



Ralph Cheek Oral History Interview, October 15, 2014

Title

“A Career Built on Recycling”

Date

October 15, 2014

Location

Century Hotel, Tualatin, Oregon.

Summary

In the interview, Cheek touches upon his upbringing in Spokane, Washington before discussing his early interest in the military and the importance of the NROTC scholarship that funded his attendance at Oregon State College. From there he reflects on his undergraduate experience at OSC, including his involvement with the Greek system, his academic progression, his duties as an NROTC member, his participation on multiple crew teams, and the circumstances by which he met his future wife, herself an Oregon State student. He also describes classroom technologies of the era, campus traditions - including his role as class thane at his fraternity house - and his memories of Corvallis in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

After touching upon his military service following his graduation from college, Cheek details his long association with Kaiser Aluminum. In this, he recalls his initial position at Kaiser as a scrap foreman, his early use of computers, his steady move up the ranks within the company, and the many geographic relocations that his career required of him and his family. Of particular interest are Cheek's recollections of family and work life in Japan and Germany, both locations where he was based for a number of years. Cheek likewise shares detailed memories of his collaboration with the Bonneville Power Administration and the major impact that power generated from dams on the Columbia River has made on multiple industries, including the aluminum industry.

As the session nears its conclusion, Cheek remarks on his retirement from Kaiser Aluminum, his involvement with IMCO, and his broader passion for the practice of recycling. The interview ends with Cheek's advice to students of today and his expression of pride in having created a scholarship fund in memory of his late wife.

Interviewee

Ralph Cheek

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/cheek/>

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So this is Janice Dilg with the Oregon State University Oral History Project, and I'm here today with alumnus Ralph Cheek, and today is October 15th, 2014. He actually happens to be in the Portland area, I believe, for a couple of events—

Ralph Cheek: Yeah.

JD: —related to OSU. So, welcome.

RC: Thank you very much.

JD: So, it's always, I think, nice to start a bit at the beginning. And if you would talk a little about your family, and where you grew up?

RC: Sure. Yeah, I was born in Spokane, Washington, and lived the first twelve years of my life, and then all through high school after that, in an apartment hotel where my folks were assistant managers the first twelve years, and then leased the apartment hotel when I was in high school. So the first part was in a studio apartment, literally. Assistant managers had a studio apartment in the basement. The only windows were high and at grass level, right at the grass and the cars coming by.

And I did set out every Friday afternoon to my grandmother's, on two buses. Of course, I had to take two buses, and of course, six years old, eight years old in those days, no problem. You just got on the bus, changed buses, to Grandma's, saw a ten-cent movie, and then folks came by on Sunday for Sunday dinner and brought you home. Well, it wasn't until I was a little bit older that I realized why in the studio apartment they wanted me out of the apartment for every weekend. So, enough said there.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: At any rate, it was an education, because in high school I held every job in the apartment hotel, anywhere from the front desk, to bell boy, to parking cars at age fourteen—which was just great, beautiful cars—and also maintenance and everything else. So it was good experience. And I was going to—so I did high school there, and I was going to go to college to Cornell. And I was accepted to Cornell. In those days, you know, if you could walk and talk you could get accepted most any place. And decided to take a NROTC exam for full scholarship, got it, and some second-class yeoman in Washington, D.C., looked at his freight, or his transportation, or account number in the college, whatever it was, and sent me to Oregon State. And I bless that guy every night, because not only got a good education, met my wife, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So that's how I got to college. I hadn't even applied to Oregon State, but again, if the Navy's paying for out of state tuition, why not? So that's where I ended up.

JD: Well, I was a little intrigued by that, in looking at your records, that kind of the NROTC decided where you would go, and then you had to apply to the college separately.

RC: Well, yeah, I mean, it was just automatic. I'm sure the college takes everybody that NROTC sends, because the Navy guarantees we can read and write by that time. So, yeah. But it was great. I was not a great student at all at school, and tried to keep a gentleman's B, and ended up with—what did I end up with? 2.95—I just missed it. So, you know, but nobody seemed to care, at least in those days. Certainly the Navy didn't care, and didn't—nobody ever checked it afterwards. But it was a good time. The Navy almost took care of everything I need, and I worked two years as a house boy at Delta Theta sorority, which is one of the best jobs that a young guy could have.

JD: [Laughs] Well, expand on that a little. What were your duties as a house boy?

RC: Well [0:05:00], you said this wasn't censored. Well, the best part was that you waited on tables, and that's fine. And of course, on prom nights they were wearing these dresses, so I mean, and they still paid me and fed me, after all of that. It was a wonderful job. But at any rate, you just did cleaning of the tables, and setting the tables, and serving, and every once in a while there's some duty upstairs with the plumbing or something else. And they'd yell, "Man on second!" You'd go up and fix whatever's up there. But it was not a distinguished career in college, but I married one smart, fantastic gal,

Janet Lekas, who was taking Pharmacy. The last year of Pharmacy was done in four years. It's now done in seven. And she was Phi Beta Kappa, Mortar Board, and she somehow had bad vision, apparently, because we got married. We met there on a Coke date, blind date, our senior year, and of course, I was shipped right off to the Navy.

So after four months alone down at San Diego on the ship, I called up, proposed on the telephone, which probably wasn't too smart, since her father was from Greece, and I didn't ask his permission. I should have. I mean, I regret that. But he didn't give me a dollar, either, so we're even. It was a great marriage. She helped me, no question that my career was helped by—everybody liked her. She was great. When I would be transferred one place, you know, Kaiser would always want you there next week, and she'd have to sell the house, or sell the car, and do whatever's necessary.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And it was great. After I got out of the Navy, ended up taking the first child up to Spokane to show my parents. And my father, who had worked at the Alcoa plant at that time, really during the middle of the war, as part of the war effort, told me that he wanted me to go out and interview. He had talked to the plant manager, who had lived at the apartment hotel during the war, and had stayed with the plant even when it was purchased by Kaiser. I went out, and the rest is history.

JD: Well, let's go back and fill in a few details along the way, here. I think perhaps one might be: what was your interest in military service, or in the Navy, since you were clearly thinking about that already in your high school years?

RC: Well, it gave an option, because the regular NROTC program gives you an Annapolis commission, this 1100 designator, which is the same as Annapolis. You may not be treated the same as Annapolis when promotion time comes later on, but you certainly are in the early years. And certainly there have been a lot of good exceptions, where NROs have done very well in the Navy. But after three years on a AKA, which is a converted cargo ship that carries tanks to offload onto the beach—not offload directly onto the ship, but onto boats that the ship had to take trucks and stuff down to the beach, to finish. But after three years of that, 15 knots wide open, I decided that that's not my life. And besides, I had a baby waiting at home.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: So got out, and no job, and just started up north looking for jobs, and fortunately found one at the end of the road in Spokane.

JD: Well, I want you to talk a little bit more about your time at OSU. So, the NROTC assigned you there, but then what were your academic interests? What did you think you were interested in when you went off to study, the academic side of OS? [0:10:00] Well, then, OSC was the name, when you were there.

RC: OSC, that's right. Well, first of all, when I was in high school I took mechanical drawing. And in those days they had you drawing with pen and ink. Now they use CAD/CAM and stuff. And I could not draw a line without the ink smearing. I just couldn't do it! And if you can believe this, the teacher said, "Mr. Cheek, you can forget about engineering." And that was one of my alternatives in mind, was engineering. [Laughs] So, yeah. So I took, what's the next best thing? Well, hotels, business—business, okay. And it was Business and Technology, which as the name implies—and so my minor was Naval Science, of course.

JD: Mm-hm?

RC: You get a fair amount of science with that, and you are thrown in Physics, for example, with these full-time engineering physics geniuses, and stuff. And I think I got out with a C, but I was dangerously close to a D, and I might have gotten a D; I don't even remember. But it was touch and go. It just, the competition was incredible. So in that respect, I realized that I'm better off [laughs] not being an engineer! That's more than the ink that I couldn't handle.

JD: [Laughs] So, you arrive at campus. I mean, basically, you are growing up during the years of World War II, and then you are heading off to college pretty much on the heels of that?

RC: That's right.

JD: What are your recollections of that aspect of your life, and perhaps how that shaped your NROTC experience?

RC: Yeah. Well, the thing that was present at that time, we had a lot—this was 1948—we had a lot of vets, some just coming back, others who had been there one or two years, and they're all business. They're all—I mean, business meaning work ethic.

JD: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

RC: And get things done; they're serious, etcetera. I pledged to Sigma Phi Epsilon, who at least at that time had a running record of being number one, scholastically. And they were really serious people, so that really helped. You know, I didn't have any problems with beginning English or any of those things. I had a good high school, and the temptation was to really goof off, because I had no problem that first year. But everybody was looking at the grade average, and so I would say that the veterans had an effect.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And Janet said the same thing at Pharmacy, you know. She said that they needed to break into the laboratory so they could be sure that they finished their experiment, and stuff. I mean really serious— these were serious people.

JD: Mm-hm. Well, they'd had some experiences that many other young college students hadn't.

RC: Well not only that, but they had a wife and a child out at Adair Village.

JD: Mm-hm, mm-hm. So, talk a little more about just what the campus was like then, where you lived on campus?

RC: Well, I lived at the Sig Ep house, and I started out just the first term in the dorm, but then moved. And I was house manager my senior year, of the house, and so that was all of my living experience. I do remember all of the rain. I came from Spokane, which is dry. If it rains, it'll rain for an hour and that's the end of it—none of this mist stuff. And I finally got like everybody else; I'd wear a wool sweater and it'd be damp. When I got in class, it would dry out and I'd go back out again. [Laughs] You know, you don't think a thing about it. But the first night that I was in the dormitory, got into that bed. I said, "Some SOB watered my sheets," because they were cold, and they were damp. And I found out it's that way every night! [Laughs] [0:15:00] Especially in the outdoor sleeping porch, which the house had. So, but you get used to these things.

JD: Sure, sure. And so how did people get around then? Did many students have automobiles, or what was that part of it?

RC: I had a car, so I could come and go from Spokane. And I had a classmate, NRO classmate, actually, from Spokane, and so the two of us drove back and forth all the time. I would say there was six cars in the lot, maybe, and we must have had I don't know how many in the house, but it must have been 50 or 60, or so, so not that many people had cars.

JD: Mm-hm. And clearly you had a busy schedule, between your coursework, and your NRO, and your campus jobs? But was there time to recreate or hang out, and what did you do if you had time to do that?

RC: Oh, yeah, yeah. I took freshman crew, and the only reason I took that was I didn't do any sports in college, in high school, and it's the only sport that I figured I'd have an even start with everybody else, because how many high schools have crew teams? And I liked that. And then I rowed for the house intramural after that. That was my sole sport, except for ping pong in the basement at night. You could play every night.

JD: Uh-huh?

RC: I play today.

JD: Oh, wonderful! And so what was crew like at that point? Where was the boat house, and when were practices and things?

RC: Yeah, the boat house was right next to the bridge; don't ask me which bridge, but right next to a bridge. And the thing I remember the most is that we didn't have decent equipment. All of our shells were leftover University of

Washington Husky shells, which were the best. You know, they bought the best; there's no question about that. But they were leftover. And they get a warp over time, for some reason or another, as time goes by, so by the time they came to us they were warped. So the people on the bow, on this side, going that way—on this side really had to work hard to get their oar out of water, and the opposite down on the opposite side, down there. And unfortunately I was right at the bow. So it was really hard work, because—and all because we had used shells. So if there's any benefactors watching here, please put some money in. I forgot all about the shells. I should do something, too.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: I hope we're buying new shells.

JD: I actually was in Corvallis just last week, and crew teams were out on the river, so they're still going at it.

RC: They're still going at it. It's a great sport.

JD: It is.

RC: Good for you. You don't—no concussions, no broken knees, none of that stuff.

JD: So if you're working hard doing crew as well as all of your other things, I'm guessing that you were looking forward to dinner and meals. Did you take most of your meals at the fraternity house, or how did that work?

RC: Well, yeah. We took all of the meals at the fraternity house, except those two years, then, of course, I ate at the sorority, out in the kitchen.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And it was enough money to make the difference, so that I didn't have to ask my folks for any money. What I did do was send my dirty laundry home in those bakelite, or whatever the heck they were, boxes, you remember, like this. One came over with the top and had a thing around it. And I sent my laundry up and got—I remember, you take a look, you know, Cheek's laundry's back. [Laughs]

JD: So, as you were talking about your duties as a house boy in the sorority house, and that someone would call up, "Man on the second floor," or whatever, which might not necessarily register quite so much with students of today [0:20:00], where it's coed.

RC: No, it wouldn't.

JD: So talk a little bit about kind of what the social norms, and the curfews, and what were the rules then?

RC: The rules. Oh, we had rules. They had rules, period, at sororities and fraternities, absolutely. The gals had to be in a certain hour, and the house mother was right close to the door there, and meant it, yeah. And you know, you didn't walk into upstairs in a sorority, of course; it was a big deal. IU know; I sent three children through college, and the fifth grandchild's going through college right now, so I hear all of these stories. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] So you've seen the evolution?

RC: Yeah, that's for sure.

JD: When you were talking about your classes and that they were tough, were there particular classes or professors that particularly influenced you, or were really memorable?

RC: I have to admit, no, no. Nothing sticks; nothing in particular sticks. I mean, everything sticks, but nothing in particular stick, other than the problem I had in Physics. [Laughs] I just wasn't made to be a physicist.

JD: And there was coursework related to the NRO, but then there's also a training aspect to that as well? Talk a little bit about what that entailed, and kind of the time commitment, and how that played out then.

RC: Oh yeah, we'd have Saturday drills and stuff, and then in the summer you would have a cruise, which was either—obviously, there's three summers involved, and two of them were on shifts, the first and the third. The middle one was Amphibious and Air, to expose you to all of those things. I got sick in the trainer airplane, so that took care of the air side of it. [Laughs] And that's what they're trying to find out.

JD: Mm-hm?

RC: Yeah, the instructor had a V-line of airplanes that he was training. And he'd be over here looking at this side, and he'd slip over here and look at this side. He'd do a few maneuvers while he was at it. And they found out very quickly who was capable of being an airman, and who wasn't.

JD: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And where did you go to do the summer trainings?

RC: Well, the first one, we sailed out of San Francisco on a heavy cruiser down to around the Galapagos Islands and back, across the Equator, and kiss the chief's belly with the grease on it and stuff. Did all of things that you do when you cross the equator on a Navy ship. And the second one, the first half was at Norfolk, Virginia, for the Amphib, and then the Air was down at Pensacola, Florida. The third one was out of Norfolk on a light cruiser, I think. You know, went up to Halifax, went in, 21-gun salute, the whole thing. It was interesting.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: But it was a good experience. The Navy was a great experience, absolutely. You show up—you're 21 or 22, and you show up on the ship green as can be. And you learn quickly how to handle things that—I think this was very valuable. You learn that the chiefs make things go. You learn how to get along with the chief. You learned how to get along with your fellow officers, your senior officers, the skipper, your crew. And those lessons—when I joined Kaiser [0:25:01], and the first job I had was a lowly foreman, I knew right away: who is the chief here? The chief here is the grievance man, the union guy in that department. Right to him, yeah. I'm green, I'm going to need some help. If you see me doing something rather than writing me up, just come over and give me a hint.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: No problem, no problem. And if I'd come directly from college, I wouldn't have done that. I wouldn't have handled myself that way. I'm a believer that we ought to have compulsory duty of some kind, whether it's military, or whether it's medical, or whether—whatever it is, that we ought to have that. These are a couple of years that are very important for somebody to have a chance to get their feet on the ground without really committing themselves to a career yet.

JD: Mm-hm. And when you talk about weekend drills?

RC: Oh, it's just marching up and down.

JD: Uh-huh?

RC: Yeah.

JD: In gear?

RC: Well, in uniform, yes.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: Yeah.

JD: In uniform with gear, I guess, is what meant to say.

RC: Yeah, well, the Navy didn't carry any gear. We let the Marines carry it for us.

JD: [Laughs] And did I understand correctly that you studied the Russian language when you were in college?

RC: Yeah, I did. After all, in those days, they might win.

JD: That's true. This was at the front end of the Cold War.

RC: And the Navy wouldn't mind having it, too. But never had to use it, and just as well. I found out later that the lady, the professor who taught me was really Georgian, and that I had a terrible Georgian accent. So, besides, I had too much silver and gold in my mouth, and that's the first things they check to see if you are American. [Laughs]

JD: Well, you did make some comments. I saw some applications that you filled out.

RC: By God, you did? Uh-oh.

JD: I'll share them with you when we're done, if you want. And you were asking to get some credits in Liberal Studies, and I also noticed that you took a class in Russian Culture. But you were kind of thinking that you might go into foreign trade, or the diplomatic corps. Do you remember what was shaping your thinking at that point?

RC: Just keeping my options open, that's all. You know? At that time, frankly, we didn't know what, where things were going. The Russians were played up as a superpower, and certainly militarily they were, at that time.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And, but fortunately we had a government that handled everything quite well, and let the Soviets destroy themselves, because they couldn't out-arm us. They couldn't keep up with our technology and arms.

JD: Mm-hm. Well, and I think technology is also one of those topics that's interesting. Just as we were talking about sort of differences in kind of social norms and regulations at college when you were there, technologies were certainly different that you might have used in preparing papers for classes. Talk a little bit about, whether it was typewriters—talk a little about what were the technologies that were in place, how you got in touch with your friends. Not necessarily online.

RC: Yeah. Well, the technology, they were called pencils and paper. And I didn't call much at all. Communication, you just didn't think about it that much. You know, if you called for birthdays, for holidays, that was about it. Or if you needed money, or laundry, or whatever. [0:30:00] But other than that, we really didn't have much communication. We didn't think about it. The time zone, the timing of it kids had, we just tschk-tschk-tschk-tschk. And we're picking this up, at least I am, you know. The cell phone, if it rings, you want to look at it. You want—it's just automatic. And it's really changed. In some respects it's really kind of too bad, in that we don't have time to reflect, or think, with kids texting all of the time, for example, or people our age emailing, or doing whatever we do, texting.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: Yeah. Surely 80 or 90 percent of the communications that are going on right now aren't really necessary.

JD: Mm-hm. And were there particular campus traditions, dances, events, going to games? What were those traditions that you remember and were involved with?

RC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, freshmen couldn't wear—what was it, cords, or something? Freshmen wore beanies. If the sophomores—every living organization had a thane, and I was a thane for my class at the house.

JD: And what was that?

RC: Thane, T-H-A-N-E. It's a Scottish—you remember, surely, your Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor? And the gals had Talons, T-A-L-O-N-S. They don't have that now? They had those, and you had a deal on your white sweater, big deal. But it was a service, and so that was good. You had duties and helped at various things. Yeah, and we had the junior prom and the senior prom. You know, I'm trying to remember which one, but I think it was the senior prom that Vaughn Monroe came, you know, Racing with the Moon, the guy that sang through his nose. And he'd say it was, "So good to be here at the Willamette Valley," and everybody went, "Boo!"

JD: [Laughs]

RC: And it was on nationwide, nationwide radio. And somebody told me that the, "Boo" came out right over the radio. [Laughs]

JD: So, why was it on the radio?

RC: In those days he was on every week, every Saturday night, wherever he was

JD: Okay, okay.

RC: Yeah.

JD: And do you know how he came to be at Oregon State?

RC: I imagine they paid him money.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: How else, why else, would he come? [Laughs] I don't know. I have no idea.

JD: [Laughs] And so, there's certainly a relationship between Corvallis and Oregon State. We've been mostly talking about things on campus, but what were your experiences with the town?

RC: Experiences were good. You know, the stores, the Coke shop, whatever it is you wanted to do, treated students like human beings. And I'm sure at Columbia and other certain places maybe it's not the same, when you're in the middle of New York, or some other place. But it was very good. And also, when we would serenade, a living organization, a sorority, dorm, or whatever it was, the residents around clapped. You would hear them open up the window, so you knew they were listening, then they clapped. That makes you feel good.

JD: And so what were the occasions you went out serenading?

RC: Whenever somebody pins somebody, like I pinned my wife.

JD: Mm-hm? And just describe that. Not everyone's going to necessarily be familiar with what pinning means. [0:35:02]

RC: Well, I had a fraternity pin, and how did that work? I guess I just gave it to her. I'm trying to remember what the technique, whatever it was. At any rate, and then that night or very shortly afterwards, the whole singing group, which is almost most everybody in the fraternity, goes and lines up and sings, and usually there's a song for every sorority, for example, or a dorm. It would be an Oregon State song.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: But we had one for Chi Omega, and so.

JD: It sounds like a wonderful tradition.

RC: I hope they still have it.

JD: I don't know, but I'll find out. And so did you go into town often?

RC: No, seldom went into town. I don't remember even going in to see a movie. A, you had studies, and B, there was usually something going on, whether it was ping pong downstairs, or whether it was playing hearts at the library. Hearts is a card game.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: There was always something going on.

JD: So, it sounds like you all kind of in some ways entertained yourselves, or did things together?

RC: Yeah, well, we didn't have a lot of money.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: That's right.

JD: So, you do successfully finish your studies, and then you pretty much went straight into a couple of years in the Navy?

RC: Yeah, like the next day. I mean, they got to take us, ready, you're going! They've got the train tickets. [Laughs]

JD: Wow! [Laughs] So, did you have the opportunity to go to your graduation before you—?

RC: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I went to graduation. Got all the pictures.

JD: So, well talk a little about what graduation ceremony was like when you graduated, which was in '51, or 2?

RC: '52. Yeah, well, I'm trying to remember if they had it by grades or not. If so, I was in the back, but I was in the back anyway, for some reason. Whether it was the school or whether it was me, I don't know. But I couldn't see much what was going on, I could barely hear.

JD: And it was held where at that point?

RC: It was out in the open someplace, yeah, and gosh, I should be able to remember, shouldn't I? But at any rate, I can't remember much about that, but what you remember is the fact that your folks were there, Jan's folks were there, the folks meet each other, the pictures, the photographs, which I have. And that's frankly what I remember, and not whoever the commencement speaker was. But, yeah, it wasn't Ronald Reagan or I would have remembered that.

JD: [Laughs] And was there kind of a special anything that you wore, or received?

RC: We had gowns. Oh, we had caps and gowns.

JD: Well sure, and I was wondering what in addition to your diploma you were getting with the NRO?

RC: Yeah, well you got, yeah, what you got were your stripe.

JD: Okay.

RC: Yeah. We had already, of course, had them sewn on, yeah, and had all of that done, but it was the first time you could wear them. Oh, that's right. We were sworn in at a separate deal, before or after; I don't remember which. But we had a separate swearing in assignment—ceremony.

JD: Mm-hm. And do you remember roughly how many members there were in your NROTC course or class?

RC: Oh, yeah, twelve or fifteen.

JD: Okay.

RC: We didn't end up with as many as we started, in spite of the fact that they had all passed test and everything.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: I'm not sure why, but we didn't.

JD: And if we could just for a minute, you mentioned the returning vets and that many of them lived at Adair Village. [0:40:00] I was wondering if you could just expand a little on what Adair Village was, and did you ever go out there, and kind of what your recollections were of it?

RC: I did go out there once, I don't remember why, but when you drive on 99 to Corvallis, you pass it; it's on your left, so I know it's still there. I don't know what's there, but the name's still there. It still says Adair Village. And I think they were military or government buildings of some kind during the war, and they just converted them for veterans, and it was wonderful for that.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: Because there surely wasn't room on the campus at the time, because you had the normal students like myself graduating out of high school, and then you had on top of that all of the vets.

JD: Right, and these guys—well, all of the vets, male or female, were coming back with the GI Bill.

RC: That's right.

JD: So they were able to go to school where maybe they wouldn't have been prior to the war.

RC: That's correct. That is a wonderful thing, one of the smartest things that the government has done.

JD: Mm-hm. So you've talked some about your experiences in the Navy. Do you have other recollections that you want to add about your time on ships? I know that you did a couple of tours, one in Korea, and one was near Taiwan?

RC: Yeah. Well, they both were in the Korean waters. One of them, we took Chinese prisoners of war that wanted to defect to Taiwan. We took them down to Taiwan. Another trip we took Chinese prisoners of war back up north that didn't want to defect. And if you can imagine, we had about ten times as many marines on board, with rounds in their guns. So they were two completely different cruises. [Laughs]

JD: I guess. Wow! And so the Korean War was—?

RC: I just missed it.

JD: Okay.

RC: I just missed it. But we still had, of course, all of the after-effects of it.

JD: Sure. And I guess between your time doing the training, where you said you went across the equator and near the Galapagos, and—

RC: Yeah.

JD: —being in some other different parts of the world, what was your reaction? Do you remember some of your experiences of just being in completely different climates and cultures?

RC: Oh yeah, yeah. The Japanese was—we didn't get ashore in Korea. It was still tense; we didn't even get ashore. But in Japan, of course, we had leave in several cities, four cities or so. And I liked it—it had a good feel about it—as did most everybody else. They were able to turn on a dime, and go from being warlike to welcoming the gaijin, the foreigners.

JD: Mm-hm. So you decide that life on the sea is perhaps not for you, or in the military, and so you do go to work for, was it Kaiser Aluminum when you started—

RC: Kaiser Aluminum when I started, yup.

JD: —working for them in 1955?

RC: Yup.

JD: So maybe just kind of start to walk through your career there?

RC: Okay. Well, it was a little training program to teach what aluminum is, and a little about metallurgy and stuff that most of us didn't have. We had two metallurgists in the group. It was about a dozen of us, and then they added three, so maybe a total of fifteen of us. The reason so many is that a plant was being built, another rolling mill in Ravenswood, West Virginia, and so of course the company knew they were going to have to have people to either ship back, or to relieve those that they did ship back. And so it was a big training class.

And we were all college graduates. The bachelors got the grand sum of \$325 a month. The masters, a master's degree, got 365 [0:45:00], which really ticked us off, but at any rate. [Laughs] But you know, you stop to think about it, a master's was worth 40 bucks a month, and that wasn't a very good return on investment. But anyway, all of that, of course, was by and by, as you progressed. Then I was foreman of the scrap, and that's of interest because I ended up in the scrap building. So my first job was scrap foreman there.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: Which is just one unit, just a bailer and a bunch of trucks to handle it, and a scrap train that took scrap from one end of the plant down to the other. Trentwood was 48 acres under one roof, one of the largest operations at that time—48 acres under one roof. And so, transportation was a major item, to get metal out. And then I was transferred into planning, and to help customers get their orders and stuff. It was called a service supervisor. And one of the correspondents there, union correspondent, a gal, the only gal we had working there, called it a service stupidvisor, which probably wasn't too far off.

But that didn't last long, because the next thing I knew they had me out as a shift foreman over six or eight machines, specialty machines, making shade screens, and corrugated roofing, and stuff like that. And then brought me back in to planning, to establish a loading system where each order, which is maybe anywhere around ten different processes, scheduled through each of these departments, and the furnaces, and machines and stuff, would be put on the computer so you could keep track of it. And we were one of the first, I think, that ever has done this. And first thing then, we started scheduling the plant, using not the computer doing the thinking, but the computer, of course, the computer collecting the data and every morning spitting it out. And to do this took a lot of equipment.

And so we started scheduling the plant, and all of the old-timers, my guy who ended up being my boss for the next job I had there, Swede Monson—there was a Monson coach, and he was the father of that coach, basketball coach. At any rate, Swede said, "Cheek, we're going to be out of metal tomorrow." And I said, "No we're not, Swede." "Cheek, I'll kill you if we don't have metal tomorrow." I said, "Don't worry about it Swede, but you'll owe me a cup of coffee." And after about three of those, Swede said, "What do I got tomorrow, Cheek?"

JD: [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs] So, it worked.

JD: So this was an early use of computers?

RC: Yes, very early. And it was really very rudimentary. And then I was transferred out to be general foreman of the entire Finishing Department, which on off shifts is the senior man in the entire plant, which I never could understand. A general foreman that at age 28, was I at the time, was running the plant on off shifts and weekends. But that's what it set up, and worked.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And it worked, but it was experience that stood me in good stead afterwards. And after a short time there, the man who was going to be works manager—we had three plants, actually, at Ravenswood: the smelter, sheet, and a foil plant. The works manager of all three had come from Trentwood. He was the CO guy that Trentwood had hired at age, the grand old age of 30-something, because he was experienced. [0:50:00] And so the first two guys in planning turned down the

job, the senior guys, because Ravenswood had a terrible reputation—just terrible, you know. And Spokane's a pretty nice place to live. So he said, "Ralph," he said, "Would you come if I asked for you?" I said, "Yes, sir. Absolutely." So next thing I know I'm jumped three levels to the planning division manager at Ravenswood, West Virginia, and we're putting in six IBM 650s the size of a butcher's freezer, six of them in an air conditioned room, and they've got their wheels going like this, like this, and you're pumping out cards, and you've got punch cards like this.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: This is long before—

JD: This is even before DOS. [Laughs]

RC: Oh, absolutely. So, it was great, and it worked, and so after a couple of years there—actually, the fellow who was the number two guy there, the fellow I replaced, was a sales manager, had been a sales manager, and so he hadn't had the right experience. But the number two guy was very smart, and he really knew what was going on, so next thing I know, I'm set up—I was called to the Oakland head office by the division manager. And he said, "Ralph, the Reliance,"—well, at any rate, "Our major distributor in Los Angeles has decided to get out of the mobile home panel business, mobile home panels, roofs, ducts, and stuff. And I want you to go down and start a new plant, and eventually a new division." I said, "Okay." He said, "The only problem is," he said, "that my authority is \$99,999, and that's the amount I'm giving you. Lease everything."

So [laughs], I went down, and the sales people gave me their best salesman, who was my age, a great guy, and an engineer, who had been product engineer somewhere. And so I had to have an office manager. So I told Kaiser, I said, "I'm going to find—I've got a single gal that I think I'll bring out from Ravenswood." "She's non-exempt!" "It doesn't make a difference." "We've never transferred a woman, ever." I said, "Well, Bill Evans gave me authority. Do you want to argue with him?" "No." So I called up, "Nadeen, do you want to come out here?" Well, she was single; she had a daughter.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And the education, not the best there—first three grades, yes, but after that. So she said, "Sure." And she came out, and the best thing that ever happened—took charge, you know, everything. Just, there wasn't anything she couldn't do. And so we got going, and then I went to Elkhart, Indiana, to start the second one there, and was there for maybe a year and a half. And I got a call, and this is where Jan comes in, my wife, a call and said, "We want you to go to Japan. They need you immediately. We've promised that we'll have somebody over there." I said, "That's nice, what am I going to do?" "You're going to build a rolling mill, and you're going to be the technical advisor for the rolling mill. You're going to represent Kaiser in this joint venture." I said, "Technical? I'm not an engineer." "Ah, yeah, but you're a production guy. You'll be all right." [Laughs]

So sure enough, I went over there. I left Jan; she had to sell the house. We had bought it just a short time before [0:55:00], on the GI bill, for very little down and everything else, and so by the time the commission and everything else, we had to pay money in to the escrow. [Laughs] She had to sell the house, sell the car, but kept it while she was doing all of this. Then she had a little accident with the car, and the gal that bought it saw the accident. [Laughs] Things went downhill from there.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: She had to get the movers in. Of course, Kaiser's helping all the time.

JD: And I'm guessing you had a few kids by this point?

RC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The three children, and of course she stayed there until the kids got out of school in June. So I was over there in March, so I was there several months living in a hotel, and then she brought them over by herself. Incredible gal, and big support, big support.

JD: Well, I think just as you're talking about kind of all the different places you're working at, maybe if you could just talk a minute about—I think the era of the type of manufacturing that Kaiser was involved in, that you were working at,

has passed by the U.S. at this point, maybe returning, or at least at the level that it was happening when you were there. Maybe just talk a little about kind of Kaiser as a company, and working for a big company like that, that had all of these different branches?

RC: Yeah, Kaiser was an excellent, excellent employer. Yeah, the benefits were great, as good as at most anyplace, maybe, but more important is they kept track of you. They made sure that you were trained, even though in cases like this they didn't. Did I have any Japanese lessons? No. Did I get much of a briefing from engineering before I went over there? No. But if they have time and everything else, they do. It was a very good company. And driven by Henry J., as it was in those days. He was still—he may have been in Honolulu; he may be in the pink house at Diamond Head with pink cement trucks running around with his name on them, and his poodle dyed pink, and his wife wearing pink. I've got to be careful here. At any rate, it was a great company. He'd call up—the stories were, I believe, he'd call up some vice president in the middle of the night, "John, I want you to go out and do such and such, check on such and such. Get on the first plane there is, and give me a call." Incredible!

JD: [Laughs]

RC: Everybody loved him! It was just a great attitude that everybody had, and it was just a marvelous company I'm so happy and proud to have been a small part of.

JD: So, you're off in Japan, and maybe you can talk about where in Japan you were? Your family comes over?

RC: Family comes over; we were in Tokyo. We were in a suburb—not really a suburb. We were practically downtown in that I would say we were a mile from the Olympic Stadium, from the swimming pool part of the Olympic Stadium, the swimming stadium.

JD: Mm-hm?

RC: And a very nice location. I mean, expensive, but we leased—the company, again, leased the place, or our joint venture did. And the kids had a three-quarter hour bus ride to and from the American school, which was in the suburbs, actually out by an Air Force base. And so for the first year everything was easy because everything was still in the drawing, the negotiating, the ordering of equipment, and all of those stages. But the last two and a half or so years, I went out four days, three nights, four days, to the plant, and left Jan alone again, because it was about an hour and a half, two hour train out there. [1:00:00] And stayed at the dormitory.

JD: Was this like the worker's dormitory?

RC: Well, yes, mm-hm. Well, yes. I would say you'd say the salaried workers' dormitory.

JD: Oh, okay.

RC: Although I'm not sure about that. No, there were operators there too, I think.

JD: Mm-hm?

RC: And so did those other people who didn't move out there, and they stayed there too. So it was great. We'd have box lunches, a little box dinner, bento, and then come into a common room, just the staff, just myself and the department heads and the plant manager. There would be a mahjong game going on, and some other things. And I'd just basically go in there and read, and talk with people.

JD: Mm-hm. So, were you the only American?

RC: I was the only American in the entire village, or town, yes. I was the only foreigner—well, maybe there was a Korean or something there, but I was the only westerner in the town. And if I walked down the street, I'd have kids following me. [Laughs] Back in those days, they were short. When I first came to Japan, and you'd take the Ring Road—not the Ring Road, the Ring Train, it was standing only. There weren't any seats, standing only. And I'd be at one end of the car, and I'd look and I'd see an American soldier at the other end. When I left, I'd looked down and I'd see a fourteen-

year-old, a couple of fourteen-year-old Japanese boys. This is what diet does. Kentucky Fried Chicken, hamburgers, well, anything fried—the gentleman who was older than I by quite a bit, maybe twenty years older—I was only 35 when I arrived there—he told me that the only protein they had were silkworms during the war.

JD: In quantity as well as quality.

RC: Everything.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: And if they were in the service, that's different. The service got the best they could, the best they could.

JD: Mm-hm.

RC: But the home front suffered. Yeah. So it was a good experience; I enjoyed it. So we came back after almost four years, three and a half or four years.

JD: Mm-hm. And then back to California doing your same work?

RC: Yeah, I came back—came for the first time, not back, but for the first time to the home office in Oakland. Got a house in Piedmont, right next door, and very handy. And again I did traveling. I had five foil plants I was the operations manager, over five foil plants to keep running, and do all of that sort of stuff.

JD: Mm-hm?

RC: And then they added the four can plants, so I had nine plants, and that's really traveling—plants in Newark, New Jersey, plants in Jacksonville, Florida, Houston, Texas, LA, all over. And so it was a lot of traveling. And so again, I'd be gone, yeah, maybe three nights, not every week but quite a bit, and Jan took care of the family. She was father and mother, went to all of the games, did all of the good stuff, and worked, to boot, for part of the time. She was a pharmacist. So that was good.

And after a few years of that I was given two medium-sized divisions, the forgings division and the wrought iron wire. The forging had two small plants, the wrought iron wire one large plant. And that was good experience, because then I had profit responsibility, full responsibility there. [1:05:00] And then they added on another division, which is the largest fabricating division, the sheet plate. And that was Trentwood, Spokane, and the Ravenswood plant. And then I was one busy guy—one busy guy.

JD: And perhaps more early on in your career, do you recall—you mentioned your experiences in the military, and how they were useful to you as you moved into your kind of industrial work. But in those early years, can you recall things that you learned in your Business Administration courses that—?

RC: Sure, oh, sure. You don't even think about where it came from, but absolutely. All those things happened, yes, and of course, I'm sure that they're learning different things now, because different things are more important—not more important, but in addition, additionally important. Kids have to know much more, frankly, than we had to know. I mean, computers, obviously; everybody sees that. But you need to know about labor relations, and you need to know about negotiations. And I don't remember any negotiating courses, but I recommend if you don't have a negotiating course now, that you have one. Life is a negotiation. Again, Kaiser sent me and a whole bunch of others to the Alex Karras Negotiating—excellent, excellent. I can't practice it. I mean, I know what I should be doing, but I still don't—I'm still not made so that I can be that brazen sometimes, but at least I know what is being done to me. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Perhaps equally as important.

RC: It is just as important.

JD: So, the manufacturing and the industrial world's changing as you're going through your career? Talk about sort of some of the later periods as you were becoming a senior—

RC: Well, yeah, the next job I had was in Germany, [German name]. I was a member of the board of Kaiser Aluminum, Europe—Kaiser "Aluminium" Europe, Europa, in charge of all operations, the five plants, and sales. And that was really wonderful experience for several reasons. The most important one was that I didn't travel. If I traveled, most of it was one-day travel, because three of the plants, three of the five plants I could drive to and back, even though one of them was in Belgium and two in Germany. I could go to each of them and back. After all, at 100 miles an hour, you could cover a lot of—

JD: [Laughs]

RC: I mean, seriously. You either drove 100, or you drove between two trucks at 50. I mean, that's the choice you had. If you were out at 70 miles an hour, these Porches would be coming along behind you. So it was good, wonderful, in the perspective that Jan and I had much more time together, and a wonderful reception. There had been as many as I think eighteen Kaiser people there when the plants were started up, you know, helping do all of these things, and provided plant managers, and all of that. By the time I got there I was the only, the last, American, and so everybody wanted to practice their English, so I had a tough time practicing my German. But wonderful reception in the Belgian plant, and in the Swiss plant, and in the three German plants, one of which was in Berlin, in West Berlin obviously, because this was during the time. So that was a fantastic experience. [1:05:00]

And after that was when all hell had broken loose here with the power, Bonneville Power, and they wanted me—they kept me on the board, but I turned over the plants to the two senior plant managers to take care of the five plants, and move them out. But I was still on the board; I still made trips back for board meetings. But my job was to see what we could do here, and so Jan and I moved to Portland.

JD: And maybe just lay a little more groundwork of what you mean by "all hell had broken loose."

RC: Yeah

JD: And what you were doing with the BPA, and how the landscape was changing substantially at that point.

RC: Yeah.

JD: And this was '84, roughly, 1984?

RC: '84. Yeah, you remember, of course, that it all started in the '30s with the dams—one of the smartest things the government has done, to build the whole Columbia system of dams. Yeah, should we have done better with fish, and all of that? Of course, but we did the best we knew how at that time, and did a wonderful job. Then in '37, BPA comes along. They've got to have somebody that's going to manage all of this, and so BPA comes along and sets things up, a stool with three legs, the private utilities, the public utilities, the DSI, direct service industries, of which the smelters took the most, but there was also chemical, also lumber, etcetera, in there, the absolutely meaningful companies who relied a great deal on electricity. So the three legs bought directly from Bonneville. They were Bonneville's only customers, I believe, at the time, and Bonneville had plenty of power.

The war came along, and the government, wisely—again, wisely; I mean, we had some pretty smart governments—decided we've got to make airplanes. Boeing's already there. We've got to make aluminum for it, so we need a rolling mill. We've got to have metal for the rolling mill, so we need a smelter, and for the smelter we need alumina. There's no advantage of having it there. Why ship two pounds of—four pounds, I should say, of bauxite in order to make two pounds of alumina? They'll do it down in Louisiana. So they put it in Baton Rouge to take the bauxite and turn it into alumina, which is aluminum oxide powder, a white powder. And it takes four pounds of bauxite to make two pounds of aluminum oxide, to make one pound of aluminum, so that's kind of the ratio. So freight plays a part.

So they only had one real aluminum company in America at that time, and that was Alcoa. So the government said to Alcoa, "We'll pay for it. We'll buy it." So Trentwood rolling mill, well a rolling mill, and a big smelter, and the story is—and I've never seen it in writing to prove it, but I believe it, because enough people have told me. The story is that they were going to put this close to Boeing. And right about that time one Japanese sub surfaces, sends some—you have two Japanese guys. One of them tossed some shells into, where was it, into Astoria or somewhere, and another one put some

fire bombs, incendiaries that blew, etcetera, etcetera. Anyway, the next thing you know, we're on the other side of the mountains. [Laughs] So those are the locations.

So there was another interesting part of it, just to spend a moment on it, is that the government was going to help the Russians build this rolling mill, and so nobody had time to design a new mill from scratch. [1:15:00] They just took Alcoa Tennessee's rolling mill drawings and copied them, and put it all in Russian. Then they decided, oh, no, we're going to send it out here. So when the drawings came out, they were in Russian. [Laughs] This is what happens in war time, huh? Anyway, so the rest is history. They built a great rolling mill in Spokane. They built this large, very tremendously large at the time, really, smelter in Meade, which is just a suburb of Spokane, and ran it, and supplied the war effort. And it wasn't just planes. It was what goes in planes; it was the chaff, the radar chaff. It was a lot of things that were made up, landing mats at one time, lots of things.

And then after the war, of course, the government decided we need more than one aluminum company. So Kaiser, who by the way was one of the six or so that built the dams, the Columbia dams, and also the Hoover Dam, and also the Shasta Dam, was very active. He was a very good politician, spent a lot—he was the Washington, D.C. man for the consortium, or whatever you want to call those engineering companies that all went together, construction companies. And so he knew what was going on of the various plants. It wasn't just the Northwest; it was other areas too that this was being done. He had lived in Spokane and worked in Spokane. He knew the Northwest. So he bid—'46 and '47, he bid and got Trentwood, and then Meade, and then Baton Rouge, so he had one of everything. And Reynolds was doing the same thing, and Reynolds being an eastern plant, an eastern company, even though they ended up in Troutdale, they were essentially an eastern company. So that's how that got started.

So when I came here—well, at any rate, so the Bonneville had all of this power. It looked like it could go forever, but then the population increases, new smelters coming in, particularly smaller ones, which are really a little more flexible, and they looked down road, and we're going to need more power. So the story of the three nukes, and the rest is history. They didn't make it. Then there was a lawsuit. The private companies that were a part of this deal filed suit, got a lot of money out of the thing. Bonneville costs go up, prices go up. And this is part of a sequence. The prices went up then, and yet in '75, Bonneville looked ahead and said, "We're going to run out of power. We're not going to have—it doesn't look like we're going to have nuclear power, at least when we expected. We're going to run out of power." So they gave notice.

They had to give eight years' notice to the stool, to the three legs, and so in 1983 is when they stopped guaranteeing that they'd take care of everybody's needs. And in the meantime, the fishing deal starts. You've got to take care of the fish. The assistant administrator at the time was Steven Hickok, and he's quoted as saying, "We used to run the mill for the customers. We now run the streams for the fish." That raised cost and prices between five and fifteen percent, depending on who was on the other end of it. Then on top of that there's the California swap [1:20:00], where we gave energy to California for the air conditioning in the summer, and they were going to send it back up for our heat in the winter, and they reneged. So, everything raising the price. And so those items doomed the smelter, most smelters, because power is such a major item.

So as the costs went up, even though there was the high priced jobs—I mean high paying jobs—certainly, the best paying jobs in not only Hood River and Goldendale, but certainly the best paying jobs, really, in Spokane, for blue collar, and it was fantastic. And that was endangered. The aluminum industry held on. Prices, aluminum went up for a while, but in the long run it was doomed. Meade was actually dismantled in '95.

But anyway, going back, I got here in '84. This was when they were still fighting over who was going to get how much aluminum, energy, and who was going to pay the most. And so all three legs were saying, "Cut off the other two legs." And so it was a three-legged fight, a three-party fight, and we were all trying to convince Boeing—why do I keep saying Boeing?—Bonneville. We are talking about jobs, the utilities are talking about the little old ladies are going to freeze at wintertime, and we were both playing the violins. But it was clear how it was going to end up. And so the smelters, the big ones were down, and the smaller ones are holding on the best they can. It was an interesting time.

JD: Mm-hm. And so, around that time, or give me a little timeline about when you then decided your career with Kaiser was finished, and you retired?

RC: Oh, yeah, well, yeah. I could have gone—I was going to be offered a job down at Kaiser, at the center. And to start with, what they wanted me to do was to sell Kaiser Europe. And so I said, "Okay, I'll help sell Kaiser Europe, but then I want to retire." And it really hurt to sell Kaiser Europe. And it certainly hurt the Germans, and the Belgians, and the Swiss, because frankly, they liked working for Americans. We have, at least Kaiser—they liked working for Kaiser, and they said so very, very clearly. And so, I've been over there since. I've kept track. I still have my colleague who, I took care of operations and my colleague took care of everything else, and all of the staffs, legal and everything, and just the two of us ran it. It was, by the way, one of the best jobs—it was the best job I ever had, because my boss was nine time zones away. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RC: So at any rate, but so I retired then, sat around Portland, and then so when a recruiter came and said, "We'd like you to take over this recycling company. We have one plant that's—old plant that's built, that melts aluminum cans. It also makes aluminum magnesium. And we've got another one under construction, and the guy who was running it for us left because he's going to start his own business." So I said, "Okay." I looked around. I mean, I looked, I talked, I checked, did homework, and all of that stuff. So yeah, I did, so we moved to Tulsa where this plant was, and finished off the one in Tennessee which was taking care of Alcoa Tennessee, that plant, the rolling mill.

And what we had that was different is that we melted aluminum cans [1:25:00], and we delivered them molten over the road, so that all of the energy to melt it was saved, and the skim, that every time you solidify you lose the skim—all of that was saved, so we saved energy and recovery. And bingo, there we were. But the other secret that we had was that we did everything on a toll basis. Alcoa owned the cans. Alcoa either collected the cans, or bought them from a utility—no, from cities or recycling people, or whoever, and tolled them to us. So we didn't have any inventory. We didn't have any inventory costs involved. We just took the cans in, molten aluminum out, and it was great! So we expanded in the States, several plants, and then overseas to Great Britain. And so when I got to 65, I retired.

JD: So, how did they know about you, and come looking for you to participate?

RC: That's a good story.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: Real quickly, the number one largest stockholder, originally, the guy who had promoted really, put this together, was an oil and gas man, as you'd expect any good Texan to be. And so, Kaiser Aluminum had, among other things, had an oil and gas—yeah, we went into everything for a while, nickel, real estate, everything right around that time. And so this guy, out of the blue, calls up the—no, one story before that. The headhunter called up the human relations people and asked somebody that he had been a friend of a friend, and that guy said my name, because, you know. And so then the Texan called up the oil guy, and says, "Wait 'til you hear about this Cheek." [Laughs] It's nothing wrong with a Texan accent. And fortunately this guy said, "Oh, he walks on water." So yeah, or whatever oil men say to each other. So the next thing you know, I got the call.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs]

JD: So I want to take us in a slightly different direction, but I want to give you a chance, if there's other things about your career and kind of the connection between what you learned in your studies, and how that played out in your work life, I want to give you a chance to do that.

RC: Well, I'd like to make a pitch for recycling, in this respect: Oregon was a leader, absolute leader, in recycling. The five cent deposit, you know, everybody was pretty much copying. There are ten states that have deposits, and that's all there's been for, I don't know, twenty years maybe. And eight of them are a nickel, following Oregon's bill. California, of course, has to be different. It's a completely different system, but it adds up to two and a half cents. And Michigan has ten. The recycling rate is 90 percent on these states. The recycling rate on the other 40 states is about 30. That difference, if everybody was doing 90, is equivalent of all the electricity 1,300,000 homes need period, forever. Every year. I don't know who came up with this number, it doesn't mean a lot—or to make 8,000 747s. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RC: So, it's a great deal of energy involved. It's a great pollution thing, too, really, because again, four pounds of bauxite have to be dug up, and then to make two pounds of alumina [1:30:00], but when you make two pounds of alumina, you're making four pounds of red mud, as they call it, which has to be landfilled someplace. All of this, and then the smelter takes an enormous amount of electricity to smelt, so all of this is lost. Clinton, when he was running for President, said he would put in a mandatory deposit nationwide. He got into the politics of the thing, and you never heard another word about that. The problem is that the grocery chains say, "We don't want the cans coming back to our place. They're smelly; they collect flies. They're terrible." And so, soft drink and beer people, you don't—the party line: you don't want recycling. Even though, obviously, the soft drink and beer people would be very well off if they got their cans back. So they might have shelf space. So they say, okay. So then the soft drink and beer people say to the aluminum can makers, "Yeah, don't push this. Don't push this recycling any more than the ten states."

So somehow, the rest of us have to get on our horse and say, "Hey, we'll shout louder than the grocery chains, okay? And we'll save a great deal." By the way, there's a lot of other—aluminum pays for the entire recycling cycle. Glass is worth, what, ten cents a pound? And so you'll find the best recycling only where there is aluminum being recycled, because they can't afford to do it unless some laws pass that forces them to do it. So that's it.

JD: Oh, that's very interesting.

RC: So, I appreciate the opportunity to make a pitch.

JD: You bet. Recycling's a good pitch. You mentioned beer a couple of times, and since there's—

RC: Oh, I'm in favor of beer.

JD: [Laughs] OSU now has a hops and brewing archive, and Oregon loves its reputation as Beervana, and I know that you have a little story of your own about being a beer taster?

RC: Oh, gosh. Yeah, if you want. Yeah, it's terrible, but when I had the can plants and the foil plants, there was a small engineering—by the way, Kaiser invented the two-piece can, and we had a small laboratory in San Leandro, separate from everything else, with the inventors of the can, and all of the other engineers, the coating engineers and everything else. And they had to make coatings all of the time for the lid and for the can, and to try to come up with something new, to test every—so they needed taste testers. So first thing I showed up as the new boss—well, I was given—because the regular engineering department couldn't supervise it because they were too wild, and so they added it to my deal. So I went in there and, "All right, Cheek, let's see what your taste test is." And so I tasted all of these beers and stuff. And the answer was, "Cheek, you couldn't tell beer from horse piss." Excuse me. [Laughs] So that ended my taste tenure.

JD: [Laughs] So that was a short-lived career.

RC: It was a short-lived career. It was a great group, and we had lunch whenever I was out there. Everybody was sack lunch, and everybody had to tell jokes. And when they got around to me, I'm the worst joke-teller in the world. And I finally struggled through one joke, and one of the engineers said, "All right, Ralph, tell them your other joke." [Laughs] So he figured at most I had two.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: It was a great career, and it was all, I really believe, thanks to Kaiser Aluminum, and thanks to Janet Lekas.

JD: I would like to ask you, just as a former OSU student, whether you would have some advice you might share or offer to current or future OSU students?

RC: Sure. The people aspect is all-important. [1:35:00] And take whatever you can, courses you learn about labor relations, human relations, negotiate—whatever you want to call it, it's all the same bag, that is, people contact: how to deal with people, how to work with people, how to work for people. People working both ends, all ends of the deal. Technology rules today; I understand all of that, but don't forget the people aspect.

JD: And any final thoughts about just OSU?

RC: Oh, it's great. It's great. Last night we—if you don't mind me saying so?

JD: Please do.

RC: We, the whole family, initiated a scholarship in Janet's name for pharmacy, and it was a wonderful affair. And the Pharmacy School, as they proudly told me, 34 percent of their graduates give to their scholarship program, and they say this is better than all other schools at Oregon State.

JD: [Laughs]

RC: So, for whoever's watching, remember. OK?

JD: It's been great hearing your recollections; thanks so much, Ralph.

RC: You're welcome.

[1:36:28]