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Lebanon Valley College Archives—Vernon and Doris Bishop Library

Oral History of

Harry Speece

Athletic Support Staff

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Interviewed by Art Ford

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Mr. Harry Speece, Athletic Support Staff—Over the years, Speece has become an institution at The Valley with his endless support of the athletic teams and his meticulous research and record keeping of each team. He is the encyclopedia of LVC athletics. When asked what he does in the Arnold Sports Center, his reply is, “Whatever they ask me to do.”

A: I'm here with Harry Speece, who works over at the Sports Center. It is now—I think it's the 20th, isn't it today?

H: Yes.

A: 20th of February, 2014, and we're in the Frock Room, up in the second floor of the College library. We're going to be talking about some of Harry's experiences here, some memories of the place, and that sort of thing. Let me begin, Harry, with a little background on yourself.

Where were you born, where'd you go to school?

H: I was born in Lebanon and went to public schools in Lebanon—well, Lebanon High School grad, 1955. Bernie Buzgon was in my class, Lloyd Smith, guys you know. Worked for a year after high school and then enlisted in the Air Force.

A: Going back to high school, were you involved in athletics in high school?

H: For a while, I was on the cross country team. The football coach thought I would get killed playing football because I weighed about 130 pounds then, so I pretty much stuck to track and to cross country. I played a lot of the other sports—I was a member of the—our intramural champion as a senior at Lebanon High, but not quite good enough to get on the varsity, so—

A: Athletics has been a part of your life ever since then?

H: Always.

A: Why is that, from high school, what was it since you were involved in—most of the athletic teams at a high level, you still develop this sense of athletic superiority or something?

H: I'm not sure, except that I lived in a neighborhood growing up where there were a lot of kids and we were always playing basketball or baseball or something. My dad was a huge, lifelong baseball fan—he played football at Palmyra High School, and it kind of—his love of baseball

transferred to me, and I think I—from there it just kind of grew, you know, first with baseball, then the Red Sox, and everybody else. You know, one of the things—when I go to baseball, our baseball games here—I find that a lot of those kids don't really understand scoring plays, and I often joke that my dad wouldn't have let me out of the house if I didn't know the answer to some his questions. So, I just fell in love with baseball first, but all of the other sports followed up too.

A: You say you went into the Air Force?

H: I went into the Air Force.

A: Was that for four years?

H: Yep. Actually extended it a little bit—it was about four and half, you know, because I wanted to finish a tour I was on in Hawaii, which is where I was married, and then where my oldest son was born, in Honolulu.

A: So did you marry someone while you were in the Force?

H: I—yes, I—this was a lady I was dating before I left home and once she finished school, with permission of her parents, she flew over to Hawaii and we were married there on a little base—the little Air Force base up in the mountains.

A: Where else were you stationed?

H: I was at—there was two places in Texas, Lackland Air Force Base and Kelly. Then for a while I was in Wyoming at Warren Air Force Base there—that was cold (laughs). And I was at—before I went to Hawaii and after I came back, I spent some time at Travis Air Force Base, which is the San Francisco-Oakland area. But most of my—three-quarters of my—or almost three-quarters of time was spend at Hickam Field in Hawaii and—a great place.

A: OK, when you came back then what did you do, out of the Air Force?

H: Well, I had been—my job in the Air Force was radio communications—you know, facsimile and stuff like that, and I wasn't gonna get anything like that around Lebanon unless I wanted to go someplace else—and I didn't want to be that far away from Lebanon and Lebanon Valley sports. And I took a job at the Lebanon Valley National Bank, it was at 9th and Cumberland Streets in Lebanon at the time. I was there for 12 years, then became an office manager at Kingsley & Brown here in Annville, right down the street it used to be—and, let's see, from there I went to Lebanon Valley News Company in Lebanon. He was looking for somebody to run the shop there—and he and I did not have a great relationship, I walked away from that at one point in time, and wound up as an office manager out at—actually purchasing manager eventually—out at Farmer's Pride, Senator Manbeck hired me and I spent the last 23 or 24 years out there.

A: Now, at Lebanon Valley College you—I said you're working over at the Sports Center—what are you actually doing over there? What's your—

H: Whatever they ask me to do. I help with the student payroll, it's one of my main—I kind of control the cash in the safe, you know, teams need money for some of their traveling, and so I dole that out, and keep track of it day by day, and do the deposits from the sports events that we charge—ice hockey and football and basketball.

A: How long have you been doing that? How long have you been there?

H: Just over eight years now, since I retired, and I'm gonna do at least eight more because Rick [Beard] would have to throw me out of there to get rid of me.

A: So you're part time there?

H: Yes, yeah.

A: 20 hours a week or something?

H: Generally, I think my time card's like nine to 12, but I'm often there, you know, I don't put all that. Sometimes I spend a whole day there, other times I—

A: What got you first interested in Lebanon Valley College, the college athletics? Did you go to the dean, did you know him?

H: You know, that's a funny thing, my—the first basketball game at Lebanon wasn't at Lebanon Valley, it was old Lebanon High School, which is now Lebanon Middle School, and I had an aunt who was—she was a junior or senior in high school at the time—and she had a—kind of stuck on Floyd Becker, who was one of our early—you know—big basketball stars. She took me to a game against Lehigh University—that was in '46—and that was my first basketball game. Of course Floyd wound up at Lebanon Valley—and I've been going ever since, you know, I liked what I saw, and I kept going to them, and then I would start going out to Lebanon High Stadium for the football games, and just—I also had a—my dad's brother worked at Lebanon Valley, and knew [Lou] Sorrentino, Rinso [Marquette], and all the people, he was like a—I don't know I guess a locker room guy, you know. Yeah, and oddly enough, his name was Harry—I was named after him. So, he began to take me along to away football games and stuff, so that was my first experience with that.

A: What do you remember about those early teams back in the late '40, early '50s?

H: Who do I remember?

A: Yeah, what do you remember about them?

H: I have a pretty good memory of most of those since I saw most of them in those days.

A: Who were the best?

H: Well, we had Floyd Becker and Larry Kinsella, I remember. (Pause) Hank DiJohnson, that's the name I was trying think of—he was actually a football player and a basketball player—and a baseball player! He was a really great athlete and a nice guy—boy, a really nice guy. And I remember the Oxley brothers and a couple of others whose name I won't be able to think of while I want to—but yeah, they were good then. As we got to '48,'49,'50, [Ralph] Mease was a coach there for a while, and got pretty good teams. Murawski came along and—

A: Who was he?

H: Just—Al Murawski was a big kid from—came there during the semester break his first year, and came off the bench 'cause we had our starting team all set—but he was amazing, really. He was the first big guy I saw like that who could shoot the jump shots and go to the baskets, but also he would go out the back and shoot a two-handed set shot. He made one on one day right at the buzzer from half court, and I thought, 'my gosh!' And of course, the following year he went crazy and averaged about 26 or 27 points a game, so—and then after that dropped out of school—I don't know that story, if that was financial or—

A: Well he was a baseball player too, right?

H: He was a pitcher, and a pretty good one apparently, and I didn't get to see—at that point, in the '40s—in the late '40s, early '50s, I wasn't getting yet to the baseball games, you know. In fact, my first baseball games would have been while Howie [Landa] and Lou [Sorrentino] were here. Lou was my attraction there when I found out he was a three-sport guy—I had to find a way to get to the baseball games, and so—

A: But basketball—that would have in the early '50s, that's when they had those great teams.

H: That's correct.

A: What do you remember about those? Did you follow them away as well as home?

H: Yes. Those I went to—I went to a lot games. I drove to some, I got—I found rides to some, but yeah, I really fell in love with that team, because they were so good.

A: What was so good about them, what made them so good?

H: (Pause) There were a lot of things, but I think—first of all, the thing I think of is the togetherness—I mean—and people who saw those teams often remarked that they would go down the floor and score with four or five guys touching the ball and the ball never hitting the floor—and, you know, that was kind of amazing, but they were—because of my uncle's closeness there, I would often—wound up wondering around the locker room there after the game. So, then you kind of get a personal—and I liked them, all of them, you know—sometimes, even a team you coach you might not like all the kids on that team, but there were no bad guys on that team, these were guys that loved to play basketball.

A: The best one apparently was Howie Landa.

H: Absolutely. Ahead of his time.

A: In what way?

H: Well, he did things that—he could play today. He could be a star today, right now. He just truly believed that—sometimes I go back and forth, people ask me, 'who is the best?' and I say, 'well, Mike Rhoades,' then other times I think, nah, you gotta remember that time Howie did all that stuff—and he can do this today. So, but, you know—

A: Well they were playing what we would call Division I teams back then—

H: Absolutely.

A: They were all divided—they were big schools, small schools—but they played some of the best teams.

H: Absolutely. We played LaSalle, Temple—who's the other school—Villanova—Villanova, we played Villanova when they had [Bob] Schaeffer. We played Temple when they had Guy Rogers, and Howie—and beat them. You know, we—not always, but we beat them—I can recall a game at Lynch, where we trailed by 13 at half against Temple and won it in overtime. That's, you know, for a long time, I remembered that game (laughs)—when you're a young man, that sticks in your head.

A: You mentioned two players that were three sport players, and excelled at all three—Hank DiJohnson and Lou Sorrentino—

H: Lou Sorrentino.

A: Yeah—was one better than the other?

H: Yeah, Lou was the best, all-around athlete. I mean, he was—not to take anything away from Hank, but he had some limitations as a basketball player, partly because of his size and bulk an—but he was a top guy, he was really a top gun. But Lou was the best, you know, whatever sport he was into, he looked like that's where he belonged, you know, he was fluid, and just—well of course he eventually signed a couple of pro contracts. I'm sure you know that as well as I do.

A: In football and baseball?

H: Yes! Yes—

A: How about the coach, Rinso Marquette? What are your memories of him in those days?

H: Oh yeah, in those—he was more distant, not as a person, but from my perspective at that time—and it was only when we got into the—further into the '50s, that I realized that he was almost the same age as the guys he was coaching. You know, that never quite dawned on me. He was a good athlete too, but I didn't remember seeing that personally, so some of that I kind of soaked up later, and I never really got to know him personally until many years later, you know, he was—when I probably would have done that were the years that I was away in the Air Force. But then as I began to spend more and more time in the '60s and '70s up here at Lebanon Valley, then I got to know him a little bit, and then much better after I started doing some research up here. But he was a heck of a guy, I mean, he was—he cared about people and, you know, he stopped me at Giant in Cleona one day—this was after he was sick—and I think maybe he only—he died another three months or so later, don't—I'm not sure about the time frame there, but he was sick himself at the time, and I thought it was obvious when I talked to him. But he stopped me and congratulated me and thanked me for the stuff that I've done here, and I'm thinking, 'holy cow, this guy—who's done more than he has,' and always remembered that. I will always remember that—and he didn't know me from that, I mean, he had no reason to.

A: We'll come back to the work that you've done, compiling statistics and things like that in just a minute, but if we can stay and sort of—going through the years. After those great teams in the early '50s, when was the next time that Lebanon Valley really excelled in any sport?

H: Well, the early '60s football teams, you know, I wouldn't miss those with Les Holstein—and Vern Magnuson was my real favorite, that guy, I think he belongs in our hall of fame—and we aren't able to get any response from him—you know, he's living in Hawaii by the way, and I

tried calling him once, and I keep telling myself, 'Give it another shot,' you know, because this guy really—he was a heck of a football player, and a great track athlete too—he was a 100-yard dash guy—and the 220 and stuff. He was a good athlete.

A: Were you at the game when the football player passed out and died?

H: I was not. I was not at that game in person. In fact, it wasn't 'til the next day that I knew anything at all about that, and even then I don't—you know, I don't have an article or anything from the day after that game. And I don't even think at the time that I—that they had said he had passed away, but that he was seriously injured, and that was the first I knew about it and later on I found out that he died and—yeah, that's unbelievable.

A: So if we move on then to early '70s basketball—it was pretty good then too—do you remember anything about that?

H: Yes. Don Johnson was there.

A: Donny Johnson.

H: Donny Johnson and—I'm trying to think of this kid from—he had a brother at Albright, he was a good player too and that'll pop in my head when I'm not trying to think of it—

A: It's not Chris Linde, is it?

H: No, no.

A: (Unintelligible)

H: —(One other name?) and Eddie Ianneralla, they were part of that team—and then eventually along came Bill Ammons too—who, like Murawski, was here two years and then he left. So, I don't know if that was financial or not.

A: So you mentioned Mike Rhoades earlier—that takes us into the early '90s. What was special about that team? They're the ones that won the National Championship in Division III.

H: Yes. And that—

A: What made them so good?

H: Well, partly, the coach made them good—and made them believe in themselves, and, you know—

A: And that was Pat Flannery.

H: Yes, Pat Flan—and Flannery, you know, Flannery's first season here—'89-'90 or '90-'91—I'm a little vague on that year but—they went and won the ECAC Tournament, you know, and during that season they played Dickinson five times and Dickinson won the first four games, and each game got a little bit closer, and then we met them in the final ECAC and we beat them, and I think that was Pat, you know. I thought he brought out the best in guys—and, I mean, if you look at the hall of fame, we just put [Mark] Hofsass in there this last—and Mike's in there, and as of right now—Pat, of course, Flannery—but those are the only guys that are in the hall of fame from that team. And—I'm wrong, we added one this last time, we added the guard—shooting guard—and I'll think of that too in a minute but—

A: So you followed them very closely that year they won the championship?

H: I went to everything—

A: Did you go to Buffalo when?

H: I went to Buffalo, yep. I went there—

A: What do you remember about Buffalo?

H: It was cold and snowy (laughs) and I loved the gym, the facility was great and the hotel we were at—I was paired with somebody else that day on that trip and—they didn't show up. They never—I don't even remember who that was but—so I had a room to myself, rather than a double, which was kind of nice. Yeah, I remember talking for the championship game—I sat with some people that were NYU fans—and nice people—as fascinated as we all were with Mike Rhoades. So, a lot of enjoyment—and after the game just Pat running around and everybody was excited. I remember they took a side trip after the first day to Niagara Falls, and I declined to go because I had been there—my wife and I had been there a couple times—and I didn't really want to go in the winter (laughs). So, I stayed back. I walked down the street to a little mall that day, and of course—there was a lot of snow on the ground and stuff so everything was kind of messy, but overall just, you know, a wonderful time. It's the kind of thing where you wish you could spend a week watching something every day—actually thought the first game—I thought we played better the first game against Wittenberg than we did in the championship game against NYU. You know, we were down about 15 in that game and came back and won it in overtime too, so—

A: So was that one of the highlights of your experience with LVC athletics?

H: Yes, oh for sure—winning a national championship, sure, absolutely. I don't know that I was any more excited than when they beat Fordham at the Penn Palestra back in '53.

A: You weren't there, were you?

H: Yes! I was.

A: Were you really?

H: Yes, I was at the Palestra.

A: What was that like? Was that—that was a big time.

H: That game against—that was really exciting—and of course then I'm still 18 (?), so it was even more exciting, you know, how things are when you get—but yeah, I thought—you have to section things off as a kid, I thought, 'Boy, there'll never be another team like this,' and maybe there hasn't been when you think about it. So, but yeah, yeah I didn't get down south, I wasn't able to go along down there I listened to Bob Keller on the radio for those games. But yeah, those two times are just, you know—

A: So over the past eight years now working at the College, you've been compiling the statistics, copies of games—what all were you doing?

H: Braden Snyder, who was the director of sports information when I—at the time, and a great guy. He was—Braden worked so hard, he was just—it was just him in those days. And I know some nights—some Saturdays I'd give him a call or something and he'd still be working on this stuff seven or eight o'clock Saturday night—so, you know, there was nobody there to give him a hand. But anyhow, I had—we had a casual acquaintance, and he called me one time—he knew I remembered a lot of scores and stuff from—and he wanted to know if I could help fill in some gaps, and I said, 'what kind of gaps?,'—he said, 'well, we don't have scores from some teams,'—and I almost fell over because they didn't have all the scores from the '80s! No box scores—a couple games they didn't even know the result of the game. So I decided to—first I went to the Lebanon Daily News, I knew a lot of people out there too, and started going through their microfilm in there and printing the stuff, and we filled in all the gaps. We're still missing some scores from the early 1900s in basketball—wish I could get a hold of those—but I think we filled in football's complete and basketball's almost complete.

A: You're talking a hundred years in each of those sports?

H: Yes. Absolutely. And I still—now I keep every day—when they—after a Lebanon Valley game the next day I go through all the papers that may have something in there—the places online who may have covered that in some way—and even La Vie [student newspaper]—and I clip all that stuff, recopy it, put it in a—now of course, what I'm doing now, Tim [Flynn] has even better information on them, but I—

A: You say what you're doing now, you mean continuing the same thing?

H: Continuing, right. But of those—you know, the old stuff, I have a lot of complete articles of that stuff and it's here in the library from football games in the early 1900s.

A: What all have you put in the archives here at the library?

H: When you say, 'what all,' what sports?

A: Well what sports, what kinds of things—everything you've compiled?

H: Everything that I compiled. I—and every sport—not every sport is here yet, some still I have at home. I want to make sure I have it all in the computer before I put it over here in the library, and so, I'm still entering stuff there. And that's all the available statistics and things like that that I have, and—

A: So you still have work to do on this though, take up some years?

H: Yes. Oh yes. And I'd like to get back to—look at some of those tapes in the library down here, and there's more information to be found I'm sure. I kind of laid off a couple years ago, I began to have some trouble with my eyes and I think I over did it just because I'd sit down there in the summer. I'd go down there in the morning and sit down there 'til four or five o'clock and I'm watching that thing all day—

A: All the microfilms?

H: Yeah, and it's crazy—of course, you can't just look at the Sports section. In the old days you had to go through the whole paper because that article could be any place. So—and I enjoyed it, because—if you're interested you enjoy it, you know? It's that simple. And—but I just—I was starting to get blurry and right now I'm pretty good—the doctor said, 'there's nothing wrong with your eyes if they get the proper rest, but you can't go in there and watch the screen going across your face all day long and expect that your eyes aren't going to be affected.' So I've been doing that, much more sparingly lately.

A: So you've been busy with Lebanon Valley College stuff, off and on, in varying degrees, most of your life?

H: Yes. Yes. And actually hands on since the '90s, in the early '90. You know, I approached Lou at a game one time and—even before Braden asked me to—I thought about doing an LVC athletic history, and—not aware at the time that there were a lot of gaps and stuff missing, so—and Lou was nice about it, but could never—we could never quite get, you know, how to go about getting started, and I have to thank Braden for that 'cause, you know, he gave me the—suggested the best way to approach that.

A: So Tim is supporting this whole thing.

H: Yeah, Tim—Tim's a good guy, I think sometimes—yeah, Tim and Braden were two different guys—Braden was a baseball statistical guy—Tim's more of the modern, you know, the Facebook and all the other things and—which is good, you know, that's what you have to be today, but some of that technology kind of is over my head (laughs).

A: So all these years you spent with Lebanon Valley—is—I assume that Lebanon Valley is important to you?

H: Yes.

A: That you have—what does Lebanon Valley College mean to you?

H: Well, I know I always thought of it as, of course, I love it because of the sports—but as I got to know things, you know, I would get mad, I would actually get upset with people from Lebanon County that went to Elizabethtown, you know, that would irritate me and—jeez, that would irritate me—and Frankie Keith is one that comes to mind, you know, and—you know, over the years, I mean it's just everything—the people here—I spent most of my life, I was an office manager and a purchasing manager, and I don't care what job you had, there are people that—you know—you're always battling somebody, I never had to battle anybody at Lebanon Valley, everybody here—people that don't even know me—have been really nice to me. I think we have a great atmosphere here, a great fan base, a great—I mean I go over to the Administration Building for something and—I go for mail, I do—you know, even President Thayne, you know, he stopped me the other day and asked me how I was doing—a lot of places that doesn't happen.

A: Well you—a couple years ago you were given the Hot Dog Frank award.

H: Yes.

A: For contributions to athletics?

H: I'm very proud of that.

A: I was wondering what you were feeling about that?

H: I'm absolutely proud of that—that's sitting on my dresser at home, yet, I have it in a little stand—and yeah, it means a lot to me. I—you know, that told me it was appreciated, what I was doing. I mean, I knew people like Braden that appreciated it, I was filling in his gaps—but, you know, some of others—this was really nice. And of course my kids and my wife and everybody were here when we did that, so that was—yeah, I—when I first heard about that I almost—you know, because I had been to a number of those over the years, and those are people—doctors, and—

A: Did you actually know Hot Dog Frank?

H: Everybody, yeah—I did, but not—somebody interviewed me last year, some of the kids, and I think they might have been a little disappointed because Hot Dog Frank and I weren't—not 'cause I didn't like him or know him—we just—we were different then, and I knew him, I sat in his—ate at his place many times, he was always friendly and we talked a lot and we greeted each other at games and so forth, but I wasn't as close as what they were looking for, I guess—and you know, I didn't want to make things up, I didn't want to—I knew him well enough to admire—what he was doing for the kids, and realized I was aware of that—but it wasn't like we went to all the games together or anything like that, so. Yeah he was a good guy, I mean, all you had to do was be somebody who went into his establishment down there one time and you know he's a good guy. I mean, he greeted everybody—

A: I think we'll probably have to draw this to a conclusion now, but I have one other question, maybe the most difficult one, but give us a thought and see what you come up with. As you look at what has happened at Lebanon Valley over the past 50 years, 60 years, and what you

know about it, where do you hope it's going in the future? What would you like to see happen at Lebanon Valley over the next 50 years, let's say?

H: Well, I—I wouldn't want to see too much more growth in attendance. I like this Division III setting. I hope we keep up technologically, I think we have—and, I think we have—our sports teams are pretty successful overall, I think we do better than most probably and we have a great athletic director, well two right now.

A: And that's Rick.

H: Rick, that's right—yeah, Rick and Kathy, two of the most wonderful people I ever met. Rick and Kathy Tierney.

A: Yes, Rick Beard and Kathy Tierney.

H: Yes, and I do worry a little bit about—I'm one of those people who thinks we should have jumped this conference here, I don't like the way things are happening in the MAC. Yeah, I think in a couple of years, Hood and Stevenson are gonna run this conference, and Messiah, they have built in advantages that we don't have.

A: You mean in recruiting athletes?

H: Yes, yes—and standards, you know, we don't want to lower our standards to have to compete.

A: What conference do you think we would be best in?

H: I don't know. You know, there are a lot of new things coming up. The Landmark was one of them, but there was—there were one or two others, even the Centennial might be, especially now—you know we're gonna start our rivalry with F&M again, so—and I wish we played them in basketball again as well, but yeah, I speak mostly from the athletic end of it, but that worries

me what's happening to—and I think maybe, we should of—at one time, I thought all, a lot of this conference was built on—at least I was told that—was built on—what was it Juniata's—that was too much travel, and all the—now we've got a couple of teams that's just as far as Juniata—and I don't know what the answer is. There's a lot of things to think about, you know, 'cause we play football and some of the other schools don't. So, I don't know—maybe even more than one conference—maybe a conference for football, and another conference for—so, and I probably—I didn't feel strongly about any of that until we got—started to get to Stevenson and Hoods—and they both got a lot of money recently and, you know, just—I just—Stevenson's already at the top in every sport, spending money. Have you seen their football stadium?

A: Yes.

H: I mean it's—does that look like a DIII stadium to you?

A: (laughs).

H: So—so that worries me. I'd like to see us get settled there. You hate to leave something that you've been involved in for many, many years so—

A: Well, it'd be safe to say you're optimistic about the future of the Athletic Department?

H: Absolutely, absolutely. We're in good hands with Rick and our people here—and, you know, I don't know—financial aid and stuff like that, I'm not involved in that, and don't know how they handle that so I can't speak to that.

A: OK well, Harry thanks—thanks for your time. Interesting conversation, I appreciate it, and we'll talk again someday.

H: OK, you say when.