

Lawrence Korth completed his master's thesis on the Class of '39 at Clemson University. In 2012, as a part of his research process, he interviewed Clifton "Chip" Egan, Excellence Award Winner, Class of '39. The interview transcript follows:

Clifton Egan Interview – April 23, 2012

Subject: The Clemson Class of 1939

Lawrence Korth: Can you tell me how you first became involved with the class?

Clifton Egan: I had absolutely no awareness of the class other than the monument in the Carillon Garden. I did not know about their special history, I didn't know about their particular dedication to Clemson until I won the Award of Excellence, which I did in the year 2000, and that was a bit of a surprise too. I was nominated by a fellow faculty member who put the nomination materials together, but never in a million years imagined that I would be an award winner. By the year 2000 there had been eleven awards made and when you are on the faculty as long as I was you know most of the faculty who are tenured across the campus and so I knew all eleven of the people who had received the award. And, in every case thought it was a perfect selection and the Faculty Senate had done a really good job of picking them, never dreaming it could happen to me. So I won the award and the award is given at the December commencement service, so it was December 2000 when I received it. And then I began receiving communications from the class, from Dr. Senn in particular, describing first of all that there would be the Bell Tower service in January, and in June there was a class reunion to which I was invited, and at that time I would be inducted into the class. So, I started to think of the Award of Excellence as the award that keeps on giving.

LK: That's significant to the class and to what your thought process is.

CE: So typically, an award is a wonderful honor and then you put it on a shelf, tell your children and grandchildren about it, dust it off annually or whatever and it becomes part of your history. This award is a living breathing involvement with a group that is singular in their devotion to this institution. I guess one of the most profound things about winning it is that you learn how to be a Clemson alum when you join this class. It is not anything they set out to teach you, you can't help yourself because that's how they are, they are so devoted, and I think it exists in a category apart from the typical alumni alma mater relationship. To be honest with you, I have an undergraduate degree from a small college in southern Indiana called Hanover College, and I have a graduate degree from Northwestern University. Hanover is my alma mater but, in many ways, my school is really Clemson University.

LK: In large part because of the award?

CE: That's right, that just kind of grows on you as you interact with the class and as you start to interact with the new award winners and bring them along and help them understand what's special about the class and basically become an alum.

LK: That's absolutely on point to what I'm thinking. Is that this particular award creates an obligation and a feeling that it just doesn't end there. They are trying to promulgate themselves beyond themselves and this is the key way that they do that.

CE: That's right.

LK: Are you involved with any other classes to the extent of the '39ers?

CE: I am not. No. I can't rule out the possibility that that might happen, but no I do not have anywhere near the involvement with any other classes.

LK: Do you consider the class of '39 special as compared to other classes?

CE: I do. I think there is something about that year in history that is very special. In September of 1939, World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland and it was a watershed year. I happened to be in the arts and it was a watershed year in entertainment because that was the year that "Gone With the Wind" premiered in December, and it was also the year that The Wizard of Oz came out, so it was a huge year in entertainment. For years I've been a fan of big band music and one of my most favorite recordings is of Bennie Goodman's Carnegie Hall concert. It was the first time big band jazz earned the legitimacy that Carnegie Hall represents among serious musicians and there is a recording of that concert I just love. So 1939 just strikes me as a special year. There are probably people who feel that way about other years, it's just for me and my interests, and my connections, it's a special year.

LK: If they are special, what is it that you think separates them?

CE: Class leadership separates them. They have had a continuity of leadership particularly in Jim Sweeny and Tee Senn that separates them. And because of their longevity, their nearness geographically to Clemson and their commitment to the Faculty Senate, in particular. I think Tee was instrumental in the early years of the senate. I think he served as a senator and was involved when the senate was founded and really believes in the role of the senate as the faculty voice. So those two men, I think, created a kind of irresistible momentum for their class. And a lot of it is just 185 hosting. Tee hosted the reunions at his home for dozens of years. So I think when you have a couple of class members who are that devoted to their classmates and getting together with them and keeping in touch with them that created a momentum for that class. I do not know honestly of another class that has had that kind of nurture that they provide. They would not want to hear that. They are very self-effacing men so they would say "no, that's not something we think."

LK: Jim in a more of a quiet way and Tee in a more up-front way are right up front about how great the class is.

CE: But I don't know how much credit they would want personally for

LK: I think they will both tell you they do not need any credit.

CE: But I think they are a huge factor in why that class is unique and special.

LK: That's exactly what I think. In my conversation with Dr. Reel, we tied in that they came from a war class. Coming back from war may have created some kind of a bond, but to me those two people plus Dr. Cox and longevity, it's what you said, that cohesiveness of 75 years. Do you feel any responsibilities to the class?

CE: Oh, yes. I Don't know how to be a member of something and not shoulder responsibility. I mean I think that's just a If you're going to join then you better be willing to share your talents, your work, and your abilities. So yes, I do feel a responsibility to them, and also, I think as an administrator, which is the last half of my career has been as a higher education administrator, responsibility isn't frightening, a nuisance or a burden. It's a certain way of life, it's what you do. So it's not hard for me to say at a meeting, I'll do that. So I have said that a lot. But you know it's mostly helping those guys out. As they have gotten older, I have basically wanted to make sure that all of the functions they perform relative to planning class reunions were transitioned to the honorary members, so that, as they got older, they didn't have to work as hard to make things happen.

LK: And again, I think that is exactly in the game plan and that goes back to thinkers like Jim and Tee, how do we make ourselves be seen as different and better. And there is nothing wrong with that. They are very bold about that.

CE: The Clemson motto lately is "Determined Spirit" and those guys are great embodiments of that motto. They are competitive with each other too.

LK: And I look through the papers of Dr. Cox and see all the letters that Jim had to write to coordinate the various classes to get things done. I would not have the patience to do that. Retired or not, at some point I would have thrown my hands up and said, "Here, you do your own gardens." You are also someone concerned with history and memory. Do you think the class is more concerned with memory than other classes?

CE: No, I don't think so; I think every class savors their community and their past. But I think the class of '39, I can't tell you this with authority because I haven't studied it, but every class at their 50th anniversary adopts a class project. I think that's a Clemson tradition. Typically it is a project to benefit the university. In fact, I think it's always a project to benefit the university. But I think the class of '39 had a spirit of giving back to the university previous to their 50th anniversary. The 50th anniversary awakens the class, first of all to its mortality, and also their debt to their alma mater, and so I think sometimes those 50th anniversaries are transformational for classes. They make people who weren't aware much more aware of the needs of the university, what they can do to help and that kind of thing.

LK: One of the things I tie into this is the fortuitousness of the class's 50th anniversary and the university's 100th anniversary gave them a real special piece to work with. And then they went that extra step of saying not only do we want to do something for the university, but we want it to be ongoing and giving. And that's where I think the Award of Excellence becomes so singular in what it does.

CE: That's right. If you look at most of the class projects, they are brick and mortar, and this class has three projects. They have scholarships, many of which predate their 50 reunion. And then they've got the garden and all of the related new construction there and then the Award for Excellence. In all three of those instances, they have created an enduring program, not an award, but a program of help to the university.

LK: What do you think they want as a legacy?

CE: You know, I think that class knew how to have fun. They were such great comrades, having been soldiers together. They loved each other's wives and families, they were all male and nearly all of them were married, that family of cadets grew to a big extended family. And when you talk to the living class members about the wives and widows of the class, they are really reverential about them and think about them as part of their legacy. So, in that sense and they brag that because of the award of excellence their class is growing. So I think they have been very shrewd about perpetuating their class.

LK: That's exactly how I see it. Why do you think the class is held in such high regard by the university? Because of the awards?

CE: I think the awards are kind of secondary to the universities regard for the class. I think this university has learned, especially in the last two decades, how profoundly powerful the military heritage of Clemson was as a part of this country. And, even though there are aspects of all- male, all military, all white that you do not necessarily parade as good, it was in another era. The military service in World War II makes it a class of heroes. Every single member served and many died and that can be said of other classes of the war era. With the scroll of honor, the university is memorializing that contribution to our country more and more and more. I think that is a great source of respect for this class.

LK: Do you think the class has a culture?

CE: Oh, sure it does, and I'll say that an assumption of the class is that Clemson is a great wonderful unique university that is central to the class. I think any member of the class shares that idea, that Clemson is uniquely special as a university. And then the other part of the culture is the camaraderie and I'm going to say fun again. I think Tee Senn made sure when that class got together, they had fun.

LK: Do you think it was, "let's go get ourselves a caboose?" That's how I read that. Now you can make it a symbol and say that railroads were driving the economics of the time. But it was also, what if we had a damn caboose?

CE: If I were to describe Tee, I would say fun loving was one of his qualities. He loves to kid and tease, and he loves to surround himself with people who are good humored and active and interesting. It's infectious, and that's leadership.

LK: What do you think is going to happen when they are all gone?

CE: I think it is highly possible that when we get down to the final handful of members, less than ten members, that there is no assurance that that will include Tee Senn and Jim Sweeny. I think the passing of the original members of the class is going to turn a page in class history that's really going to ramp up the responsibilities and involvement of the honorary members. And I think that is dawning on the honorary members. The inevitability of that is sinking in. I can't tell you right now what the character of the class will be in the hands of honorary members, except that I think everybody is thinking about that. Everybody is preparing for that. One aspect of it is that the award-winning members, we have honorary members apart from award winning members, is that they are all career academics, they are all teachers. So they are likely to be more modest of means than the original '39ers who went into business and had the giving capacity to build endowments, and so on. I think the mark of the class into the future is less likely to be monetary and more likely to be other kinds of support for Clemson. I don't know what to tell you other than that.

LK: I had not gotten to that place, that's good.

CE: I don't mean to say there won't be any investment in Clemson from the class, but I think it will be different; it will be a different kind of service.

LK: In your view there will continue to be reunions and there will continue to be a functioning class of '39.

CE: Yes, and we have ensured that by making a tontine by purchasing a bottle of wine to be opened and shared at the 100th anniversary of the class in 2039.

LK: And by "we" you mean the honorary members, both the award winners and the contributory members.

CE: And because the class has an annual winner and because there is an annual celebration of that winner, the class has a reason to gather. And also, because they have made such a point of staying in touch with the families of deceased members, I believe they want to create an ongoing interest in those families to support Clemson, and I think it will be the honoraries responsibility to keep engaged with those families.

LK: Even sons and daughters of '39rs are my age. It will need to be grandchildren.

CE: These will be the grandchildren of '39ers coming to attend Clemson. (General conversation not related to the interview)

CE: There are rituals with that memorial service that they repeat every year. They read a Tennyson poem, and they read a prayer of remembrance and they play TAPS. So the

ritual elements of the memorial service are a part of the culture and passing on the wisdom of the class. I reread those when I am getting ready to invite people to participate in the memorial service. Each year that I read them, like good poetry, they really resonate. The shape of that ceremony and the simplicity of it and the dignity of it are very impressive.

LK: Can you think of some things you would want to be sure got into a thesis about the '39ers?

CE: You are very fortunate to have Jim and Tee as a resource. No matter how hard they work to document and retain and tell the story, and they are working hard to do that, it's very important to them. When they pass on, there goes a lot of information that will never come out. So you are capturing information that otherwise would not necessarily You are performing a curatorial function that is very important because you can't make anything meaningful out of a blitz of information. You have got to curate information and make decisions about what to push forward and what to let go. I have come to admire curators so enormously because they are the way we understand the past. Historians are kind of curators, so the role you are playing, even though you may be restating things that are elsewhere, your point of view and your curatorial decisions are going to make a document that is very valuable.