that he wished, as Sybil Eliza had said to me that I could develop it in any way that I wished. And I was all for the democratic way. So I did not blame him, certainly, for what was in the cards.

MM: I noticed that a lot of the plays that you've written and the performances by the Verse Choir are spiritual in nature. Why is this?

EKP: I don't know where to put the emphasis there. It is easy to find poetry that leads you into a spiritual experience and it's also good for a verse choir. And I also have to confess that I am a Christian and therefore there would be a tendency to choose poetry of that nature.

MM: That's why the play with the Lambs Players, the readings you did with them . . .

EKP: Yes, they did my play, "Command the Morning." I didn't do any verse choir with them but I did a whole evening of Negro poetry, including "The Green Pastures," which is a marvelous telling of the story of the Bible.

[At this point, MM brings out some cassette tape recordings of some Verse Choir productions.]

MM: I have "Sounds Across America," and "The Crucifixion."

EKP: Oh yes, that's a powerful one.

[MM plays a portion of "The Crucifixion"]

MM: Who is the woman singing, do you remember?

EKP: Beeta Little was her name . . .

[tape of Verse Choir turned off and subject changed to
Cleavon Little] . . . Black man who defied the people who wanted
to assign all Negros to labor. He was a brilliant person, a fine
Christian man. One time my wife said "Clevon, you've got
greatness in you." And instead of scuffing his toe in the dust
and saying Oh shucks, he said "Yes, I believe I have." And I
thought that took more courage than to deny it. And now he
finally has a very good part in a motion picture.

MM: For the Verse Choir, did you have a background that would go
along with what you were reading?

EKP: Yes, sometimes we did, but primarily it was stand where
they told you to, and you were just a part of the program.

MM: Kind of like an orchestra?

EKP: Yes, that's right. It was a supportive thing.

[Continue playing "The Crucifixion"].

MM: It's interesting that you have the women's voices doing
Pilate instead of the men.

EKP: We're not after gender, we're after a personality of the
voice. We have light, medium, dark voices. And the dark voices
tend to give you stability and strength, and the light voices do
better even as Pilate, not because women are vascilating as
Pilate was but because they're not the heavy, strong substantial
voices of the dark ones.

MM: Pilot was probably the great model of indicision, and the
voice gives you that unconfident, wavering, "What should I do? I
know this man is innocent but I must crucify him or face
insurrection from the Jews."
I went back to State [after retirement?], invited by the Speech Department to start the Verse Choir again. And the Registrar's Office wanted to give me as many students as they could, so they guided them into the Voice Choir. If they wanted English, or something else, "Well, this is what we have left"-- and I got 57 students. At first [I thought it good] but then I was very conscious of the need for an on-going experience; to have at least a third of the old choir in the present choir [for continuity].

MM: This is a tough question: how important do you feel a liberal education is--acting, verse choir, art, music, history, literature--in a college education? Today, it seems that we get this a little bit, but the main focus is on the specific major.

EKP: Liberal education is extremely important because it addresses the student's need . . . we need to give more emphasis to the humanities that cause one person to be concerned about another person, it starts at that level. Compassion is so necessary and so strong. Compassion is a tremendous tool, it doesn't set out to be a tool, but it is. Albert Schweitzer, when he came to Chicago one time, he had coined the expression "reverence for human life." An old lady came by, with a knock-about suit case, struggling, and Schweitzer excused himself from the reporter he was talking to and took the bag from the old lady and took her up to the conductor. Then when he came back the reporter said "Well now, let's get back to the 'reverence for human life'". He missed the point completely, didn't he.
MM: Yes!

I think that's all for now, and we should bring this interview to a close. Thank you Professor Povenmire.