

William R. Dickson Oral History Project
Interviewer: Susan Crowley
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Building Numbering and Physical Plant Strike

Today is Wednesday, April 6, and the topics for discussion are the MIT building numbering system and the Physical Plant strike in the 1974 timeframe. Go ahead Bill.

WD: Well, as far as building numbering, it's probably confusing to someone who looks at it -- right? -- and knows nothing about it, or there may be some people that know quite a bit about it. But it's actually quite methodical. I should say that the numbering system that's in place now is actually the third version of the numbering system.

SC: Is that right?

WD: The original being, of course, when the Institute was built in Cambridge in 1916, and it made a lot of sense at the time, but as buildings started to be added in other locations other than right in the main group it sort of got helter-skelter, and in the '60s it became intolerable because of all of the new structures without having a real plan of how they were going to be numbered. Now, having said that, let's go back and get a couple of basic points that will determine how the buildings are now numbered. First of all, we should recognize that if you're parallel to the seawall on Memorial Drive, as it's called -- that seawall runs east and west. In MIT language it's truly not east and west, it's some degrees off of east and west, but it was considered to run east and west, and so obviously, anything that ran perpendicular to the seawall would be north and south, and as a matter of fact, MIT north is about 17 degrees off of true north. So keeping that in mind, if you stood on Memorial Drive or at the seawall on the axis of Building 10 dome and looked at the dome, then you would be looking -- or your eyesight would be north and south in the MIT vernacular, and everything to the left of that line would be odd numbers, and everything to the right of that line would be even numbers. And that sort of was the original scheme, and it's still the basic mechanism of the current scheme between Memorial Drive, Massachusetts Avenue, the railroad, and Ames Street. So when you look at some of the new buildings that

have been built, just to give you an idea of how that works, Building 9, which was built in the '60s was to the left of that line, and that's why it's an odd number -- 9. Or if you look at the electrical engineering building, it's Buildings 36 and 38 because they lie to the right of that line. And I don't even know the number of the Stata building, but I'm sure it's even.

SC: Yes. I think it's 32.

WD: So that's the basic premise, and it's within that boundary that they outlined above; that's the way buildings are laid out, or numbered. Now there's a couple of odd ones because they were numbered previously, and they're not odd from the standpoint of being to the right or left of this imaginary north/south line, but they're numbered differently than they would be today. And one of those is Walker. I think Walker is Building 50, and it would not be that today -- if Walker was built anew, it would be in a lower number zone and so it would be some other lower number than 50. And I think the same can be said of 16 and 56 and the Green Building -- 54. They were done with some thought, but before the current grid was laid out. Now with all that in mind, and I said this was sort of third system -- originally, the main group -- what's Building 2, for instance? You know, it sort of has three wings. They were 2, 4, and 6.

SC: Oh, no kidding?

WD: And the same over in Building 1; 1 was 1, 3, and 5. And I once worked with a fellow that when he was trying to describe to you what might have been a flood or some other event the night before, he would say, for instance, and I remember this vividly, "Oh, it was in Building 2, Section 6." And that to him would describe not only the building, but the wing of the building. Someone that wasn't familiar with that would have just said it was in Building 2, room such and such, and you'd have to figure out by a plan where room such and such was. As it became evident that MIT was going to expand significantly, both east and west and north, Don Whiston decided to make up a grid of how you would number buildings in the future, and his grid was two-dimensional. In other words, it ran north and south, and not purely east and west because I think it paralleled the railroad tracks, so that was -- they don't run east and west in the MIT grid. They're slightly off of that. And anything to the west of Massachusetts Avenue and to the south of the railroad, would be given the prefix W,

and anything to the east of Ames Street, and to the south of the railroad -- or I guess in this case to the south of Main Street, since the railroad takes quite a curve at that point -- would be E suffix -- or prefix, whichever is the right word. And so he also drew grids in the other direction, and so if you looked at a grid, you could tell whether it was the single number grid, or the teen grid, or the twenties grid, or the thirties grid. And that's where you see the numbering developed particularly in the west campus. Most of the dormitories are in the single number grid, and you have W1 and 5 and 6 and 7, etc. And when you get to the -- Westgate, I think it's in another grid, so it doesn't -- it's not a teen, and so on. When you get across Vassar Street, you get buildings like Simmons Hall, which again, I don't know the number, but it's certainly a W higher number in the grid.

SC: Yes. I don't know [about any].

WD: Now, the same thing happened in the east, and there, of course, we either built or purchased a lot of buildings, and we have the grids -- I think the Medical Building is in the twenties.

SC: Yes. Isn't that E25, maybe? E23?

WD: Yes. E23, and then Whitaker College is 25. We've got E40 for the Webster Building, and E1 for the president's house.

SC: Yes. I was going to say the president's house.

WD: And E52 was out of place because that was numbered Building 52 before this grid work got put in place. And rather than go through all the problems of changing the building numbers and stuff, it was just left as E52, even though in theory it should be in the single number E's. The best way to determine this is to actually look at the grid, which used to be the custodians were OFMS [Office of Facility Management Systems] and they eventually became responsible for numbering new buildings, and both building-wise and room-wise they would suggest a system, and it would be criticized or agreed to by the Plant and Planning Office and maybe the Safety Office before it became set in stone. I suspect that grid now belongs, or is in, the Plant.

SC: It is.

WD: And I think it would be good if that grid was photocopied and published with this section, so that people could see more of what we're talking about. Let me just finish

up by saying that if you go across the railroad, you then get into NW's, if you're to the west of Mass. Ave., like the Magnet Lab and the reactor. I think the reactor is NW12, and the Magnet Lab -- or what used to be the Ward Building is NW --

SC: 15?

WD: -- 12, 13, and 14, and I think the generator housing was NW15. And the Plasma Fusion Center is NW something else, etc. The only change I know of, and it might have been in the original grid, but I don't think so. When I mean original, if the grid Don Whiston did was when you get further to the west at some point, then you get into WW's.

SC: Right.

WD: And I think we have one of those -- WW15, I believe -- is where the mailroom is.

SC: Right.

WD: And the Furniture Exchange.

SC: Yes. That's still the case, I believe. And I believe it is probably the only one.

WD: On the side, we get the NE's, when you're across the railroad, and to the right of Massachusetts Avenue, and I think the plant is -- what? -- in a rented building that for number's sake is called NE what?

SC: NE49.

WD: Right. So its MIT number is NE49, even though it's real number is --

SC: 600 Tech Square.

WD: Yes. That's probably its street number.

SC: Right. Yes, 600 Tech Square.

WD: Now I think a study of the grid will show in more graphic detail exactly what I just said, and as I'm talking I'm thinking. Sue, what is the number of EPSCO? Are they N51 and N52, where the Museum is?

SC: Where the Museum is? Yes. N52 is the Museum, and N51 is right next door?

WD: Right.

SC: Yes.

WD: Now that violates what I just said because those are both north of the railroad tracks. No. It doesn't violate it. They're not to Main Street because Main Street runs diagonally up into Kendall Square -- ah, Central Square -- so that's it. It falls within

the grid, so that, again, I urge that the grid be published as part of this section. As far as room numbers, most MIT buildings are just double-loaded corridors with rooms on each side, and a starting point has to be picked for the lower numbers, but the odd numbers run on one side of the corridor and the even numbers run on the other side, so that -- I believe that's right. And they start at 1, or what's very close to 1, and go to 100, or as far as you have to go to get all of the building rooms involved. Where a bay is divided up, like into a couple rooms, since the numbering system is based mainly on bays, which you know a bay is the space between columns.

SC: Yes.

WD: There may be A's, B's, and C's. And those are often found, particularly in the larger bays in the main group since the corridors are off-center and one side is wider than the other side; the office side being mainly the narrow side and the laboratory side, generally, on the wider side. We had to make an exception to that rule, perhaps more than once, but I used to number the buildings.

SC: Oh, really?

WD: And we ran into trouble when we got a two-corridor building, so we had four sets of rooms; one set on the outer side of the building on two sides, and one or two sets in the inner space between the corridors. This was Building 13, and so we had to go to four numbers in order to accomplish the same kind of system. And I remember spending a long time on numbering that building, and I don't even recall how it finally came out, although I do know that it has four sets of numbers per room. I'd have to look at a plan to see how I did that, but that was an exception, and I don't know whether there have been other exceptions or not, but that's the one I remember. Do you have any questions, Sue?

SC: No. I don't. I think -- I didn't realize that's how it was done, but I don't have any questions.

WD: When I think about odd numbers and even numbers in the building rooms -- does that sound right? Think of 4-110. Let's see? Not 4-110. We used to be -- I used to be down in Building 4, in Phil Stoddard's old office.

SC: Yes. And that was 4-110.

WD: Was it?

SC: Yes. Because 4-113 was Winnie's office across the hall.

WD: Okay. So that tends to --

SC: Yes.

WD: -- and our office 7-02?

SC: 7-206.

WD: 7-206? What was the one across the hall?

SC: You mean where Betty Whittaker was?

WD: Yes.

SC: Was that 7-203?

WD: So it seems to hold.

SC: Right. The only thing is, though -- now, here's a question, but it's a different building. 10-200 was on the same side of the building -- I mean, the same side of the corridor as 7-203, but it's a different building, right?

WD: Different building. Right.

SC: And then that's -- remember Steve? He was in 7-20 -- was he 7-20 -- I mean, I'm sorry 10 -- 10-206?

WD: Maybe. But Building 10 was a separate building.

WD: All right. Now, maybe we can talk a little bit about the strike.

SC: Okay.

WD: The strike I am speaking on was a strike of Local 254 of the Building Service Employees Union -- a union, I'm happy to say, that I'm an honorary member of.

SC: You are? Good for you.

WD: To my knowledge, certainly from the 1950s on, this strike I'm going to speak of was the only time that the Building Service employees struck. I believe it was in 1974, but I urge that that number be checked because I'm not absolutely positive. A lot of things happened around that time, and I'm not sure whether that was the year or not.

SC: There aren't that many other unions at MIT, are there?

WD: No. The Independent Union was the biggest, and it was quite large because it not only employed lab workers and stuff from MIT, but also the Draper Lab -- remembering that the Draper Lab was once just a part of MIT. So that was a very large union.

SC: Yes.

WD: And they struck in my recollection, at least two or three times in this period of time.

SC: Wow.

WD: But I'm not going to speak of them because I don't know much about them.

SC: Yes. And is Food Service Workers Union different from --

WD: Food service workers have a separate union.

SC: Uh huh. Okay.

WD: And I don't know whether that's still the case, or not. But the housing employees, I think, were a part of an AF of L union -- the non-food service employees.

SC: Yes. Okay.

WD: So this strike took place, as was the usual custom. They always had a vote affirming when an offer was a so-called final offer, and to my knowledge they always turned it down, figuring that if they went back and turned it down that there'd be a little bit more there. And I must say to their [agreement] -- or that's the wrong word -- to their benefit, they were generally right, and the change wasn't always money, but it was generally something like another half-day of funeral leave or something. And so then they would vote again. The vote would be called for by the business agent, who was Edward Sullivan, and every other time they accepted the offer. This time they voted no the second time. I don't know what the change was, or whether there wasn't any, but Edward Sullivan, who was quite a well-known business agent in the AF of L circles, said to them, you know, this is it. That's all there is, so that if you don't accept it, there's no other alternative but to strike. I don't know whether they listened or didn't listen, but once again they voted to reject it.

SC: Wow.

WD: And he -- he took them out right away. He said I told you that was it; now we're going on strike, and I think they were quite surprised, frankly, and the next day they were on strike.

SC: Wow.

WD: And this was all the custodians and all of the tradesmen, and I believe all of the so-called handymen at the time, etc., in the dormitory system.

SC: Wow. And mail services?

WD: Mail service, too.

SC: Wow.

WD: And so, obviously, the Institute needed to keep running, and we had to make some arrangements, which I'm sure we had thought of -- some of them -- beforehand in the event that there was a strike. But now reality set in, and we had to put them into place. Perhaps the most vital thing was to make sure the power plant, which was what it was called at the time -- it was basically a steam plant -- kept operating, so that there'd be heat, and steam for the laboratories.

SC: Now do you remember, was this is the springtime? What time of year it was?

WD: No. It would be in the fall. The contracts expired in July, and then we usually negotiated half-heartedly during the summer. And then more vigorously upon the approach of school, so that I'm sure this was in the fall. What we did at the steam plant -- power plant, whatever you want to call it -- the first -- the chief engineer, who was a first-class engineer -- licensed first-class engineer -- was a former submariner, so he was used to living in confined spaces for long periods of time, and it didn't faze him in the least. He showed up the next day with all of his clothes --

SC: No! Really?

WD: -- and everything else, and he stayed at the plant -- if I remember, the strike was nearly a month.

SC: It was that long?

WD: And he stayed there the entire time.

SC: I didn't know it was that long.

WD: Oh, yes. This was a full-fledged strike.

SC: Yes.

WD: And once again, I think it was settled by adding a piece of a day for funeral leave, which showed that the whole thing was sort of -- never had to take place.

SC: Right.

WD: In any case, we had -- he became the head honcho at the power plant. And we had to use staff members to work with him to do the necessary things to keep the plant operating. He did have an assistant chief engineer, George Reed, and so he was still there because he was not a union employee. But I don't know who all we put over

there, but we probably put a few people, or more than a few because they had to work three shifts too. And one of the ones we put over there was Dick McKay, who was Jim [Gibney's] boss, except for this month, Gibney became his boss.

SC: Oh, my God. [Laughter.]

WD: And he loved it. He loved every minute of it! And he and McKay got along well anyway, so McKay could take the ribbing that he got for having to work for George Gibney. As far as the trades, we took the foreman and assistant foreman, and in the case of the electric shop, I think we had a couple of assistants, and we ran them on shifts, and they had to go out and clear problems -- either that or hire somebody -- not -- you know, contractors, not people to break the strike, but contractors that had worked on the campus to take care of problems, and we did that in the heat and vent and the plumbing shop and the carpenter shop and the paint shop and the metal shop, etc. Now some of those you could take a strike or an outage without being really serious. For instance, the carpenter shop didn't have to build shelves for anybody or repair minor things. That could wait, but if a door blew off its hinges, or something else, it had to be fixed.

SC: Right.

WD: So that those were the serious situations in the paint shop and the carpenter shop and the metal shop. And we had coverage enough to take care of the serious situations, and in fact many people said, why do you need the shops? You did pretty good while all those guys weren't working. The area where you'd think you'd have the most trouble was in heat and vent, and plumbing. And I'm sure we had our share of problems, but they were all taken care of by the supervisory force. And nothing -- and I mean nothing -- major broke for the whole month. We usually had one what I would call severe outage every week or so, particularly in the HVAC systems -- a steam valve, or something else. Nothing broke, so that we were able with some trepidation to take care of our responsibilities in the mechanical trades, as well. We had just started -- or recently started -- the Work Control Center. It wasn't called that then, and we manned that, of course. I remember George Petievich was one of the people. I spent most of my time when I was on the campus in the Work Control Center, and we tried to coordinate all activities through there, so that the two places

where we had maybe the most trouble was in mail and rubbish removal. Again, if a place gets dirty enough, the people that live there can clean it for a short period of time, so we didn't do much cleaning. We had quite a few supervisors and we would have people bag their own trash, either every day or when they got around to it, and put it in designated spots in the corridor system, and then at night we would run the train system through the corridors and the supervisors would pick up trash and dispose of it in the dumpster. The dumpsters, of course, were hauled by outside people. So that the mail became the big problem or one of the bigger problems. And I think most people went to the mailroom in Building 24, where we had supervisors sorting mail, and they would pick it up and take it back, not office by office, back then probably department by department, and distribute it. So this was their first experience in working the mail system, and to my knowledge, it worked out fine. I don't remember any great problems arising from this.

[End of interview]