
Clinton Warne

President - 1973-74

Interview with Clinton Warne (Norman Silber)
By telephone to Cleveland, Ohio
April 17, 1984

Prof. Silber: This is an interview with Clinton Warne taking place by telephone to his home in Cleveland. The date is April 17, 1984. The interviewer is Norman Silber.

The first thing I'd like to ask, Dr. Warne, is how you became involved, first with the consumer movement and then with ACCI.

Dr. Warne: That's fairly easy. Dad (Colston Warne), was deeply involved with the consumer movement throughout his life. At home, I had the influence and contact with a number of the consumer leaders in my growing up period.

The real decision was after World War II when I returned from Army service in the South Pacific. I decided during my years of military service to become a social activist—a goal not very clearly defined—but consumerism was one possible aspect of it. I graduated from the University of Colorado.

In the Fall of 1947, I moved to Clark University to study for a Master's degree with Dr. Hall. I did a Master's thesis on the Fabian Movement of Great Britain and found that I was not totally in sympathy with all of its aspects. In the next few years, one aspect of my Ph.D. program with Dr. Latta at the University of Nebraska was a study of institutional movements, and the consumer movement became one of the institutions we examined.

NS: Did you get involved with any of the grass roots consumer causes?

CW: I was deeply involved with the Lincoln, Nebraska co-op and actually worked at the service station and in the small store that was developed. I spent an awful lot of time at the co-op.

NS: What was the co-op movement like in those days?

CW: Small, fumbling and trying. Basically it was a university faculty oriented co-op movement with gasoline as its real prime product and a small grocery store which, I think, failed fairly quickly for the lack of effective administration in the store section. The gas station stayed going for a period of time.

NS: Was your father a real influence in getting you involved in the co-ops?

CW: I don't think he was directly influential. I left Nebraska after I got my doctorate and went to Kansas University as an instructor in economics. Again, I became involved in the co-op movement, but it was strictly as a consumer, and I had some investment money in it.

NS: Back then, what was your father up to?

CW: I guess the best answer is that we had little contact. I was on the GI Bill so that actually I was on my own.

NS: Do you attribute any of your involvement with the Fabian topic with an interest in consumer socialism?

CW: No. I was studying with Dr. Hall. When I was looking for a topic for a Master's thesis, I found him to be sympathetic to the idea of studying the Impact of the Fabian thought but I personally had not yet found a specific direction or orientation.

NS: It's interesting that you were teaching these subjects in Nebraska in the 1950s. Was the

consumer movement considered a mainstream sort of movement back in the '50s?

CW: No, but there was a mainstream movement. It was the co-op movement. The farm co-ops dominated the Nebraska and Kansas agricultural area. I was a participant in those co-op movements which, as a young single individual, directly appealed to my sense of economics as well as personal social orientation.

NS: When did you first learn about ACCI?

CW: I was invited to the third meeting of ACCI when it was in St. Louis.

NS: What was your impression of it?

CW: I'm going to be very specific from my point of view. I was a general "go-and-get" person for my father. I was the one that got this, or did that or went to the airport for so and so. I set up the movie projector and . .

NS: Then you were in a good position to see actually what was going on.

CW: I got to know the internal interlockings, but I was not part of the actual control. I was what would be called an assistant to help make the meeting successful.

NS: Who would you say were the dominant personalities of those early years?

CW: I suspect Dad, Troelstrup, Metzen, Bivens, Price, Heimerl, Lee and Gordon. Those were the real dominating leaders.

NS: Did you think of ACCI in the beginning as an academic organization, mainly professors and academicians?

CW: Personally, yes, from the way it was organized. The recruiting did not include much grass roots participation in those early meetings. I think it was pretty well understood early on that ACCI was to be an organization of college teachers. There was a certain amount of discussion over whether it was going to be business school- or home economics-oriented, but the direction was pretty well spelled out in those early days in terms of academicians.

NS: When do you think at any point that you could say, "That was the most exciting time for me to be part of ACCI?"

CW: I think that there were two peaks from my personal point of view. First, I was invited in the early 1950s as a young brand new instructor at the University of Kansas, to write a pamphlet on "Deceptive Packaging." I spent a year putting together this "Deceptive Packaging" pamphlet as an early one in the series published by ACCI. It had enough appeal so that it attracted administration attention at the University of Kansas where I was teaching.

NS: What kind of feedback did you get about that pamphlet?

CW: Basically, very satisfactory. It was, on the whole, accepted academically as a well-prepared job.

NS: Did you work with people on that, or was it strictly a solitary effort?

CW: I did it strictly by myself.

NS: Did you think of it as directed at other consumer professionals or at students?

CW: It was aimed at professionals. It was the beginning of a fight over the problem of deceptive packaging which ended up with major national policy change.

NS: Did it lead you to start getting involved in the legislative consumer movement?

CW: Yes. After that pamphlet, or while I was writing on the pamphlet, I suddenly realized that there were some issues there that were not being settled very satisfactorily and had to be looked into.

NS: What did you do from that point?

CW: I moved to Ohio State and became deeply involved in the Ohio consumer movement, thanks to Jean Bowers, Carole Vickers and several others.

I was a last second fill-in for program chairman in 1968. Something blew up the 1967 meeting. Somebody who had been chosen as program chairman suddenly couldn't do it and I spent the latter part of 1966 putting together the Penn State meeting - making the contacts for speakers and generally putting the whole thing together. I was trying to balance the need for a college orientation with the needs of a certain number of high school teachers and those of the consumer affairs types that were beginning to develop in the various public areas. The highlight was the contact with Virginia Knauer who was then forming a Pennsylvania governor's group. She became the key speaker in that meeting.

NS: Was the political movement making its impact on ACCI then?

CW: No, not that I knew of. The crusading, lobbying pattern has never been heavily a part of ACCI. ACCI has been more research oriented.

NS: Do you think that ACCI has had a big impact on the consumer movement?

CW: I think so, yes.

NS: When did you become president?

CW: It was 1973.

NS: Do you think that the increasing numbers of consumer professionals hired by business was a response to the consumer movement?

CW: Very definitely, very clearly. Major companies were hiring, and in some cases, giving these persons positions with authority to do fairly worthwhile things to meet the generally felt and expressed need for better consumer relations. Those individuals, in turn, really seriously needed ACCI to promote concepts, to back up what they were doing, and to give themselves a sense of self-worth. Many of them had been students of such schools as Ohio State.

NS: If you were president in '73, you would have been vice president in '72, and you would have been on the board for a little bit before that; is that right?

CW: Yes, I think three years on the board.

NS: You are an economist. How were consumer economists and people who were doing the kind of consumer research that people in ACCI did; how were they regarded in the economic profession generally?

CW: It's been a long, hard, difficult struggle to establish professional credentials. Throughout this period, it is clear that economics was moving toward mathematical models, going to models

which assume that consumer behavior is totally rational and totally static. I was a mathematician as an undergraduate, but many of the model builders don't like consumer research because the product of this research does not agree with their model assumptions.

NS: Do you think this is a common problem with a large majority of consumer educators?

CW: Very definitely. You are not fish or fowl; you're sort of caught in between, and whether you're home economics, marketing, economics, few consumer professionals are fully inside of any of the standard disciplines.

NS: Do you think the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* made any difference?

CW: From my personal point of view, the answer is yes. While I was president, I pushed very hard on the *Journal*, because basically, you can't argue that a field of research should be jettisoned where there is a refereed journal in the field. I feel very strongly that the consumer movement is a professional movement in its own right.

NS: Let me ask you sort of a broad question. That is, what sorts of things do you think ACCI could have done or still can do, that would increase its appeal?

CW: This is number one. We should have had a specific field set aside as consumer economics and researched as a field. We never solved the problem of whether we were oriented toward a marketing department or whether a home economics department or whether an economics department. At no point did we ever fully settle down on whether we were a fish or fowl, and we kept the Missouri headquarters crew constantly in a problem all the way through on programs.

What were the principles that we really were trying to get to? At the time, it was never fully spelled out. We did a whole gang of individual studies of this, that or the other, but as you look through the *Journal*, it's all taking a whack at this little issue or that little issue.

NS: Nobody described the forest?

CW: That's right. One described "a leaf in the forest"—some aspect of home economics or some aspect of marketing, or an aspect of economics—but nowhere was a whole pattern developed. The parameters of the field have never actually been locked in. There is no specific subject in each field called consumer discipline.

NS: That certainly is an interesting criticism. Do you think that the opportunity is gone, or is it still there?

CW: I don't think it's totally gone. Meredith Fernstrom of the American Express, did a top-level study on the consumer movement. It's called, "Consumerism: Implications for Financial Service Providers." She's picking out the fact that the consumer movement has had three big waves. ACCI effectively, she feels, represents much of that second wave that reached its zenith with the loss of the Federal Consumer Agency.

NS: Let me ask, as a way of closing, what do you think of as what ACCI has done for you , personally?

CW: It helped me keep the faith at a time when I was personally struggling. It's been in the background, a supporting organization with a journal that permitted me to have a feeling that some aspect of social issues were being researched in a very competent way.