



Paul Farber Oral History Interviews, October 3, 2014

Title

“A Historian of Science Acquires His Tools”

Date

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Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In interview 1, Farber discusses his early upbringing in New York City, his family background, and the impact that religion made in his household as a child. From there he describes the family's move to Uniontown, Pennsylvania, his first interests in science, and his underwhelming high school experience in western Pennsylvania.

Farber then recounts his college experiences, first as an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh. Farber notes his adjustment to college life, his academic progression, the impact that a summer NSF institute made on the course of his studies, and his memories of meeting Vreneli Marti and her extraordinary family. His years as a graduate student at Indiana University are the next focus of the session, including his decision to attend IU and the scholarly environment that he found there. Farber also recounts the development of his interests in Comte de Buffon and ornithology during his graduate years.

A major component of the session is Farber's analysis of the means by which he required his scholarly toolkit as a historian. In this, Farber describes the ways in which he has managed to navigate large volumes of material in a variety of languages. He also shares his memories of early archival experiences in Paris.

The final portion of the interview is devoted to a discussion of Farber's job search following the completion of his Ph.D., his first impressions of western Oregon, his ultimate decision to come to OSU, and the state of the university at that time. Farber describes the climate at OSU in the early 1970s, including his unusual circumstance of working as a historian in the General Science department. Farber also recalls the process by which he learned the craft of teaching and describes the means by which he chose to pursue history over philosophy in the first place. The session concludes with Farber's impressions of OSU's ambition in the early 1970s and the low expectations that many of the era's faculty and administrators maintained for the institution.

Interviewee

Paul Farber

Interviewer

Chris Petersen

Website

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

Transcript

Chris Petersen: Okay, Paul, if you could please introduce yourself with your name and today's date, and our location?

Paul Farber: I'm Paul Farber, and today is October 3rd, 2014, in the library at Oregon State.

CP: So we'll talk about your life and your career, and the many years you spent associated with Oregon State University, but we'll start with the beginning. You were born in New York City?

PF: That's correct.

CP: Where in the city were you born?

PF: Manhattan. It's where my parents were living. They were living on the upper west side at the time, West 86th Street between Riverside and West End Avenue.

CP: And what were your parents' backgrounds?

PF: My parents were first-generation Americans. Their parents—my mother's parents came from Ukraine, and my father's came from Latvia. They were both born in New York City. My grandparents were among a few million Jews who fled Eastern Europe at the turn of the century. My dad was an accountant; my mother was a bookkeeper, although when she started having children she didn't work, so she was a homemaker.

CP: So do you have siblings?

PF: I have an older brother.

CP: So what was that like, the child of newly arrived immigrants in New York City, born in the mid-1940s? What was New York City like for you?

PF: Well, we moved when I was just about nine, but my memory of New York was as a—I mean, I had a wonderful childhood, so it was very positive. We lived a block from a small park, which I remember as an enormous park, but it actually was very tiny. And it was a nice neighborhood, so we would go—I felt very safe. I could play outside. There was a little lady, little ladies sitting on chairs who just made sure nobody came into the neighborhood who wasn't known. If anybody walked in, they would ask them their business there. [Laughs] So the kids were very safe. And my mother would shop every day; I would go with her. We'd go to the bakery and the baker would give me a cookie. We'd go to the grocer and get some cherries or something. And so it was just sort of a little adventure every day. It was a very happy childhood.

CP: Was yours an immigrant neighborhood?

PF: Hm, immigrant. No, my memory is it was mostly like my parents, so first generation. My grandmother lived in the Bronx. It was like visiting a foreign country. No one spoke English. The newspapers were all in other languages; there was no English at all to be seen. I do regret—my parents felt very proud—my grandparents were delighted to come here, and were very patriotic Americans. They felt this was the greatest place in the world. And my parents were also in a similar way, so they never taught me any of the languages that I might have—they felt if we're Americans, we speak English, so. My grandmother never learned English. She spoke Yiddish her entire life. And finally as I got older I was able to speak Yiddish with her, but not that anyone had taught me. I just was able to pick it up and I wanted to be able to communicate with her.

CP: Did religion play a role in your upbringing?

PF: Yes. I think for anybody in the '40s, it would have. Yeah, we were very consciously Jewish. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood. I'd say 90-some percent of the kids were Jewish. At school on Rosh Hashanah or any of the big holidays, school essentially closed down. [Laughs] There was no one there. It was a big shock, we moved to western Pennsylvania when I was just about nine, because it flipped. I was one of two Jews in the school. That was a completely different experience.

CP: And what community was that?

PF: That was in, well, western Pennsylvania, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh about an hour or so.

CP: What precipitated that move?

PF: Oh, my dad got a promotion in his company, and he went from being just an office accountant to being in charge of the whole office. He was a controller. So it meant a raise in salary, status, and all of that. My mother never—I wouldn't say, well it's too strong to say she never adjusted. My mother always considered western Pennsylvania some kind of exile [laughs], and was always expecting and looking forward to moving back. They never did. The metro pull was clearly New York, and we went back several times. All the family was there, etcetera.

CP: Uh-huh. What were you interested in when you were a child?

PF: Well, when I was a little kid, to be honest, I don't really remember. I really liked playing—my mother was always telling me—I liked to take things apart. [0:05:00] And occasionally I would get into trouble because I would take things apart [laughs], and couldn't get them back together, and they were things that not necessarily should be taken apart, like clocks, and so on. But when I was a little bit older, say toward middle school, like many kids in the '50s, I just became completely captivated with science!

And science was absolutely in everything. And I was a typical little science geek. I would send off for things in the mail. At one point I became interested in living things, or actually life, let's say biology, because I started ordering specimens to dissect in my bedroom. I ordered an octopus, an opossum, all sorts of strange things. But it was very interesting, because I had no books or anything; I was just taking them apart trying to figure what they were.

CP: How did this start?

PF: The dissection craze?

CP: Well, just the science in general.

PF: I think it was just the times.

CP: Really?

PF: Yeah, just, there was a lot of interest in science. We would build rockets. We built some pretty sophisticated—my friends were all interested in science. We did some neat rockets where we calculated their altitude just using some very simple geometry, before we had geometry. We learned a lot. The school was hopeless. I mean, all of my science education was self-taught because there was nothing coming from the schools. We also were very interested, like lots of little boys, in things that made noise and blew up. And so we started making bombs, and so actually it was the bomb-making that led to the rockets, because it turns out rockets are more interesting than bombs. They can't really do much, at least can't do much without getting into trouble. [Laughs] So we quickly switched tracks.

CP: Yeah. So it sounds like high school was, it kind of came and went for you, or am I wrong about that?

PF: Yeah, in the first several years in Pennsylvania between grade school, I wasn't very happy. I didn't really fit in. It seemed like I was an alien, and people looked at me like I was an alien, partly because I was Jewish, partly because I came from New York City. So I went to school the first day with a tie and a white shirt, and all of the kids were in jeans [laughs] and flannel, plaids. They're like, "Who's this kid dropping in from the moon?" I had this, "Where am I?" The food was all different, so it was quite an adjustment.

Later, and also I wasn't a terribly good student in grade school. I discovered years and years later, actually just a decade ago, that I'm dyslexic, mildly dyslexic. But I didn't know that. My teachers told me I was careless, sloppy. Those were the kinds of things, arithmetic and spelling, I reversed digits, but I didn't know that's what was going on back then, and neither did anyone else. So my early years in Pennsylvania weren't terribly happy in school. I think of myself as your average C

student. Actually, I was looking for my grade slips the other day. There are some in the basement that I can't find, unless they're here—

CP: [Laughs]

PF: —at your disposal. But then once I got to high school, then suddenly I got into subjects like algebra, where I was manipulating things, as opposed to actually all of the arithmetic calculations. Suddenly I went from the bottom of the class to the top of the class. And that made a difference. And then also, I think adolescence is a difficult time for anyone. So as I got a little bit older, suddenly I felt like I was sort of coming into my own. Suddenly it became fun, and then of course there were girls, and very, very interesting things in high school. [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs] Did you always anticipate going to college?

PF: There was never a question.

CP: Yeah. So you went to the University of Pittsburgh as an undergraduate?

PF: Right, yeah. Yeah.

CP: And the decision was, it was close by, I assume?

PF: Well, Pitt was a good school. It was close by; it had a good reputation. I got a little bit of financial aid. And of course, back then, with a little bit of financial aid and the tuition not being very high, it was affordable. I did apply to some more prestigious schools, or institutions, and didn't get in. [Laughs] I remember Hopkins was one. And given the wretched school I went to, it's not surprising. I was not prepared for college. We did practically no writing. [0:10:00] It was really very, very poor. Well, it was a poor district, with almost 30 percent unemployment when I was there. And I would say probably no more than 20 percent of the students went to college. So it wasn't a college preparatory high school in any stretch of the imagination.

CP: Yeah, I would gather that a town called Uniontown in western Pennsylvania is probably pretty blue-collar.

PF: It was a very blue-collar town. It used to be coal, then it became coke; there were coke ovens. When I was there, we first moved there, they still had open beehive coke ovens. There was smoke spewing out into the air 24 hours a day. And so every day there would be just a film of dirt on the windowsills. Shirt collars were black after one day. A handkerchief would be black after one day. And I hate to think about my lungs. [Clears throat]

CP: [Laughs] Well it sounds like it was a bit of an adjustment going to college, then?

PF: It was in the sense that, yeah, I was surprised by how difficult it was, because high school actually was pretty easy. But on the other hand, it was magical. I loved it from the moment I got there! At some point, I remember in high school being called an egghead [laughs], and it's taken me a long time to realize, yeah, that's really true.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: I mean, I always was an egghead. I liked to read. I started reading all sorts of things on my own. Aside from science, I had a keen interest in philosophy. So I ordered—this was, of course, before the internet, but I was able to order Hume and Kant. There was a library, and I would go to the library a lot. The librarians were anything but helpful. They felt that I shouldn't be taking out books that were too advanced for my age. So I was always being shuttled off to, shunted off to the children's section. Of course, I want the real things, the real books, and so there were times when there were problems. A friend of mine actually, a very good friend, was told by the librarian she couldn't check out *Gone with the Wind* because it was too advanced for her. And she had to have her mother go in and get the book out. And the librarian said to the mother, "Don't think you're fooling us. I know what you're going to do with this book." [Laughs] Corrupt her daughter.

CP: [Laughs] Well, you studied the sciences at Pitt.

PF: Yeah.

CP: A Zoology major and Chemistry minor. Why don't you kind of take me through your academic progression there?

PF: Actually, let me just go back to the year between my senior year and my first year in college. I had a wonderful biology teacher, Corey, who actually gave me preserved frogs and various things [laughs], and was very, very encouraging. Anyway, he recommended that I apply for summer NSF Institute. I think those were still pretty new, and I applied for one and got in. I went to Syracuse, and there was one instructor, Marvin Druger who was a student of Tavshunsky, who was a very good geneticist. And so we had classes starting at 9 in the morning till lunch, and then we had lab from like 1 to 5. So very intense, but of course the kids have lots of energy and we just throw ourselves into it. It was a small class. And that really, really sparked my interest in biology. So I mean, I was pre-med, so I thought I would go to medical school. But the summer at Syracuse was very formative.

CP: Wow.

PF: So once I got to Pitt, I took zoology. I took a zoology/pre-med curriculum, but I also took a lot of electives. If there was something I was interested in, more—I have actually, technically I have a Philosophy minor. It doesn't show up on my transcript, but I took a pile of philosophy courses, and in the process took a philosophy science course with Adolf Grünbaum, and then took a course with Robert Colodny; he was a historian of science. I took the course because I was told by this good friend of mine who lived next door in the dorm that Colodny was one of the best lecturers on campus; he was charismatic. He fought in the Spanish Civil War, and had been investigated by Congress and so on, because he was a member of the American Communist Party, among other things. [Laughs] [0:15:00] And this was early on, when things like that were not looked on very favorably.

Anyway, he was a charismatic lecturer, and after a couple of weeks in his class, I suddenly realized: this is it; this is my subject. Just like everything in the past was erased. And I went in and asked him, in my very naïve western Pennsylvania manner, "Can you make a living doing this?" And he just laughed and said, "Of course, you can!" I said, "How do you do it?" And he just took out a little pad, and wrote down six graduate schools, and said, "Here, apply to those, and you'll be on your way. Don't worry about it. There's lots of money, and you'll get scholarships."

And that was that, and I was on my way. I called my parents, and asked them to drive into Pittsburgh and chat about something fairly important. They had no idea what was going on. So we went out to Stauffer's and had dinner. And I told them, because I was a little worried. After all, being the doctor in a Jewish family is a very good thing, my son the doctor and so on. And I was very pleased and slightly surprised, but very pleased that my parents both immediately were supportive. My mother said, "Great!" And she never liked the idea of—even if she liked the idea of having a son the doctor, she didn't like what she thought was the hardship of being a medical professional and the kind of life, how much time, and stress, and all of that. Then my dad said, "Well, we've been saving money for medical school. If you need money for graduate school, it's all there." Just totally supportive. They made it a very, very easy transition.

CP: Wow. A couple more questions about Pittsburgh.

PF: Yeah.

CP: I'm interested in your social experience, particularly in your introduction to an influential family in your life, at Pitt.

PF: Oh, the Martis.

CP: Yeah.

PF: Yeah, well that's certainly an interesting story. [Laughs] You'll have to stop me, because I can go on forever, but. I had been dating a girl from, not from Uniontown, but from Brownsville, which was twelve miles west, so you know, sort of like Philomath or something like that. She was Jewish, Susie Greenberg, a very sweet girl, and we had been dating for a couple of years. I was one year ahead of her, so I went off to Pitt. But we had our whole life planned out, practically to our burial plots. We were getting married after I finished medical school, [laughs] have two children, etcetera, etcetera, was the scenario. And so after she came to Pitt we dated, but being rational people, but I think also maybe at some level we were kind of safe bets. We would kind of hold each other like, okay, if something better doesn't come along—[laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: —I've got a spouse who is socially acceptable, etcetera. That's maybe too harsh, but it's probably true, being honest about it. Anyway, I mean, it was totally subconscious. So anyway, so we were dating, but we decided it would be a good thing if each of us date other people, just to be sure, because we had been dating since we were juniors in high school, and we really should be sure. And of course, this is all before any kind of—I don't know if I want to go into this or not, but anyway, this was before sex. So we weren't having sexual relations. And that was not unusual, we thought, and that was another thing we planned out, after I finished medical school and got married and we'd have sex.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: Anyway, what can I say? Well, it was the early '60s. Things changed very dramatically in the '60s. But anyway, so Susie and I had our life planned out. At towards the middle of my junior year, my roommate Barry Shaw—we had an apartment on Forbes—invited two girls over to our apartment. Not unusual. It was friendliness, there were no romantic connotations, except that what Barry had told me right before Betsy and Vreneli—that was her friend—came over to the apartment, was that he was in love with Betsy. Barry fell in love about every other week with somebody else, so I didn't take it all that seriously. But okay, you're in love with Betsy. And so the two of them came in [0:20:00], and he and Betsy went off to the bedroom, presumably to talk or whatever, and so that left Vreneli and me in the living room.

And so we were just sitting on that couch, and behind Vreneli's head was a reproduction of just the head from Birth of Venus, this very beautiful redhead by Botticelli. And I have no way of explaining this, but suddenly I was just sort of overcome. If there's such a thing as falling in love at first sight, I don't really believe in that, but that's what it was, it sort of felt like, at least. And so, she must have been attracted to me equally, because when Barry and Betsy came, out of the bedroom, the two of us were lying on the couch making out, which shocked Barry deeply, because what Barry had been telling Betsy was that he actually had fallen in love with Vreneli—

CP: [Laughs]

PF: —but hadn't told Vreneli or me. And so he was furious at me, and for weeks didn't talk, and just called me an incestuous beast, and so on. Anyway, what became obvious was that this was the new person in my life, and that all the plans with Susie were just somehow vacated. And so we started dating, and she told me about her family, which seemed amazing, because I mean, before I met them—like for example, once she got a long letter from her father that must have been four pages, single-spaced, typed, on Augustine. I thought, "Who gets a letter from her father about Augustine?"

It was just so completely outside of my realm! He was a philosopher, and took all of this stuff very seriously, and didn't seem as abstracted as something that was related to everyday life. For him, Augustine was of great relevance to our daily lives. But I remember being very impressed and thinking, "My goodness, this is an amazing family." And finally, when I did meet Fritz, it was under hardly auspicious terms. Vreneli and I went to New York in the summer of '64 to work at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows. And so she went. She didn't like it, so she got a job in the city, but I continued to work out there. And so her father was visiting, and she brought him to the fair to meet me. Well, at that point I was working in Franksville. It was a hot dog place. [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: I had this dumb little hat. And I was heavier; I weighed back then probably a good 35 pounds more than I am now, so I was a little bit chubby. And her father was not impressed, [laughs] not impressed at all.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: But fortunately, we ended up having a very, very close relationship, and Fran's mother always said I was the favorite son-in-law. I shared a lot of interests. I was interested in his philosophy, and he was an amazing character. But anyway, so I was introduced to the Marti family. Then I met Fran's twin sister Moira. Pitt had a trimester system, so you could go through the summer and get a full semester's worth of credits, and so she finished in three years. We entered the same year. So she went off to Harvard, and at the time I thought, "Oh, this is the end. She's going to get snatched up by some Harvard guy." I never thought it would last. But it did. I was very happy about that.

CP: What was she studying?

PF: Russian. She's quite amazing in languages. Her father, being Swiss, raised the kids speaking French, German and English, so they became fluent in three languages. And then Vreneli was just interested in language, as was her father, so she studied Spanish, and Hebrew, and all sorts of languages in high school. And when she went to college, she somehow—this was not a good choice, but anyway, she decided if she majored in Russian, because she had a little bit of Russian, [laughs] very little bit [0:25:00]—if she majored in Russian and minored in French and German, she could fulfill all of her distribution requirements. [Laughs] And so she wouldn't have to take these courses, many of them were Mickey Mouse courses. So that's what she did. She majored in Russian, and she was very good at it, and then applied to graduate schools and got into Harvard, and had planned on taking a year off, but Harvard was too attractive a call, so she went. It was a disaster, actually.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: That's her story, not mine. But anyway, when I visited her after she went off to Cambridge, she was living with her twin sister Moira in a house on Magazine Street. And it was very unsettling, because Moira's body type and appearance is completely different—dark hair, shorter, etcetera, but they have many of the same mannerisms, their hand gestures and so on. So she'd do something that I associated with Vreneli and no one else, and it was like, it was just very strange at first.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: Anyway, she was at Boston University at the time.

CP: Yeah. Well you matriculated into Indiana. That was—?

PF: Right. I applied to Harvard and didn't get in.

CP: One of the six colleges.

PF: [Laughs] It was one of the six, yes, right. Harvard was one, too. In some ways it was a fortunate—I mean, a couple schools I didn't get into, some I did, but I think going to Indiana turned out to be magnificently, just a great, great choice for me, because it was a department that was small. It was a graduate department; there were no undergraduates. Lots of money. I actually was able to get a grant right off, a federal grant, and a Hastings Fellow after that. So I did very well financially as a student.

But the department was small; it was very nurturing. Fred Tertia was my major professor, spent hours and hours with me. I had been a zoology major, had written very little, had come from a pathetic high school, and I really needed a lot of work! [Laughs] And Sam Westfall was pretty amazing. He would meet not just with me, but with all graduate students. Typically we'd write a 30-page research paper, and he would meet with each one of us and go over the paper line by line. We'd take hours. He would say, "Farber." I can hear his voice, actually! He'd say, "Farber, why did you use a relative pronoun here?" And I was like, "What is a relative pronoun?"

CP: [Laughs]

PF: [Laughs] "And why did I use it? It sounded good? I don't know why." [Laughs] So he made me, he forced me to think seriously about word choice. I'd gotten myself an Oxford Shorter Dictionary—it's actually a pretty huge thing—and started looking up words. I wonder if that's the right word? So I'd look it up. And then also, I cleaned up my grammar. Well it isn't so much that I cleaned it up, because I think my spoken English was very, very good, which was a reflection of my parents, not my school. But I became aware of grammar, so I was able to make correct choices about clauses and punctuation, and so on. And that's sort of what you needed.

Had I gone to Harvard, I would have never gotten that. Harvard was very much sink or swim. You just go, go do your thing, and the professors sit in judgment. It's up to you to get there. And I don't know if I would have made it. I don't know; it's hard to say at this point. But Indiana was great for me, and it was—one of the great things about Fred was it was done in a way that was nurturing. I never felt I was put down.

I remember once, more than once, but [laughs] I remember one particular instance, I'll tell you about one particular instance. I had done what I thought was my master's thesis and turned it in. Fred read it, and we got together, and he said,

"Well, now." This was in the spring, and I thought I'd be able to go to Paris and start working on my dissertation. So I met with Fred, and Fred said, "When you finish revising this thesis, you're going to be very pleased with it." [Laughs] Oh no, I guess I'm not going to Paris this summer! [Laughs] I spent the summer revising it.

But again, that was a terrific experience, because we went through it line by line. [0:30:00] He said, "What's the argument? And where's the topic sentence? And where are you leading, where are you going?" So I was very, very fortunate to have some terrific mentors, terrific mentors.

CP: Mm. Well, you focused on Comte de Buffon? Is that how you pronounce it?

PF: I discovered Buffon my senior year in college. We had to do a research paper, long, probably 20 or 30 pages. I had two years of college French, [laughs] freshman and sophomore year, and I was in the library and just wandering around and saw this set of volumes, Buffon, leather-bound. They looked really beautiful. I took a couple of volumes off and looked at them, beautiful engravings. I thought, "Wow!" I had read John Greene's *The Death of Adam*, and in that book he discusses Buffon as one of the important figures of the 18th century, one of the two most important figures. But also, he thought as a precursor for Darwin. I came to disagree with him quite strongly about that, but that's beside the point.

But anyway, I had run across the name, and I thought, "Well, that would be neat. I could check some of these books out." [Laughs] And then I also discovered in the library they had a translation, which I don't think I actually could have worked in French, really. So I did the typical undergraduate thing, really. What I did was I basically read the English, and then when I wanted a quotation, I would go to the French to make it look more scholarly. [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: We did things like that, but that's the way it was. Yeah, I almost don't think I've ever told anyone that. Anyway, so I was familiar with Buffon, and he was a terrific writer. He was a member of the Academie Française. It was beautiful French. Even in English, the translation was beautiful, and interesting, and engaging. So I found it neat. So when I got to Indiana, we had to do research papers. I thought, "Well, that was pretty interesting. Why not just go take that on?" So I went to the library and I could—back then, you could check it out. I checked out the French that had belonged to Alfred Kinsey, and it was the first edition, leather-bound, with gold tooling on the outside, fold-out engravings. I don't know what that's worth, 30,000, 40,000 dollars? This was in the stacks!

I took them all out, carried them all back to my office [laughs], had them there all semester. No one ever looked at them; they were never called back. And was just so enamored with that. And also, he turned out to be very, very interesting. He had a theory of generation that sounded kind of wacko at first, but then I discovered that it was mainstream 18th century, and so I became interested in that, theories of generation, because they were so unusual. And Buffon, it turns out, was bucking the accepted positions, and was using Newton's science to do that. So then that's sort of like, wow, here's the influence of the new English philosophy and science coming into France. And it turns out Buffon was one of the main figures to introduce Newton to the French.

And so he turns out—he turned out to be a very, very important person in ways I didn't even know. So I just fell down the rabbit hole and didn't emerge for a very long time.

CP: I'm interested in kind of getting a sense of how you developed your tool kit as a scholar?

PF: Yeah, well.

CP: Was it just a situation of working hard and having good mentors, or was there more to it than that?

PF: There was a lot more to it than that, but that was the big piece of that. I was certainly encouraged. Back then, there was practically nothing written on Buffon. It was just virgin territory. And both Fred and Sam said, "That's a really good area." They knew he was one of the great figures of the 18th century, and no one's worked on him. That's one of the wonderful things about the history of science. I guess you can, back then, even now, you can pick major, major topics. It's not like English literature, where you have to take something very, very narrow.

Anyway, so part of it is having good mentors, good peers. It was a great group of other—Maggie Osler was one of them—just a great group of people. [0:35:00] And so there was a constant discussion. We had a group called the Jim Beam Club that would meet periodically. I can't remember how often, but basically what we did was bought a bottle of Jim Beam bourbon, and didn't leave until it was gone. But it was just an intense conversation. These were seemingly live-and-death issues for us. Anyway, so that was important. And a certain amount of luck. I was just falling into some really interesting questions, and getting a grant to go to France to work on these first papers, and so on.

But I think really, in terms of tool kits, kind of serious scholarship, there are a couple of things. One is just my temperament. Perhaps because I was told throughout my childhood that I was careless and sloppy—my sister-in-law, who is a psychologist, says I've overcompensated. And so, one of the things that characterizes my work is an enormous attention to detail. And I'm very, very persistent. If I don't find something, I just keep looking. I figure, okay, there is some way to get at this. And I'm not easily discouraged. I can work on a problem for a very, very long time. So that's partly my temperament.

The other thing is I had a conversation in, let's see, that would be about—no, I know exactly. It was '75, the summer of '75, because I was at Harvard and I had an NSF grant, and I was working at Widener and the Museum of Comparative Zoology, MCZ. And I had sent in a paper on—do you want the details of this? Okay. So I had written a paper, which came out of research I had been doing on birds. After I had finished my dissertation, I decided pretty early on that I didn't want to become a Buffon scholar. Spending my whole career just focusing on one person seemed too restrictive. So I was looking for something else, and decided to work on birds.

And the way I got to that was what I noticed was the literature on birds after Buffon suddenly changed very dramatically. So I was, what's the heck's going on here? I'm curious, In a few decades, you suddenly have essentially professional, serious ornithology, whereas Buffon's subject was more amateurish. So what was going on in those few decades? Anyway, that interested me. So I started looking at birds and the history of ornithology. Again, had a grant, was able to work at the Natural History Museum in London, and in Paris, and the resources, incredible archives, but then just a great library. In London they just gave me a key to the Tweeddale Collection, which was more or less everything written between the 17th and 19th centuries on birds, all in a set of cases. They just gave me a key and said, "Go take whatever you want." You know? [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: So it was an amazing opportunity. I don't think you could do that these days. But anyway, that was back then. Anyway, so one of the things I discovered in my reading was that in the 18th century there was a crisis in the study of birds, because basically what was happening was that explorers and naturalists would go to places like South America, they would collect crates of parrots and all of these very interesting exotic birds, and mammals, lizards, and so on, ship them back to either London or Paris, Berlin, Leiden, etcetera.

And as often as not, within a few months, the whole collection was reduced to powder. There were beetles, dermestids beetles, which just devour specimens. Like overnight, you could just have something—in the afternoon you have a parrot; in the morning some bones and dust. It was absolutely the—it was a crisis. And so people, everyone was trying to figure out: how do we get rid of these bugs? People were trying things like fumigating with sulfur, but it destroyed all of the feathers. So you kill the bugs, but you destroy your specimen. Anyway, at one point in the 1770s there was a French pharmacist in Metz who discovered that he could make a preparation using arsenic. Paint the inside of the bird, beetles come in, and they drop dead. End of problem. And so it went from being a crisis to basically a technique. All of a sudden the literature on taxidermy just changes. [0:40:00] No one's asking, "How do we preserve?" They say, "Okay, to preserve birds, this is what you do: da, da, da, da, da." So that's a neat little story.

So I wrote an article and sent off to *Isis*, which is the main journal in the history of science. So I was walking across Harvard Yard with Roger Hahn, from Berkeley, who just happened to be in town that week. And I guess—this is my memory of it, there could be—this could be faulty, by anyway this is my memory. He said that he had been sent the paper to review. And nice story based on sources, and running it down, etcetera, but he basically said, "So what? Who cares? Why should *Isis* publish this? It's a nice little story. It's a story. What's its significance? Why should anyone care?" And I don't think anyone had ever said that to me before. He went on to elaborate, I don't know whether he was a mentor. He

became a mentor. He's a French historian of science. He basically said, "When you do this for science, you can't just look for interesting stuff. You have to look for significant problems. That's what real historians do."

And it really made a huge impression on me. I think in terms of my tool kit, and sort of doggedness, and then sitting down and saying, "Okay, what's important about this stuff?" And there may be an area that I'm interested in, because I let my interests, have always let my interests guide me, but then it's also, okay, so, who cares? What's important here? If I'm going to do something, it has to be something other people are going to want to read, and will find interesting, and will be important for the profession, in some ways it ties in. So, I think that again, this is just kind of luck, walking across the Yard with Roger. At that time he just happened to read my manuscript, and just happened to be a nice guy. He was giving his junior colleague some advice. But it really struck home. And the other thing was knowing French has been very helpful, just in languages area. I've studied German in graduate school, and that for birds was an enormous amount.

And with German and French, it turned out—my wife would cringe if she heard me say this, but it allowed me to then look at Dutch, Italian, and so with a dictionary and kind of thinking it—well, not thinking it, just sort of getting the sense of what was there. So having a couple of languages was, in terms of my basic tools—and of course I have a Zoology major, so I know a lot of science. And I wasn't intimidated by going—when I started to study birds, I had never studied birds, so I said, "Okay, I'm just going to have to go get a bunch of books on ornithology, and sit down and learn all of the families," and etcetera, and that's what I did, just doggedness. [Laughs] But also, you know, I had some scientific background, which was very helpful.

What else was I going to say about the language? Oh, yeah. Let me just add one thing about—because this goes back to Buffon. When I first checked out Buffon's 36 volumes from the library—I still marvel that I had those in my hands for so long. Anyway, I started reading it, and of course my French was terrible. I had two years freshman, sophomore, that was it. I really wasn't very good. I was hopeless, actually. When I had a paragraph to translate, I would always get Vreneli's help, because Vreneli was quite fluent. She was always quite nice about it, but it made me realize how [unclear]. Anyway, so what I—but yeah, he had written 36 volumes, big volumes, and I had to do a term paper in a set period of time. And so, had I sat down and read the 36 volumes, at my rate of reading, I'd probably still be reading it. So that's completely impossible.

So what I started doing was sort of skimming, and sort of going down—basically, what I was actually doing, I think what I was doing, was just looking for words I knew. [Laughs] And piecing together, and trying to—I think it says something about the way my mind works. [0:45:00] I can take pieces, and form a story or a narrative, construct meaning, as opposed to, say, my wife, who is very literal. I mean, if she's reading a sentence and there's one word she doesn't know, she's stuck; she can't go beyond that. She has to go back, find the word, and then proceed from there. So we have very, very different styles. We tried translating together once and we absolutely failed, because our styles are so different.

Anyway, so I started doing that in French, and ultimately got through the whole 36 volumes, and wrote my paper. But then, what I noticed, because the reading load in graduate school was enormous! We got reading that would be like fifteen pages, single spaced, on the subject. There was no way a human could read that many books in fifteen weeks. It was just not possible. And I think in a way I was sort of naïve. I think these bibliographies were not really intended to be lists that we were supposed to master. On the other hand, I had professors who seemed to know every book that was ever written. They were so conversant with the literature, Strauss, Ringer, so I felt I have to read as many of these as I can.

So I would go to the library every day and bring home at least ten volumes, figure, "Okay, how am I going to do this?" So I started just flipping through, not exactly pretending it was French, but just letting the words on the page jump out at me, and then reading the introduction and conclusion, and this sort of thing. So I'd say, "Okay, I know what this book is about. I get the general argument, took notes. And if I need this book, I know what it is." So, Paul the Tsar, the crisis of the 17th century, and so on. But so I started going through ten volumes an evening. So I started to get very fast.

And I think that's also one of my little tools, because I can go into a library; I'm not intimidated if there's an enormous amount. When I start a new project, like when I started evolutionary ethics—zero knowledge. So I just had to start from scratch. Didn't know anything about ethics, actually, the academic discipline. Just started from the ground up, and just started reading all the basic things, and the bibliographies put you down, you start seeing which other books are being referred to all the time, go over the controversial figures, go to the library and get the journals, etcetera. So I think that that's one of my tools that has been very—I think it's hard to be an historian if you can't speed read. Now, my wife would

argue that I pay a heavy price for that, because I make mistakes. I'll read a book and I'll get it wrong, and just get the argument wrong. The only thing I can say in my defense is that if I'm going to use an argument, I go back and look at the book carefully. And so the mistake usually gets corrected. [Laughs]

CP: It sounds like one of your early archival experiences was in Paris. Am I right about that?

PF: Oh, totally, yes. That was my first archive experience. It was at the Jardin des Plumes, what had been the royal garden, before someone built it up from a very small pharmaceutical garden into this great, great institution that it became, and has continued to expand. It's where Cuvier was, and so on. Yes, and all of his papers were there, boxes, and boxes, and boxes of them, although before he died he tried to burn all of his papers. So actually his early papers don't exist. I didn't know that when I went.

And my first week—well, two things. My first week I realized that I couldn't read a word on the page. This is 18th century quill pen handwriting. I had the feeling, "I'm in Paris. I'll never get the dissertation. [Laughs] I'll be bussing tables for the rest of my life or something." That was, it was very, very discouraging. Then I discovered that not only couldn't I read it, but even if I could, it wasn't there, a lot of this stuff I had come to look at.

So, basically what I did in terms of figuring out, I just spent a lot of time on one page, and just started to look for a letter I could recognize. [0:50:01][Laughs] And it's like cracking a code. And finally I got good at: these are A's, these are B's, these are C's, that makes a D, and pretty soon I had most of the alphabet. And then I can start putting the letters together, and then I had to worry about whether I understood the French or not, another issue. But at least I could get the words together. So that was my first archive experience. I had no preparation. No one ever said anything to me about how you work in archives or anything; I just walked in cold.

There was a lovely lady there, older lady—of course, she was much younger than I am now, but from my perspective in my early 20s she was an old lady, maybe 40. And she just kind of took me under her wing. She was one of the people who worked behind the desk, and she was just nice to me. She would make sure I would come in, so whatever I was working on the day before was right there on the table. One day she met me as I walked in downstairs. She was all upset, because someone had come in and requested one of the boxes I was working on. And of course, the French are very territorial about their research, and she was expecting bloodshed or something like that, [laughs] that here are two people studying Buffon.

But of course, being American, I thought, "Fabulous, another person who's interested in this!" So I wasn't the slightest bit upset. I wanted to know what he was working on, and we became good friends, and have corresponded ever since and have helped one another. He was French, [laughs] and it says something about him that he could rise to the occasion. Well, I was there first, maybe, so. [Laughs] Anyway, and she, for example, just to show how she watched out for me, I was doing something that was incorrect, that was improper, essentially breaking the rules, but I didn't know it.

I was working on a manuscript, and then if I got tired, I would say, "Okay, I'll go outside and get a cup of coffee." So I'd just leave my desk with all of the manuscripts on the table, this was the manuscript room after all, and go out and get a cup of coffee, come back in, and a couple of times this happened, she came over to me and she said something. Again, my French was—when I first got there, I understood maybe five percent of what was said to me. Maybe a little bit more, but very little. Vreneli, of course, was my translator, although she wasn't in the library. So here I am; she's telling me I've obviously done something wrong, but I don't know what it is.

So, of course, being Paul Farber, I smile and say, "Yes, yes, got it," you know, "certainly won't do it again." [Laughs] I didn't know what it was I was doing anyway. So this went on for a couple of days. So I came in, and she gave me this look, sort of a quizzical look, like, "What the heck's going on with you?" So then she took a piece of paper and wrote it out, like, "When you leave, return manuscript box to desk," [laughs], "in front." But she figured, okay, I'm reading 18th century manuscripts; maybe I don't understand what she says to me, but obviously at some level I knew some French. And of course I understood it, and I felt very embarrassed, and, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." She said, "No, no, fine, fine."

And then the other thing about her—these are examples—you can go to an archive in France, maybe anywhere, but certainly in France, and have a terrible experience. You can also have a wonderful experience. It's somewhat luck, hitting it off with the people who are there. Vreneli says that she doesn't understand why I seem to go into any library and people

seem to just kind of take care of me. Obviously, it's just because I look like a befuddled professor. [Laughs] They just feel sorry for me and take care of me! Whereas Vreneli walks in speaking perfect French, and as often as not gets into an argument about something. [Laughs] I would never argue. Anyway, well, anyway, I won't get into too many of those details.

Well, actually I'll just tell two other things. So, I started to order photocopies of these manuscripts I was reading, because they were very, very interesting, not only Buffon, but other people as well, and then photocopies of some 18th century works which I knew I wouldn't be able to get elsewhere. And so I started getting these, and I noticed when I looked more carefully at the bills [0:55:00], which I'm paying, I noticed that I was getting a discount on each bill, 10 or 20 percent off. So I thought it was a little odd. I was pleased, and being a graduate student, I had very limited funds, and so I was happy I got the discount. And then the same thing with microfilm, too; they took a bunch of microfilm for me.

So I asked her one day. I said, "I'm very happy to get this discount, but you know, is there a mistake being made? And if so, why do I qualify for discounts? It's very nice." And she [laughs] kind of smiled, and said, "Oh, trop compliqué. This is too complicated. I really can't explain this to you." I think staff, and people who were working at the Jardin, got discounts, so I don't think I qualified. But she was just being nice to me. [Laughs] The other, just one other example of how nice she was—there was one manuscript, a set of manuscripts, a box of manuscripts of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire that I was trying to get at for months, months and months and months. Every time I went to order it, I guess, she would say it was in the bindery. So I said, "How long is it going to be at the bindery? Like, how long does it take to bind these things?" Because I was there for a year. This wasn't like I was breezing in for a week. And said, "Well, it's hard to say."

But then one day she said, "Here. Give me a list of all the manuscripts you're interested in, specific ones." She didn't say why, or what she was going to do. I assumed that she would go talk to somebody in the bindery and get some of these out. But I never saw the manuscripts. Then about six months later, after I got back to Corvallis, in the mail comes the roll of film, microfilm, of all those manuscripts, a huge number—no bill.

CP: Mm.

PF: [Laughs] No bill. And I could never get anybody to tell me where it came from, who ordered it, anything. And later, years later, I discovered that the archivist was working on those manuscripts—again, this sort of, I mean, this was a public institution, so he didn't have the right to just take these manuscripts and just use them exclusively, so they were checked out to the bindery. [Laughs] So they were essentially off limits for a year, over a year.

And just a kind of a tag onto that story, Mike Osborne, who is now on the faculty here, when he was still in California, it must have been—yeah, it was when he was in Santa Barbara, he and Anita were passing through town, and we were talking about Geoffroy. And he said something about, there were a whole set of manuscripts that he'd never been able to [laughs] access. And I said, "Oh," as he was telling me, I said, "I have them."

CP: [Laughs]

PF: He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I have the microfilm of all of those." He said, "That's impossible. How can you possibly have all of those?" "It's a complicated story," [laughs], "but if you want them, you may use them. But you may not ever say that you got them from me. You can cite them, because they have numbers, and this is Jardin, and no one can fault you because that's what it is, but you can't say anything about how you got it." Which is what he did. He used it and never said that he got it through me. Probably through the—I'm sure that woman just ordered it. Actually, the way they did microfilm back then is that there was a little man who would come in with a camera and take whatever manuscript it was into the cloak room, close the door, and take a picture of each page. I think she just had this guy come in one evening and take all of the pictures, like a spy movie or something, and send it off to me. I'd love to know the full details of that story, but I don't really have any hope of digging it up. [Laughs]

CP: Let's talk about OSU for a bit.

PF: Yeah, sure.

CP: So you came; you got married in Indiana. You finished up your PhD. In 1970 you came to OSU, assistant professor of history of science in the Department of General Science?

PF: That's right. Let me just say that Vreneli's dad, before we did get married, once we were downstairs, and I was looking at his Augustine, which was in—his copy was in Latin. [1:00:00] It was Latin. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. The point is, I was looking at some of his philosophy books, because he had Greek and Latin, and I didn't say anything. I said, "Oh, that's interesting. These are the originals, original languages." He said, "Well, I don't know how anyone," he was down on a lot of things, and he was very big on—he thought highly of a lot of American education, but there were other things he felt were faults. He didn't think there was enough emphasis on language. He said, "I don't know how anyone these days could call himself a PhD without a mastery of Greek and Latin." I remember thinking, "He will never let me marry his daughter." [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: Fortunately, in spite of my lack of Greek, he allowed me to marry her. Yeah, so we came here; we got here in August of 1970.

CP: How did this all come about?

PF: Oh, okay. So, as a graduate student my last year at Indiana. I went to the American Historical Association/History of Sciences, and I ended up joining. The History of Sciences met alternately with the American Historical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Triple-A-S. So that year was the AHA. And I was looking for a job. The job market the year before, '69, was spectacular. You basically could go to that meeting and decide where you wanted to go, what part of the country, what school. It was basically a buyer's market. Given the fact that I am kind of the pre-Baby Boom, this little period right before the full Baby Boom, but it's enough that it's a foretaste of what's coming, that's my generation, '44, and also the economy, and that what it was.

Anyway, there was a complete collapse of the history market, history generally, history of science in particular. So, from maybe fifteen jobs in the history of biology, and Indiana was one of the main—it was Indiana, Wisconsin, Harvard, so if you came out of any of those three you would have a very good shot at any of those jobs. Anyway, suddenly there were two, two jobs, depending on how you count it; there was a third job that was vaguely interesting. So, I was hysterical, of course. Because, again, am I going to spend my life bussing tables?

So I went to the meeting, and I was able to get an interview with Virginia Polytech that had a position for an 18th century historian of science, and would teach history as well. But I walked in the door, and it was just like there was a grate that opened up and I fell down through it. Basically, I had a beard. This was the '60s, so double-breasted jacket with a bright yellow paisley tie, and a crimson red shirt, wire rim glasses. I mean, very *au courant* for the time, very cool, not for the guys at VPI, who had crew cuts, and they were just moving basically from a military academy to a rank institute, regular university.

Anyway, they took one look at me, and the chairman of the department essentially turned his back on me and watched a football game during my interview. So I didn't have many hopes about that job. And I heard years later from someone who was visiting here who then had a job at VPI that they used to talk about this guy who came for an interview, this hippie who came for the interview, like, can you imagine this hippie expecting us to take him seriously?

CP: [Laughs]

PF: I was hardly a hippie, but anyway. So there was a possible job, a potential job, at Berkeley, but it didn't materialize. I talked to Roger Hahn, had lunch with him, then also had lunch with a guy from Harvey Mudd in California, but it wasn't a history of biology job, this was history of science, and that's an engineering school. [1:05:00] And although I thought it was a very good interview, and we had a lovely breakfast and all of that, I clearly didn't fit into their profile of the kind of guy they were looking for. Maybe they didn't hire hippies back there.

Anyway, I just happened to—I ran into Maggie Osler, Margaret Osler, who was there with Brookes Spencer—I think that's true. We had a long conversation, because she had been complaining about OSU to me. She was not happy here. She was here for two years. She did a very good job, but she may have been the only woman in the department. When she came in she was deliberately paid less than the men hired the same year, and she was told that, because women don't need as much money as men, etcetera. Also, she was gay, and Corvallis back in the late '60s, for a single gay girl—woman,

wasn't actually the best environment, it didn't work too well. And I mean, she's a very East Coast, a very East Coast person. So the whole thing—she was on the moon. [Laughs]

So she would complain to me all the time, because we were friends in graduate school. And so we got together; we had drinks. She was telling me about, "Oh, you can't imagine what a dump Corvallis is. And my colleagues, and my chairman!" And after about an hour of this, she says to me—the fog clears, and, "Oh, by the way, we're looking for a historian of biology." [Laughs] And I said, "Maggie, that's not exactly the best selling job." [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs]

PF: Anyway, she burst out laughing. But I mean, we were friends, so she wasn't trying to present the place in a way that was not—oh, excuse me, Florida, University of Florida was the other job in history of biology, and maybe some history. So in the end, the only two interviews I had, campus interviews, were Florida and Oregon State, which, I mean there were two possibilities, so by the time you make that list you're close to getting a job. But compared to the people the year before, where there were like six interviews, I was very, very uncomfortable.

So the first interview was at Gainesville, the University of Florida, where again, maybe I hadn't learned my lesson with VPI. Gainesville was Florida, but it's as much southern Georgia as it is northern Florida. And I felt somewhat out of place. All the guys were in the short sleeve white shirts with narrow ties, [laughs] and certainly no wire-rim glasses, or double-breasted jackets, or anything like that. So I felt a little conspicuous walking around. And culturally, I felt a little uncomfortable. I was at a party, and they were talking about how funny, how amusing it was that the state police would look for northern license plates, stop people, and throw them in jail overnight, just to scare them. I thought, "What's funny about that?" I didn't see the humor at all. [Laughs] But they thought it was just hilarious.

And then they took me around for a drive around Gainesville, and they were showing me houses that were potentially places I could go to buy. They were all concrete block houses that had been painted pastel colors, really pretty—from my point of view—pretty ugly, not aesthetically pleasing in any fashion. So I had the feeling, culturally this may not be the best fit. On the other hand, my parents by then had retired and moved to Florida, so they were living in southern Florida. And it was the East Coast; I mean, it wasn't the end of the Earth. So I thought, well, maybe.

They wanted me to take part in an interdisciplinary biology program, as well as teach some history of science. And I talked to people in history; they said there was a possibility of maybe doing a course on the Enlightenment toward the French Revolution, which was my period back then. So that was quite interesting, quite interesting.

Then I came out here. I came out here on my birthday, March 7th. I remember that because there was a solar eclipse [1:10:00], which I saw from the airplane. It was kind of nice for a science geek. I was astounded with Corvallis. Flying down from—that's how you got to Corvallis back then, was by airplane—flying down the Willamette Valley, because I had never been farther west than Bloomington. That was the West for me. I was expecting to see cowboys and Indians—not quite, but almost. So this was way outside anything I had experience with. Also, in grade school geography, like 5th or 6th grade, we had done a unit on the Northwest, Pacific Northwest, and I pictured it pretty much like the Olympic Peninsula, like a rainforest, sort of Ewok country, with redwoods, and little villages nestled among the redwoods.

And as I was flying down the valley, it was this big, open valley with this river going down the center, and mountains on the sides, but all agriculture. Where are the redwoods? What's going on? It wasn't all what I expected. It was March. When I left Bloomington it was grey, brown; everything was dead, cold, sort of miserable. It was pretty miserable there. And here it was spring. The star magnolias were blooming. First of all, all the plants and birds are different. Blue jays were funny-looking; there weren't cardinals. For a guy interested in science, or biology, everything was new, all of the plants and everything, sort of like landing not exactly on a different planet, but like a different continent, for sure. It was the other side of the Rockies, it turns out.

Anyway, I wasn't exactly prepared for that, very naively. Anyway I just didn't expect it to be quite so dramatic. And everything was washed from the rains. But I got here on a week when I don't remember it raining at all on the days I was here, so it was clear. I remember going up into Weniger Hall, looking out, and seeing Three Sisters. I thought, "Wow! Imagine being in a place where you can look out your window and see Three Sisters over here." I didn't know about the

rains, the clouds, and so on. But anyway, and everything was just so, all of these frame houses that had been washed clean; air smelled fresh.

We went down to Burtons and had lunch, and I had razor clams, which I had never had before. I thought, "Wow, this is!" And we went out to the Spencers' and they had a bunch of Dungeness crab, which they put out on newspaper and just threw out a bunch of crabs. And I had never had Dungeness crab before, and thought, "Wow, I've died and gone to heaven. This is just amazing." Back then crab cost 69 cents a pound, so this was something that was affordable even for an assistant professor.

So this was a General Science Department. At that time they had three historians of science and they were hiring two more, so for history of science with a PhD program. I would be teaching just history of science; no other subjects. I went over and talked to George Carson, who was the chair of the History Department, who was very interested, because their person who did 18th century had left, died, resigned. But they didn't have anybody. He was very interested in having me do an Enlightenment course at least, and maybe the Revolution. And Dave Willis, who was the chair of the Department of General Science, said, "Yeah, that would be possible."

So this seemed like an ideal job, and I figured, "Okay, I don't have Maggie's problems over different people," and it seemed very, very exciting, really exciting. And then I think what cinched it is I went out to dinner with Brookes Spencer's wife Nancy, and Jim Morris, and Martha, and had a bunch of martinis, and was probably pretty drunk, probably. And I would be sort of propped up against Brookes in these booths, and just thinking, "You know, these are a great bunch of guys." [Laughs] And I liked each of them very, very much, right away. Interesting people, and doing interesting work. Jim was doing 18th century chemistry. Brookes, of course, was just back from the Niels Bohr Institute, so this was really—it just seemed like an incredible place. [1:15:01]

So, and then they offered me a job, although Dave was concerned because I hadn't had any teaching experience. One of the things about the department that I was in, from a graduate student standpoint, this was great; we didn't have to TA, we just got to work all the time. But in terms of preparing one for teaching, I had no preparation whatever, at all, and he was worried about that. He said, "We're hiring you to teach." And no one had actually said that to me. We were trained, educated, as researchers, not teachers. So he had some real—I remember sitting in his office, and him saying, "Now, so let's go over your teaching experience." I said, "Well, I don't really have any." He said, "Well, you must have some." [Laughs] I said, "No, actually I don't." He said, "Oh, think, think, you must have something." [Laughs] So finally I said, "I did give three lectures once in Fred Churchill's class on History of Biology, the history of classification in the 18th and 19th century." "Ah! So you had some teaching on the college level." I said, "Well, yeah, three lectures." [Laughs] And he was like, "Okay, I can check off that box." But for a while I thought, "He's not going to hire me."

And it turned out later—I didn't know this at the time, but he actually had met someone, Jonathan Hahn [?], who was a very good historian, and he was very interested in hiring him. But Brookes and Jim were not, and so they were pushing for me, and they were the historians. Dave actually was I think partly looking for a way to disqualify me; on the other hand, didn't want to totally piss off Brookes and Jim. And Maggie was here, so in the end he offered me a job. But again—not again—I got back to Bloomington, and I had had an offer from Florida that was more money, but it hadn't been finalized. Sort of like, "Well, we'd like to hire you, but we have to clear it with the dean. But this would be your salary." It was like maybe a thousand dollars more. My starting salary here was 9,500, so a thousand dollars actually was a significant amount of salary.

And so I was sort of torn, because I didn't particularly like Florida, but it was where my—I liked Corvallis, but it felt like sort of the end of the Earth. It was like, this is so far away! I'm sure there's mail delivered there, but it really felt very, very foreign. It really did. It's so funny to say that now, but that's how it felt. It felt like I was going to Indonesia, or something like that. It was really, really exotic. So I remember talking to Fred about it, and Fred was very clear. He said, "Look, don't make a decision based on money. That would be a terrible, terrible mistake." And I was thinking, "That's okay for you as an assistant professor to say, [laughs] but us down in the trenches, a thousand dollars is a thousand dollars."

But anyway, in the end I decided I really should, I should go to Oregon State. And as it turned out—and so I said yes. And I still hadn't heard from Florida, and then a couple of weeks later I found out—they never informed me, but I found out that the position didn't go through. So in a lot of ways the choice of Oregon was a very lucky one for me, actually. It's been very good here; I can't complain. I can't complain. It's been very good here for me.

CP: Was it awkward or unusual to be split from the History Department proper? I mean, you're in General Science, but there are also historians in the College of Liberal Arts?

PF: It was very strange, because aside from these four historians of science, they were all biologists or radiation biologists. But of course, I was interested in science, so at one level it felt sort of comfortable. On the other hand, many of my colleagues didn't have a clue as to what I was doing. [1:20:00] Mike Mix for example, with whom later I became very, very close. He's told me in sort of indirect ways that those early years—I remember thinking—I didn't think at the time—I don't know if I want to put this on tape. [Laughs] I'll be honest. Okay, so at the time I first met him, I didn't care for him very much. I sort of thought he was a jerk, actually, and it was quite mutual. [Laughs] He thought I was a jerk, and certainly didn't think history of science was a subject that was worth taking up space in the department. Later we collaborated on a textbook and worked together very closely. He now is writing a history book. But this was early on, but it's indicative, so some ways I felt a bit alien.

And of course, the chair I think was always ambivalent about the history of science. I don't think he ever fully bought into—I mean, he inherited the department that had that. And in fact, Dan Jones was the other historian who was hired. He was the historian of chemistry, from Wisconsin. So Indiana, Wisconsin are the two big Midwest schools in the history of science. And we lived next door to one another and became very, very close friends, Carol, and Vreneli and I. After Dan and I were here for a year or two, Dave called us in and said, "By the way, you probably should know that there's really only one tenure-track position here."

Now, we each had been hired with the understanding that we each had a tenure-track position, so this put us in a very awkward situation. First of all, I thought this was tenure-track, but then second of all, we were essentially competing for the same job. Fortunately by then, our friendship had been cemented and it never got in the way. And I don't know quite how we made it that, but I think basically we just didn't think about it. We figured something will happen. [Laughs] It'll work out for the best. What happened in the long run was that we were in France for a year doing research on the grant, NSF grant, and so he went up for tenure a year ahead, which could have been threatening [laughs], had he gotten tenure—could have. Maybe at some level we didn't really believe it.

But anyway, so he went up for tenure and his publication record wasn't strong enough, so he didn't get in, so that problem evaporated. He moved on and landed on his feet, ended up at the NEH as a program officer, but taught for a number of years in various classes. So there were some awkward moments. And then at some point—I don't know how much you want to know about all of this stuff?

CP: I'm interested in sort of the climate of—

PF: Okay, the climate. Okay.

CP: Yeah, what you found at OSU in those early years.

PF: Okay, okay. So, teaching was an enormous shock, having never taught before. The classes were small, so I was teaching with maybe a maximum of 30 students in a lecture class, and then a seminar with maybe five or six. The lecture classes, I had never prepared a lecture before, so the first year I would say I was basically hysterical the whole time. I would go to the library—fortunately I could read quickly—come back with fifteen, twenty books a day, sit down and say, "Okay, I'm going to lecture." [Laughs] I was teaching two sections of a General Survey in the History of Science, so that goes all the way from antiquity up to the present. So that was General History of Science.

And then I was teaching a two-term History of Biology sequence as well. And I repeated the second term of the History of Biology for the third term. So every term, I was teaching two different classes, two different preps, except for the spring where I was basically using a prep that I had already, so to speak. So I was writing a minimum of six lectures. Now, the department didn't bother—there were some professors with seminars with six students, initially. [1:25:01] I now see that that was more in the other faculty's interest than in mine, but anyway, that's a common practice. So I was writing six lectures a week.

My lectures were Monday, Wednesday, Friday, so essentially I was writing—over the weekend I was writing two lectures, and part of Monday and Tuesday. So I rarely got home before one or two in the morning, every day, just. Well,

I was persistent, as I mentioned before, fortunately. I'd had, as an undergraduate had had those two seminars, those two lecture courses from Colodny, which were General Survey courses. And of course, at Indiana I'd had graduate courses, the whole survey, plus the history of biology.

So I had models, but what I discovered, much to my shock, when I went to my notes, Colodny's notes, the course wasn't nearly as great as I remembered it. And I could tell, reading my own notes, where he had gotten the material. He was borrowing material from the major secondary sources, but I didn't feel I could really lean on that very much. It didn't feel like me, and it wasn't the story I wanted to tell, and it wasn't the perspective I had that I had developed in graduate school. I had certain strong, very strong opinions.

When I went to graduate school, I should mention, one of the reasons for going to Indiana was that you didn't have to decide between History or Philosophy the first year; you took courses in both. Because I had taken the full sequence from Grumbaugh in the Philosophy of Science, plus some courses. And as I said to you before, I had done a lot of philosophy. I was really interested in philosophy. I had had no history courses as an undergraduate, other than the two history of science courses. So I was quite deficient, to say the least, in history. And so when I got to graduate school I did a minor, an outside minor, and took history courses, and sort of beefed up my history background. But anyway, in terms of going to Indiana, I was interested in both subjects, took courses in both subjects, but it was clear after a month that I was headed towards history. Do you want to hear that story, because I can tell it quickly?

CP: Sure.

PF: Okay, so I took a seminar from Roger Bock, who was a very good philosopher. He was chairman, and he was a good philosopher of the social sciences and a lovely man, lovely man. Anyway, so my first paper that I did for him, basically we just met and talked about our papers, what we were going to do in our papers. So I wrote my paper, drafted my paper, I turned it in, and I got the paper back, and all of my quotations that I had made to scientists were crossed out. I thought that was very odd. So I went to talk with him, and I said, "Could you explain what's wrong with this?"

He said, "Well first of all, in philosophy, philosophy is a dialogue of philosophers. So what counts is what people are doing." He said, "You have correctly identified a problem that other philosophers have discussed, so that part's okay. But, you've made the mistake of quoting a scientist." He said, "You never quote a scientist in a professional paper." So I asked, "Why? What's wrong with that?" He said, "Well, philosophy of science is a subject that's independent of science, it's a branch of epistemology, what we can know." He said, "In fact, it would make no difference if all the scientists on the face of the Earth disappeared overnight, philosophy of science wouldn't change one iota." And I thought to myself, "This is not my subject."

CP: [Laughs]

PF: [Laughs] I'm really interested in science; I'm not interested in pure epistemology. Interesting as it is, that's not really what drives me. I'm really interested in the nature of science. But my point is, I had done a lot of reading in philosophy of science, and I went to the seminar, public lectures and seminars, and so by the time I got here, well, actually I taught Philosophy of Science here for ten years. The Philosophy Department needed somebody to do it. I was farmed out to them, not against my will. But I came in with a strong philosophic background [1:30:02], and so I was approaching history of science, at that point, very much a Thomas Kuhn paradigm shift, so I wanted to get students to see, "Okay, the science that you're learning, there is a whole set of underlying assumptions about the world that your teachers aren't telling you about, but it's part of what you absorb from your classes."

And although hitting them directly makes no sense, but showing it to them historically, I was able to, I think, very effectively get through to students who for the most part this was a requirement. So students were coming in. A lot of them had chips on their shoulder, "Why am I wasting time taking a history course? I'm a Zoology major, a General Science major," whatever. And you could sort of see the light bulbs go off—after a couple of weeks, ding! I got it. This is actually what I'm interested in. This is the nature of science. There's something here that is instructive. So the teaching in that sense was deeply rewarding, deeply. It was always a battle in the first month, man, a hostile crowd.

CP: [Laughs]

PF: But on the other hand, from an ego standpoint, turning that around, turning it into a group of believers essentially, was very, very satisfying. Like, okay, they got it. They got it! So I'm doing something worthwhile here. It's very nice. I think my teaching career here was wonderful in that sense. It was the administration that was a pain in the ass. The students were always great.

Although, again, my first semester—term, excuse me—I remember being a little bit horrified, but I think this is a very common story, by lack of knowledge. Students just hadn't read anything outside of their very narrow curriculum. So I mentioned Dickens, or Balzac, or something, blank. And when I was an undergraduate science major, I was reading all over the place, novels, philosophy. I was reading history; I wasn't taking history courses. I said, "What's going on here? This is an impoverished education these students are getting. Someone's cheating them." So I felt that part of what I was doing was teaching them about the nature of science, but also kind of backfilling, giving them the story of western civilization, giving them a kind of background of what are the philosophic issues that concern philosophers, and why should you care about them? So I always kind of felt that I was doing 20 jobs at once, in class. But initially, it was like, good lord, where are these people coming from?

And then the writing struck me as just hopeless at first! And then I said, "Well, I've been in graduate school for five years. These are undergraduates, and they haven't had the benefit of having someone like Sam sit down with them and go over it line by line." So I finally said, "Okay, I'm going to have to sit down and start going over this stuff, and start meeting with students." I was copying, on an undergraduate level, what I took to be the value, the things that I valued in my graduate education. So I spent a lot of time, actually.

CP: Yeah.

PF: I spent a lot of time with students. Consequently, I did most of my research in the summers. I just couldn't get much done during the school year. And that's when I applied for grants, so I was able to get—I used to humorously say, "Corvallis is a great place to leave; it's a great place to come back to."

CP: Yeah.

PF: I was able to get out, so to speak, every couple of years, get to Paris or London, work at a great library, and have no other obligations.

CP: On a more macro sense, what was your sense of the university at that time, its kind of standing, and its ambition, in the early years when you were here?

PF: Yeah, well it had a cap of 16,000 students. And it had what I took to be a very perverse attitude in general, starting with the upper administration, MacVicar, and going through the deans and the chairs. [Laughs] The thing that I heard over and over and over again, that was like nails on a chalkboard, was, "Remember, Farber, this ain't Harvard." In other words, don't expect too much from your students. And it was sort of like, you know, if you don't expect much, you won't get much.

These are bright students. [1:34:59] Maybe they don't have a prep school background, but that doesn't mean they're not smart and willing to work. I was teaching mostly science majors. They were used to working very hard. If you told them clearly what you wanted, they would do it. They would do it. So, I ended up being a somewhat demanding teacher, but students rose to it; they rose to the challenge. Some didn't, of course, but most of them did. Most of them did. And I think part of it was my own enthusiasm for the subject. I felt if there was a student who was just really turned off and is not interested, somehow I've failed. I mean, later on I realized, okay, you can't convert the world. But certainly my feeling was, if I don't get through somehow, it's my fault. I should be able to get through, and I really worked at it.

But it was sort of discouraging at times, it really was, because it seemed like this place aimed too low. I don't know how many conversations I had about that. Or I'd be on a graduate committee, and I'd look at the research, like over in Fisheries and Wildlife, or, because I was on lots of committees. I'm not quite sure why I was, but I was—well, there were probably bureaucratic reasons, but I was put on a lot of graduate committees in areas outside of my own. And a lot of stuff was just basically, the faculty member had brought in a graduate student, and basically had a free technician. For four or five years, they did technical work. And at the end they had a bunch of data, and they wrote it up. It was very pedestrian. They

weren't asking any interesting questions. They weren't asking things that were significant. As often as not, the project had been given to them by major professors by a lab, studying flounder starling, flounder juveniles, and putting DDT in the tank, and how many die? Go count them, for four years. [Laughs]

And I remember this really came home to me one year, this was over in Fisheries and Wildlife. It doesn't matter because they do it in a lot of departments. There was a guy who was working, and he had worked for five years in his major professor's lab, and in the end all of the data he had didn't support the hypothesis that he had set out to demonstrate. And so at his defense, he essentially had nothing. He had reams and reams of data, and no conclusion. I remember Chuck Warren, who was one of the really bright guys over in Fisheries and Wildlife, with whom I got along very well and he was very interested in philosophy and history, and asked significant questions of his graduate students, and didn't give them projects; he made them find their projects—he said, "This is not a dissertation. This is not a PhD. You can't give this guy a PhD. Yes, he put in his time. He did what was asked of him, he passed his prelims, but he has no dissertation. He has no contribution to the field." And the major professor was chagrined, was really embarrassed. And I don't remember what—I don't think the student ever got his degree.

CP: Hm.

PF: And I thought that was really terrible, but it was endemic, the sort of thing that I saw too often. It wasn't the students. Well, no, it wasn't the students, because I went into graduate school knowing nothing, and I was guided. I don't know what I would have—anyway, those are counterfactuals, you know what I'm saying? You can't try to figure out what you would have done in a similar situation. But to answer your question, I felt that OSU undersold itself; it wasn't ambitious enough. I became very friendly, not surprisingly, with people in History, various people, and they were frustrated, because they were told, "Well, that's what they do down in Eugene. If you want to teach serious history, that's what they do in Eugene. [1:40:01] You're just here as—it's a service department. We just provide some—you're basically an ornament for the bachelor's degree," which is very bad. It's shortchanging our students. They deserved better. They deserved a good liberal arts education.

This is actually—I mean, I fought that battle all the way through my career here. I don't know how many arguments I had when I was a chair here in the chairman's meetings in the college. People would say, back then—I spent a year on sabbatical in Cambridge. And so what I heard stopped going from, "Remember, Farber, this ain't Harvard," to, "Paul, you're not in Cambridge now."

CP: [Laugh]

PF: It was a variation on the same theme. Don't expect too much from anybody here, which is a great mistake.

CP: Yeah.

PF: Yeah. Some of the deans I worked under were terrific, and really, like Fred Horne was spectacular, and really had high standards, and wanted to raise them, and did all sorts of things that people said you can't possibly do. For example, hire women in science—it was common knowledge you can't do it. They don't exist, and it's just a hopeless task. And Fred told the Chemistry Department, "Your next hire, if it's not a woman, you don't get to hire the person." And surprise, surprise! They found a woman who was very good. [Laughs] So, yeah, he made a difference. I know he was controversial and there were people who didn't like him, but I was a great fan of his.

Tom Suvahari [?] was another one who was not understood by many of the chairs in science, because I was chair of General Science, ultimately, before I moved over to History. And they didn't get him either, but [coughs]—excuse me, he was a very good dean and really tried to improve the College of Science in a lot of important ways.

Yeah, I don't want to get into the detailed bureaucratic disappointments I had my first year, but there was some—I mean, I told you this one story. There were some like that that made me think, "This place is run kind of like a family grocery store." It wasn't terribly professional. And that's why someone like Fred coming in was—he was a guy who really knows what he's doing as professionals, and acts like a professional. So I've appreciated those. We've had some very good administrators here, but we've had our share of duds. [Laughs]

CP: [Laughs] Well, on that note, if it's okay with you, I think I'd like to end for today and we can pick up at another time. I've got another sheet of questions to ask you.

PF: Oh, dear. OK.

CP: And we're over an hour and a half now. Sound good?

PF: Yeah, sounds great.

CP: Terrific, thank you Paul.

[1:43:06]