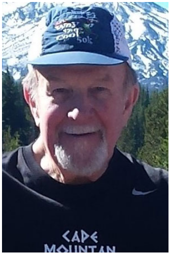

Bill Robbins Oral History Interview, June 27, 2017

Title
"Working Class Historian"

Date
June 27, 2017

Location
Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary
The Robbins interview begins with a detailed description of Robbins' upbringing in Connecticut. In recounting his early life, Robbins comments on his early memories of working on the family dairy farm, receiving a vocation-focused education, and choosing to enlist in the Navy to learn a trade. He then outlines his four-year Naval obligation, commenting on his training, his assignments, and his decision not to pursue a military career. Next, he traces his unsuccessful initial attempts to pursue a higher education, his employment by Great Mountain Forest, and his ultimate enrollment at Danbury State College.

Looking back on his undergraduate training at Danbury State, Robbins explains the circumstances that led him to identify History as a potential career field. From there, he recalls his brief graduate experience at Syracuse University, the life imperatives that led to his dropping out and moving to Oregon, and the renewal of his graduate career at the University of Oregon. He likewise shares his memories of campus culture at Oregon during the late 1960s, discusses his doctoral dissertation, and recounts the meagre job market that led to his first employment at Oregon College of Education.

The remainder of the session focuses on Robbins' career at Oregon State University. In this, he recounts his arrival at OSU; the status and evolution of the History department; memorable courses that he taught; and his sense of the ways in which OSU's History program compared and contrasted with the U of O's. He also touches briefly on a handful of the books that he authored, including a history of Oregon State University commissioned to coincide with the university's sesquicentennial. Dovetailing throughout these recollections are comments on the impact that historian William Appleman Williams made on Robbins' life and career. The interview concludes with thoughts on the importance of oral history and advice for current-day students of history.

Interviewee
Bill Robbins

Interviewer
Mike Dicianna

Website
http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/robbins/

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Today is Tuesday, June 27, 2017 and we have the honor of capturing the story of William G. Robbins, Emeritus Distinguished Professor of History here at OSU. We are in the Valley Library on the OSU campus. My name is Mike Dicianna. I'm an oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project. Well, one of the things we always like to do is start with a short biographical sketch. Items like when and where you were born, early family life memories, that type of thing.

Bill Robbins: Do you want me to begin with a complete portfolio just quick or not?

MD: Just childhood-type things.

BR: Just from the beginning, okay.

MD: We'll get into some other things as we go, so.

BR: Okay. Thank you. I was born in Charlotte Hungerford Hospital in Torrington, Connecticut on September 20, 1935. My mother and father were both born in the same hospital and I was the first of four children born in Charlotte Hungerford Hospital. Torrington at that point in time was a community of about 25,000 people, a manufacturing center. It became important in brass production, the American Brass Company during the Second World War where my father worked. My mother was a housekeeper, home keeper. We first lived in a small house with two bedrooms with my grandmother and grandfather Robbins, just north of the downtown center of Torrington. And in 1941 with four of us children and two parents living in the same bedroom, my parents purchased an old Revolutionary house outside of Torrington, about 5 miles from downtown. A property that was owned by my grandfather.

We moved there in the fall of 1942, and I was entering 2nd grade. I did first grade in Torrington, and my second grade I entered the Winchester Center School, which was a one-room schoolhouse: all eight grades one teacher, one room. The building actually had two rooms. The other room was used for play during the winter months. Because my parents weren't taking possession of the house until November of 1942 I lived with my grandparents who owned and ran a farm, a dairy farm, just one quarter of a mile from the house that we were to live in. Anyway, I entered 2nd grade from there. The teacher tried to put me in 1st grade because I was small and she had no documentation or anything. Finally my grandmother I think worked out the situation that I had already completed 1st grade.

And I remember one of the clearest memories was riding in a 1-horse carriage with a woman who delivered about a 40 gallon can and a half of milk from a small farm that she ran. I would ride in the carriage about the quarter of a mile to the house that we were to live in, where a family had several children going to Winchester Center School. Then we were picked up by a bus/car and driven to the school. That was my first experiences that I remember, and I should add that all of my growing up years until I went to the Navy my life was centered on the dairy farm. I began working there, as occasionally did my two sisters, and after I joined the Navy in 1953 my brother also worked on the dairy. But this was a family job. It was much more, as I said in a short memoir that I wrote for my children and my siblings, it was much more than a job. It was an obligation to family, grandparents. My two uncles worked on the farm, my aunt and so forth. Of course, as you can imagine, during haying season everything was especially hectic with a lot of—and I began with small chores: sweeping mangers and feeding calves and so forth, and matriculated up the line of responsibility.

[0:05:12]

By the time I was in high school we had two rows of cows, milk cows, and I think we were milking somewhere between 45-50 head of Holstein. I ran two milking machines on one side and my uncle ran two milking machines on the other side. That was a responsibility, a job that I did until I joined the Navy. I went to the Winchester Center School into 7th grade and I was a good student, primarily because I could read well. However, I learned by the time I went to a school in Winsted, Connecticut, which is an adjacent factory town near Torrington, my math skills were sadly lacking and never recovered. At the beginning of 7th grade it was probably two months into the school year, the 7th and 8th grades were shipped to the center school in Winsted, Connecticut, which is similar to today what we would call a junior high school or middle school.

I went to 7th and 8th grade in Winsted. Within a year after I started 7th grade in Winsted they closed Winchester Center School, the school that Winsted School districted in, and so we all went to the Winsted schools then. That included my two sisters. My brother, however, by that time was in 6th grade or something like that, so we all were transferred then to the Torrington Schools: Torrington High School for myself, my two sisters and my brother to one of the middle schools in Torrington. And the reason for that had to do with a questionable town line between the town of Winchester and the town of Torrington and they moved it about a quarter of a mile, and that left us in the Torrington School District.

I want to go back and say something about the closing of the Winchester Center School. The decision caused a lot of opposition in the town of Winchester, which was an old New England community with a church, a grange, a chapel, a village square and so forth. No businesses. A post office, which was run out of someone's home. But it was pretty conventional. Very rural. Not too many of the students in the school lived close enough to walk. Most of us had to travel by a bus, car, et cetera. When the announcement came that the school was going to be closed, and this is after, of course, I spent a year in Winsted, they had a town meeting in the school and two people stood up in favor of the closure of the school: one was my mother with a second-year high school education, and the other was a neighbor up the road out of the big crowd that was gathered in the school district. It had nothing to do with the teacher, who was very accomplished, it was just that it was an overwhelming responsibility for anyone in the field of education and so forth.

I went to Winsted Center School and then three years to Gilbert High School. It was called Gilbert High School because the building was funded, I don't know what date, but probably in the 1920s, by the Gilbert of Gilbert Clocks. Gilbert, that person, began his career in Winsted, Connecticut. So I transferred to Torrington High School and spent a year in Torrington High School taking courses designed to help me learn a trade. This was true of my 3 years at Gilbert High School and Torrington High School. I took wood shop. I took machine shop. I took mechanical drawing. My junior year I took a course in agriculture, which consumed at least a third of all my classroom responsibilities. It was a real throwaway.

[0:10:00]

I know, I probably even knew then, it was a waste of time. When I transferred to Torrington, I again took woodshop and I took one other functional skill-related course, and then took general education courses. I took history, English, and I can't remember—senior problems. Meaning, senior in high school problems, and chemistry and so forth. I graduated probably my overall GPA—if you put it on a scale of 4.0 and ours was on, of course, 100%: 90%, 80%, 70% and so forth—I think my grade point, my percentage high of graduation was somewhere around 73% or 74%. I graduated with C's. I flunked a couple of courses: one was in business arithmetic. There was nothing in it to gear me towards going to college.

MD: Now what year did you graduate from high school, then?

BR: 1953.

MD: '53. So one of the things that interests me, is that you were in grade school up through your early grades during World War II as a young child. A) Did you remember when they announced Pearl Harbor? And B) Were you involved as a young child in the home front? How, where you of the greater picture of the war?

BR: Well, we lived on food stamps. The conventional food stamps, everyone had them and so forth. And I still have some at home in my memorabilia packages. My father worked first for the Hendey Machine Company and then early on in the war he switched to the American Brass company and worked for, I don't know, four or five months 12-hour days 7 days a week. I vividly remember that. We had an enormous garden. My mother and father worked in the garden. My father always worked swing shift: 3:00-11:00, so that cleared him time to do heavy work around the house, including something that I'll never forget: painting the clapboards on this Revolutionary Era home, American Revolutionary era home. Putting on some parts of the house 3 coats of paint because it had not been painted in so long. It was gray clapboarding, if you can imagine that. You've seen a lot of those in the countryside.

My mother canned vegetables, canned fruits. We picked berries. Both my mother and I think my sisters and I would weed corn. This is before the days of treating corn crops with chemicals to keep weeds down. We weeded corn. We had had a hurricane one year and one of the things that I did was when my mother and uncles and so forth would cut corn by hand, with a corn knife. I would help stack it into bundles so it'd be picked up by the corn harvester. But when a hurricane

ravages a corn field, it just shreds everything and lays it flat. The corn's still good but one has to do that. That was another chore. I went with my father on fishing and hunting trips. Hunting simply out our backdoor, which was great fun.

When I was probably 8 years or 9 years old I was allowed to have a BB gun and I would hunt, we had a rabbit dog and mostly our dog would put cottontail rabbits, run them into stonewalls and then we'd get them out. Sometimes we'd get the bunny and sometimes we wouldn't. We ate all sorts of wild game: cottontail rabbits, woodchucks - groundhogs to a lot of people - and occasionally in the fall a deer, of course, venison, which was illegal as hell. We fished. I fished with my uncles and learned to fish in reservoirs, water reservoirs and so forth that were off-limits to fishing. We'd go just before dark and fish for bullheads early in the spring, even ice fishing in the winter and so forth. Am I addressing other questions?

[0:15:22]

MD: No this is wonderful. This whole New England upbringing is so poignant. So you entered the U.S. Navy—

BR: Can I back up just for a minute?

MD: Sure, oh yeah!

BR: One thing I want to say is I grew up 5 miles from this industrial town, and yet in the early 1940s this is very, very rural. Few cars on the road. Living a good part off the land. We had wood stoves. We had a parlor stove in the living room and a wood stove in the kitchen. Eventually we upgraded to a wood and gas stove in the kitchen, which my parents still had when I went in the Navy. My father sometime towards the end of the war, or right after the war, we put a wood furnace in the cellar. I want to say something about the structure of this house. If you went into the floor in the cellar, it was simply dirt floor until my father put cement in. The beams over the cellar [motions with arms] were chestnut, American chestnut, which is, most people know, was wiped out by a blight in the 1920s and earlier—by 1930 all the chestnut were gone. And these chestnut were hand split because the bark was still on the chestnut beams.

MD: Wow.

BR: In the third floor of this New England house, the center beam. What do you call it the roof—the center beam. Now they're probably 2x8s. This was a 12x12 beam.

MD: Wow.

BR: And there were no nails in this part of the house.

MD: Pegged.

BR: [Nods] Pegged.

MD: Wow.

BR: Everything was pegged.

MD: Does this house still stand?

BR: Yeah.

MD: Oh man. That's cool.

BR: After my parents' passing, we rented it for just a while and none of us wanted it. I thought my brother would take it because he's an inveterate fixer-upper of anything, including building his own home, and he didn't want to undertake it either [chuckles]. It's a beloved place. It occupies about an acre of land with stonewall embracing it on three sides and of course a country road on the other side.

MD: Probably the stonewall dates back to the original house.

BR: Well, probably when the house was first built. The house was built in two parts. There was a three-story structure without a basement. Then at some point after that there was the other part of the house was built with a living room, kitchen, and wood shed that we kept the wood in, what was essentially a garage. It was under that portion of the house that the chestnut beams were. Even that was dated. But the other part of the house had 4 rooms and there were fireplaces in each room. They were all closed off by this time because the chimney that went up the middle of these four rooms was gone.

MD: So—

BR: Now we can move on.

MD: Let's talk about, now why the U.S. Navy? This was 1953?

BR: Yeah. That was a trajectory from the courses I took in high school which were all technical and related to various kinds of skills. I guess the best explanation for why I joined the Navy was to learn a trade. I did during the spring of 1953 reconnoitering all of the different trades that one could do in the Navy. There was one—and it was a specialty in the Navy called patternmaker. A patternmaker is a carpenter. When I went to boot camp on December 2, 1953 after having your hair removed and other things that happen when you go to boot camp: five different inoculations, two teeth pulled, and other introductory things of that kind, I took an exam, called a General Classification Test, or better known as the GCT.

[0:20:28]

This is the first time in my life in terms of educational prowess and that I learned I wasn't a dummy. I scored in the top 12th percentile on the GCT. So when I met with a counselor, Navy counselor, to determine where I wanted to direct my time in the Navy, a four-year [holds up four fingers] investment incidentally, I mentioned patternmaker. I'm just 18 years old, naïve as hell, and this fellow quickly talked me out of being a patternmaker, and suggested a radarman, sonarman, or interior communications electrician, which is what I became [laughs]. All due to this very persuasive fellow who steered me in that direction.

Interior communications dealt with everything from sound - powered telephones, to intercoms, to the telephone system, the ship's loudspeakers, movies, any kind of device that transmitted sound. We were also charged with the care of the ship's gyroscopes, in other words, with the anemometers, wind direction, and things of that sort. From boot camp, eleven, twelve weeks in boot camp in Bainbridge, Maryland, I took leave and went home for a few days and then was off to the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, which is just north of Chicago, Illinois, across the border in Wisconsin. It's not too far from Milwaukee, actually. I went to IC Election School, Interior Communications Electrician School. Twelve people in the class. I still struggled with math, but I thought that that would be a challenge, and it was, I graduated fifth out of a class of 12. It was an enjoyable experience. I made good friends with one fellow in particular whose wedding I went to after I was discharged from the Navy and kept in touch with him until I guess I moved to Oregon. That was the beginning of my experience in the Navy.

MD: So you shipped out and were assigned to?

BR: I graduated from the Interior Communications School in April or May of 1954. I was assigned to the USS Kula Gulf in Newport, Virginia. I think it's Newport News, Virginia.

MD: Yeah.

BR: This was a World War II carrier, small carrier, crew compliment of a little over 500 men. We did some travel in and out of Chesapeake Bay, sometimes heading north, most of the time heading south where it was sweltering hot when we were in the area around the Caribbean. There were all sorts of rumors that we were going to leave for longer tours, and we were never did. I was on the Kula Gulf until the following spring, so that would have been March of 1955 when I was transferred to the USS Coral Sea, which was nearly 1,000 feet long, had a crew compliment—I should have looked at the figures, I have them on my desk at home—of way over 1,000 sailors. I no more than boarded the Coral Sea than we left for the Mediterranean.

[0:25:04]

That was my first ocean voyage crossing into the Mediterranean, stopping at the first port of call Gibraltar, Marseille, first Barcelona, Marseille. And travelled about other ports in and out. Playing war games all the time. Occasionally playing, this is one thing that was reality, both the Coral Sea and then the last carrier I was on, the Bennington, was on every cruise we would lose a plane and usually a pilot. It just went with when you launch so many planes at that point in time, occasionally one would go into the drink. The Mediterranean cruise was fascinating. I'm still, as I tell people, a dumbass kid off the farm. Knew very little about the places I visited except when we stopped in Piraeus, which was the last port of call that I visited while I was in the Mediterranean. We took a bus to Athens, which is nearby. I have photographs of me standing in the Acropolis and these wonderful historic Greek ruins, which I knew very little about except you can't miss knowing something about the Acropolis and that was about all I knew. And then in graduate school, of course, one of my areas of satisfying the Ph.D. at the University of Oregon was Ancient History.

MD: You were there!

BR: Then while I was on the Coral Sea, which was a real 4.0 ship. It was clean. It was squared away, [in] Navy talk. I was asked by one of the chief petty officers, we had two chief petty officers in the IC Gang, as they were called. Asked me if I was interested in going to the Nav Prep School. The Nav Prep School was close to a year of study, and if you survived that you go to the Naval Academy. I was honored to be invited and everything, and I don't know whether it was probably my GCT score that prompted this chief's interest and the potential that I might have. Anyway, I gave a lot of thought to it. I'm still a country boy: I like to fish, I like to hunt, and I looked at this scenario one year at Nav Preps, three at the Naval Academy, and then three more obligated duty after you get out of the Naval Academy, and I began to have second thoughts about it. Seriously. So I went before a board of officers from admirals, captains, and they weren't all from the ship. Because we were an aircraft carrier the admiral could come aboard. I didn't take much of their time. I told them that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in the Navy, that I wanted to get out—I know in my naiveté I said I loved to fish and hunt and all those sort of things [laughs].

MD: [Laughs].

BR: They quickly decided—they were very nice to me and thanked me for being candid and I was dismissed. And the chief would never talk to me again after that [laughs].

MD: [Laughs] Yeah he put you out there and—

BR: It was something I wrote about and I remember not too long ago reading a letter to my mother. By the way, my mother kept all of my letters, and so I have a rich trove of information about the time I spent in the Navy by reminding me reading my correspondence to my mother, to my dad, to sisters, and so forth. Anyway, I remember writing that evening after the interview with the board of officers that I was either the stupidest person on earth or the wisest [laughs].

MD: [Laughs] Well, made you what you are today. Now I understand that one of your duties while you were on the ships was—

[0:30:03]

BR: Showing movies.

MD: —showing movies. You were probably a popular guy.

BR: Yes. I became very skilled at it, along with my two partners. I dabbled a little bit on the Coral Sea, just learning what a projector was, how to splice a film. When I went on the—well I got transferred again from the Coral Sea to the USS Bennington, and it would have had to been in June, July of 1955. I was transferred in Piraeus and took a voyage back to New England, actually went to Newport, Rhode Island on a destroyer escort. That's a very small ship. We went through a hurricane, which was a fascinating experience because the sleeping quarters where I was toward the rear of the ship, below decks of course. All the hatches are closed to keep the water spray out. When we went to breakfast, lunch, and dinner—chow as we called it—we had to go up on the superstructure part and there were ropes and we'd crawl along on our hands and knees. That was at the peak of the hurricane.

MD: Yeah.

BR: And then crawl down through a hatch and close it behind us so water wouldn't come in. The food was mainly fried potatoes and scrambled eggs. You could put eggs on the grill and they'd very quickly congeal. They wouldn't run off the side of the [gestures with hands, laughs]. All of that was pretty fascinating. When we landed in Newport, Rhode Island, I was taking 10 days' leave, and I got on a Greyhound Bus to Hartford, Connecticut and that was 36 miles to my home. I remember reading the Boston Globe, a short piece, just a snippet, saying that the town of Winsted, Connecticut, where I went to high school for three years, had suffered $5 million worth of damage from a catastrophic flood. That was huge at that point in time. Anyway, the famous floods of 1955 early August, and it wiped out the center of Winsted, Connecticut. I mean, literally. I don't know how many people died and so forth. The same thing in Torrington. It gutted part of the city of Torrington.

So when I got to Hartford I went to another bus terminal where I could get a bus into Torrington. The first thing I was told, "There are no buses to Torrington because all the bridges are out." And then somebody did tell me, "Well you can get to this little town of Collinsville, Connecticut, because there's one bridge standing." So I took a bus to Collinsville, had my sea bag with me and I walked across this still-standing bridge and hitchhiked to Torrington. My parents, living up on the hill, of course they were not affected at all except for having a house full of people sleeping in the living room and dining room and everythone who came up from the valley, which was two miles from where we lived. So that was a big event and still is to the present day.

Since then the Army Corp of Engineers has put in flood control dams. To this point, I don't think they've ever been used. They might have been back up a little water. These were huge construction projects. There's three of them I can think of on different branches of the Naugatuck River. That was a riveting experience. From there I flew to Jacksonville, Florida, and that's where I boarded the USS Bennington. That would have been in August/September of 1955. The Bennington left the next day for the West Coast. We departed from Jacksonville, stopped in Montevideo, Uruguay where some people took liberty. It was not, it was about a mile from shore because the river, what's the river—

MD: The Plate?

[0:35:01]

BR: The Plate River [Rio de Plata], yes, is so wide and shallow the ship could only get in to a certain point. I didn't take leave there. We went from Uruguay down around Cape Horn.

MD: Oh wow.

BR: Which is fascinating. Stormy. Dark. Gloomy. And stopped in Santiago, Chile. I think the port was Valparaiso. I didn't take leave there either. Then north to San Diego. I took leave with a buddy and I think when the ship went to San Francisco I took leave with a buddy, and he lived in Oregon. That's how I found Oregon [laughs].

MD: Oh wow [laughs].

BR: Early October 1955. Took a Greyhound bus to Santa Rosa, and then hitchhiked from Santa Rose to his parents' home in Brookings. Through the night hitchhiking with one guy who we thought he was going to run into redwood trees, because the way he drove around the curvy road on the old redwood highway. Then we hitchhiked with a log truck driver who—I'll never forget this—it was right after the crack of dawn who drove with both windows down, sleeveless, and we were in our Navy blues, and it was chilly as hell, is all I can say [laughs].

MD: [Laughs].

BR: He dropped us above Crescent City across the line into Oregon and then we got to Brookings. My buddy was married and his wife lived in the Illinois Valley in Kerby. Actually his wife was living with her parents in Kerby. I got to spend time in the Illinois Valley, and that's what I really loved. My friends' father in law, a guy named Curly Robinson, took me on a day trip to sawmills and different parts of the Illinois Valley and fed me all kinds of information. He was a timber faller. And he was laid up, as they say, at that point in time with a broken arm. The injury occurred in some kind of logging operation. Then it was back to San Francisco, back aboard the Bennington, and off to the Far East. Stop in Pearl Harbor, and onto Japan, and then the first of two Christmases that I spent in Hong Kong, which was rather interesting [laughs].

MD: Yeah [laughs].

BR: How we wind up in Hong Kong two years in a row was interesting. Anyway, it was during that time that I was really getting into running motion picture projectors. And on the Bennington I lived in the movie booth, which was halfway between the hanger deck and flight deck because the hanger deck was the theater for where the sailors sat while we showed movies. We were above it. We had two projectors. We had three rooms. One was the entry room, which came in right off the walkway off the side of the ship. And then we had a workshop and then a little room to store movies. Then the movie booth itself was two projectors and three bunks. I can't remember—I think for some reason I got the bottom bunk because the other two guys were a lot taller than I was.

That was actually fun. We had relatively loose supervision. We were competent. We did things the right way. Never missed, I don't think we were ever reprimanded for having anything to do with our operations of the projectors. That was kind of fun. I liked that a lot better because I didn't have anyone to supervise and I didn't have anyone overseeing over me. The only problem was an ensign, who was charged with oversighting the movie booth and some other responsibilities, and this fellow saw fit to come and visit us, maybe on a daily basis, not for long, just to suggest in kind of a messy way, we weren't very fond of him, but, he didn't, you know on the larger scheme of things we were competent and he never interfered with that.

[0:40:17]

MD: Call him a shavetail.

BR: He was a shavetail.

MD: [Laughs].

BR: It's interesting. He was the junior officer in E Division: this was the electricians and the interior communications electricians. He was the junior officer, and then the senior officer in charge of our division was a fellow named Jimmy Adams, and he had come out of the merchant marine fleet. He was the guy that everyone liked, and no one liked this other guy [laughs].

MD: So you spent your four years in the U.S. Navy and was just discharged, regular discharge, and went home.

BR: Well, no, there's a long route to that.

MD: Ah.

BR: That is, my growing interest in going to college with these not-so-celebratory high school scores which caused me a lot of grief. I started taking a few correspondence courses in Algebra and so forth, and I'm not sure that they helped at all. My last year in the Navy beginning in the fall of 1956, I started writing—I thought about going to the University of Alaska, because I was interested in fisheries and wildlife. I thought about the University of Connecticut where a lot of my high school peers went to school. By the spring of 1957, I was discharged in September, I was made initiatives to get into the University of Connecticut. I knew nothing about admissions procedures. I had no one to advise me about admissions procedures. So I marshalled what I thought: my high school transcripts, the correspondence courses that I took, and sent them to the University of Connecticut, and I was turned down for admission. As I tell my friends, they were letting dogs in, but not me.

So I reframed my argument to get into the University of Connecticut. I applied again. This was in the late spring of 1957. I was refused again. I also wanted to take advantage of an early discharge from the Navy, if you could prove you were entering school somewhere. I failed that because I couldn't get accepted at the University of Connecticut. I was discharged in September, drove across the country. I had a car then. Went to work on a dairy for a while, a couple of months or so, which was very draining, because it was a nice guy to work for but I was doing everything [chuckles] from sun up to sundown. Then I worked as a seasonal employee for the U.S. Post Office. In late January/February I hired on with Great Mountain Forest in Northwestern Connecticut near the small town of Norfolk. This was a considerable forest operation: 7,000 acres in one of the smallest states in the United States.

MD: Yeah.

BR: It was a wealthy man who ran this operation. He had a full-time forester, another fellow who had been to forestry school for two years had an associate's degree, and a couple other employees. I was hired during the beginning of that maple syrup season, or the sap season as we call it in New England. They had a considerable operation of making maple syrup. I was hired on the grounds that farm boys are good workers, and [laughs] I don't think they knew much about my grandfather's farm. So I went to work for Great Mountain Forest. Still interested in going to college. In the summer, the Great Mountain Forest hired a crew of 6 or 7 forestry students out of Yale University.

[0:45:00]

Most of them were people who were transitioning to graduate forestry school. I should also add that on Great Mountain Forest was a Yale summer school, buildings and outbuildings, that ironically I learned relatively recently was the home where my grandmother Weigold, my mother's mother, grew up in a family of 11 or 12 children, and the house burned down sometime before it became part of the Great Mountain Forest estate. That was interesting. I worked with college students, which was a good influence, and I wanted to go to school still, and I took an exam at New Britain State Teachers College, which is now Central Connecticut State University, of course [smiles]. They were going to accept I think 40 students out of this group who took the exam.

I received a letter sometime in the middle of August of being refused admission to New Britain State Teacher College. So, this is the real story: I went out that night with my buddy Rolly Miller, drank too much beer, and woke up the next morning determined that I was going to drive to New Britain and see what was going on, to talk to real people. I called Great Mountain Forest and told them what had happened and I said, "I'm going to drive to New Britain today." I went to speak to an admissions person in New Britain and anyway he looked at the scores and he said, "You just missed." And he said, "By the way, Danbury State College is I think still accepting students. Would you be interested in going there?" You know, this is the last straw [laughs].

MD: [Laughs].

BR: So I said, "Sure." He says, "Do you have some time? Would you drive over there?" I said, "Sure." So he phoned Danbury, I think he talked to Al Geddes, who was Dean of Men, and I was on my way. By the time I left Danbury State Teachers College, that was its name then, that afternoon I was enrolled, ready to pay my tuition for fall semester, and went home very happy person [laughs].

MD: Now did you use the GI Bill, or?

BR: Yeah.

MD: Yeah.

BR: Yeah, I had the GI Bill for all four years. Anyway, it's amusing now to look back on it.

MD: Yeah.

BR: But then it was very stressful, because I really wanted to go to college, you know [chuckles].

MD: Now I show that, now did it change names? Because—

BR: Yeah.

MD: You show Western Connecticut State College was a—

BR: It went from Danbury State Teachers College when I first—and during my four years there the title was changed to Danbury State College. Then it went to Western Connecticut State College and then, like New Britain, it went to Western Connecticut University.

MD: Mm-hm. And it was located where in?

BR: In Danbury, Connecticut.

MD: Okay, right in Danbury, okay.

BR: The hat center of the universe.

MD: Yes it is. Yes it is.

BR: Yeah, and there were still some old hat factories. In fact, after I was married my wife and I lived in a second-floor apartment in a big house, and the other half of the house the fellow who lived there with his wife and two daughters he worked in a hat factory. But the hat factory business was on its way out.

MD: Yeah by the early '60s they were a shadow of what they were.

BR: Yeah.

MD: So while you were there—now did you—what was your main field of study?

BR: Well, my objective was to go to school for two years there, eventually, to go to school for two years there, and I was interested in physical education and then I could transfer to New Haven State College, State Teacher's College. It was another one of the normal schools that was going through different name changes. That I would go to New Haven, and they had a good graduate program, undergraduate and graduate program in physical education. Along the way I was still thinking about transferring somewhere in fisheries and wildlife and so forth.

[0:50:04]

None of that ever materialized. I survived my first semester after flunking exams in Psychology, Biology, a C- in Western Civ. and so forth. I eventually finished the first semester as I remember with all B's and one A, and then the next semester was all A's. It was a slow climb because I had to learn to study. I had to learn the routines of how to prepare for exams. I had to learn how to properly write papers. All of that was a learning experience with very little guidance except for people on the faculty who were very helpful. I was not the only veteran there either. Probably in my class there were 5 or 6 veterans who had been through some of the—two of them were quite a bit older than I was too.

MD: Now so we're looking from basically 1958 through '62. Now did you do the fraternity thing?

BR: No, no. There are no fraternities [smiles].

MD: Oh, really?

BR: Yeah. My graduating class was 110 people. I mean, Mike, get real [laughs].

MD: [Laughs].

BR: I didn't know what a fraternity or a sorority was. I'm not sure to the present day—they probably do, but no.

MD: Oh, wow.

BR: What was interesting about Danbury was most of my colleagues were first-generation college students. I was certainly in that category.

MD: Oh, wow.

BR: My brother also graduated from Danbury.

MD: So what was your degree actually in?

BR: My degree was in Social Studies Education. In other words, I was qualified in the state of Connecticut to teach social studies. I don't know what my certificate said. It was through high school. I took Western Civ. two semesters. I took

U.S. History two semesters. I took a course "History Through Biography," which was fascinating, and I took a course in Modern European History. That was it. But my learning curve, my interest in reading, by my junior year I was flying in terms of interest. I had two or three faculty members who would loan me books and give me copies of *The New York Times*, and I got interested in politics and political history and so forth. It was a very nurturing environment for one who came from the background that I did.

MD: Especially going from someone who wanted to be fisheries and biologist to one of the greatest historians that OSU's ever seen.

BR: That's a bit embellished [chuckles].

MD: But the whole idea of when did history click?

BR: Well, by my senior year. I took the course in Modern European History was the one where I really learned the most about approaches to the study of history. As I remember the faculty member his name was Myron Stinchfield. He was a short very unassuming man. Very quiet but riveting lecturer. I wrote a paper for his class that was flowing with double entendres and so on. I was getting A's in all my courses then. He gave me a B- on the paper and said, "Please come and talk to me." I went in to speak with him, and he very quietly and very politely and very kindly I guess would be the word informed me that to use all of the vocabulary that impressed *me* was not necessarily going to impress people reading what I had written. That was, I guess from that point on as a graduate student I learned to "stick to the facts ma'am" [laughs].

[0:55:02]

MD: [Laughs].

BR: That was very instructive and something I've never forgotten.

MD: Let's move into your path to your Ph.D. Now I see Syracuse University is part of a graduate career.

BR: Yeah, well I, yes. I graduated second in my class at Danbury of 110 students. I applied to graduate school in History. I was accepted at Syracuse on condition, because I didn't have many history courses, that I maintain a B average. By this time I was married to Jeanne Schwartz. We were married at the end of my freshman year, and we had one son born in 1960 and a second son born in June of 1962, right after I graduated. We moved to Syracuse. I worked two jobs during the summer because I had no assistantship or anything. Started in late August, I think their semester system began. We lived in married student housing, which was very economical. I went full-bore into graduate school. I took a course in English History in the 19th century. I took the first semester of a two-semester course in Russian History and had a professor who is named Warren Bartlett Walsh who is famous in some circles in teaching Russian History. He lectured to the Army War College, that'll give you a hint [laughs].

MD: Oh, wow.

BR: I took a course in the French Revolution with, I can't remember the professor's name now. He was excellent. Let's see [looks down to count with hands]: Russian History, English History, Modern European History, I took one other one. Anyway, at the end of the semester I had 3 A's and a B. I knew at that point that I could make it in graduate school. I started the second semester. I was babysitting our two boys from 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon until bedtime for them, studying and so forth. My wife, Jeanne, worked a 3:00 to 11:00 shift in an IBM, working with IBM cards and so forth, punch machines and all of that.

Anyway, later in that semester and into, I started the second semester, I was having back spasms and I was at the end of my rope. I quit. I pulled out of graduate school a month into the second semester. We moved back and lived with my parents for 3 months. I went back to work on Great Mountain Forest right at the beginning of the sap season again. Worked there until June and meanwhile I was laying the groundwork to move to Oregon and Jeanne agreed to that. I left Connecticut with a high school buddy who drove across the country with me in a 1963 Hillman Husky station wagon [laughs]. We arrived in the Illinois Valley on June 6, 1963, which is a date that's easy for me to remember.

MD: Yeah.

BR: I got a job setting chokers.

MD: Mm-hm.

BR: Working in the woods, actually close to the Oregon Caves National Monument. All kinds of funny stories about getting hired to do that that I won't go into. But it's just amusing. Hiring a guy from Connecticut to set chokers in the great Northwest woods? And these two guys they knew that I was going to be a schoolteacher and all of that. Of course, that added to the humor.

[1:00:01]

MD: Yeah [laughs].

BR: Anyway, I did get a job teaching sixth grade in Creswell that year. We lived in Eugene in married student housing, the Amazon Housing Project. I took graduate classes to add to my portfolio, in the evening. I took evening classes. I was really fortunate. I got into two great seminars: one in British History and then another one with Wendell Holmes Stephenson. This was a high powered graduate seminar in American historians. It was riveting. I did well in those courses. The next year I worked in the woods again in the summer. Actually I was foreman of fire crews summer of '64. Lots of humor and fun stories about that. Not fighting fires but the characters I worked with.

Then in '64/'65 I went back to school and I had a half-time assistantship. It paid for some of the damages. My wife Jeanne then had completed her bachelor's degree and she taught school in Pleasant Hill during that year. I had my master's degree by the end of that academic year and searching around for graduate programs, and we moved to Maine where I was going to enter a graduate program and do graduate work at the University of Maine. Because I was interested then in the pulp and paper industry. I don't remember all the details.

I taught junior high school for a half a year while we were in Maine and met some of the faculty. I didn't take any courses until the spring semester of 1966. I met Doug Miller, who is a young intellectual historian. I met a colonial historian, James Henderson, who was interested in a paper that I wrote at the University of Oregon on the Massachusetts Bay Company dealing with numbers. Not huge quantitative numbers, but just a few. I showed him a paper, and I had not yet taken his course in colonial history, and he said, "Are you interested in quantitative history?" And I said, "Huh [laughs]?" "What's quantitative history?"

MD: [Laughs].

BR: Well, he explained to me that my paper in fact was dealing with that and he suggested that I send it off to *The Historian* for publication. And it worked!

MD: Yeah.

BR: So that spring semester I went back to school full-time. Jeanne was working in the university campus publications office in Journalism which eventually became her forte. Anyway, I did the spring semester, took a full course load and did very well. And in Jim Henderson's colonial history class I wrote a paper, a research paper, that was a proposition for a doctoral dissertation in quantitative history: looking at tax lists. I picked a couple of a communities at the mouth of the York River: Saco. [laughs] I better have the pronunciation right; and Biddeford. They're small communities on each side of the river. I looked in the late 1600s, and they had all the tax records available and everything. Jim Henderson agreed, this is the meat that you need to do a doctoral dissertation.

Long story short, I applied for an assistantship. The department father figures and mother figures decided that I was married, had two children, I was there, I wasn't going to leave, and they didn't give me an assistantship. They made me a first alternative. I wrote to my English history professor back in Oregon, and said, "I want to come back." He wrote back immediately and said, "You're in. You have a full-time assistantship." So I came back to Oregon with my family.

[1:05:19]

MD: Now your time at the University of Oregon is significant to me. You're going through grad school during the beginnings of the Vietnam War, starting of the turmoil of—

BR: I was there during all of that period.

MD: During all of that period. Then you come to the epicenter of that in Oregon, at least.

BR: Yeah.

MD: The University of Oregon. One question I want to catch before I get too far into this, though, I always ask everybody—there's that significant memory that's generational that makes an imprint on people. The one that strikes me about your era is when Kennedy was assassinated in November of '63. Did that memory imprint on you?

BR: The library at the small school that I taught—I was teaching sixth grade in Creswell. This old wooden building, second floor. There was a partition between, I think it was the first floor, there was a partition between the library and the principal's office where the secretary was and everything. My class was having their class pictures taken when the news of Kennedy's assassination came. We could hear the radio going in the secretary's office.

MD: Those are the memories that just—

BR: Yeah, those are vivid memories, yeah—

MD: They imprint on a person. Every—

BR: If you ask—

MD: Every generation has one.

BR: If you ask anyone close to my age, even the children that I taught, now most of them are retired, would remember that experience.

MD: Yeah. I remember it's the first time I ever saw my father cry.

BR: Yeah.

MD: So we're in the turbulent late 1960s, and you're right in the middle of finishing your doctoral dissertation on the U of O campus. Tell me about how the counter-culture, the culture, the Vietnam Era.

BR: [Looks at watch] I'm supposed to have lunch with Larry at 11:45, so—

MD: We're doing okay.

BR: Okay. The spring of 1965 before I left for Maine in March of 1965 when Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam I participated in the first anti-war march from the university campus down to the Harris Plaza in downtown Eugene, which wasn't very far as the crow flies. Just to cite the politeness of this event: I had a white shirt, a tie, a sport coat on. We walked on sidewalks. We waited for lights to change before we crossed.

I cite this because that's a sea change from four years later, three years later, when I returned to Eugene when people didn't bother with parade permits or anything and just bulldozed on marches down to Harris Hall or Free Speech Plaza. That was an enormous change. When I came back in the fall of 1966 and I was—my focus was going to be American History, not British History, and British History was one of my subfields. I came back with the model of a dissertation that I had framed at the University of Maine. Are you interested in this?

MD: Yes, that was my [knocks on table] right there [laughs].

BR: It followed what was considered then considered cool among new left historians to do history from the bottom up, to give voice to the voiceless. I quickly looked at—I had three communities in mind as frontier communities: Roseburg, Grants Pass, Springfield.

[1:10:02]

I think the first place I visited was the county courthouse in Roseburg and talked to clerk staff and wanted to know if they had tax records, because we have census records, but to build a credible quantitative historical argument you need tax records, because it reveals wealth, poverty and so forth. They took me into an unvented, dust-filled, very sizeable room with all the tax records with an inch of dust on the top of them. I'm probably exaggerating a little bit but not much. I knew then it would be Roseburg. Anyway, along the way I framed an argument for doing my dissertation in quantitative history. No one had done anything like that at the University of Oregon. Had a committee meeting and so forth, and I was on my way. That was the academic side.

Which was interesting because when you do quantitative history today, immediately you need computers. Some that you'd even hold in your hand. This is in the days of mainframes. There was no money in the history department's budget to pay for doing anything like that. I had to speak to the dean of Arts & Sciences who readily made possible for my access to mainframe analysis. I had a fellow graduate student in economics who knew how to write programs. I knew nothing about this information. This guy saved my bacon. Because I was going to use IBM cards, punch cards, darning needles, and sorting out categories of stuff like this [raises arms]. He thought I was still riding a horse and buggy because he understood the potential of a mainframe. I wrote a list of questions, thirty-five questions or something like that, that I wanted to find out from my data. He wrote the program, and I was spared all the agony of doing sort cards [laughs]. Then it was another sort machine that was a step ahead and then it was the computer of course. Anyway, it worked.

MD: The actual title of your dissertation?

BR: Was—oh man. Something about frontier democracy.

MD: Yes.

BR: It was a mild test of the Turner Thesis [chuckles]. What I found, I was interested in persistence in the community: how long people stayed. I was interested in the Donation Land Act. In other words, people who had Donation Land claims, their persistence of course was way up [motions with hand]. Then roughly 50% of the population paid no taxes. They were transitory, stayed in the community less than 5 years. This was over a 30-year period of time. My study covered 1850 to 1880 to 1885.

MD: Yeah. And a good portion of these people were in the timber industry?

BR: No, no.

MD: No, really?

BR: Mostly agriculture.

MD: Oh, really. Because that's usually transitory.

BR: No, no. this is before the timber industry.

MD: Really took off, yeah.

BR: No it was farming. The railroad came to Roseburg in 1873, so transportation was relatively limited. Getting in and out of Roseburg at that point in time, until the railroad, everything was by stage.

MD: Yeah.

BR: The Umpqua River is navigable as far as Elkton, and that's it. Transportation was—if you raised wheat, grain products, even if you, as eventually there was a large sheep industry, the wool clip was shipped out annually, and most of that came after the coming of the railroad.

MD: Well, you successfully defend a dissertation and then start your career in higher education. I understand that you had a couple of years at Western Oregon. And then you came—

BR: There were no jobs in the early 1970s.

[1:15:01]

MD: Right.

BR: I defended my dissertation in October of '69, and there are no jobs. I taught part-time '69/'70 at Oregon College of Education, now Western Oregon University. In 1970/'71 I was hired full-time as a visiting professor, because another person took sabbatical leave. At the end of that year, '71, I had no job. My wife Jeanne and I were going to, we had rented a storage unit in Eugene. We were going to move our furniture there and go back east to visit our families. It was Friday of final exam week. I was in my office grading finals. Graduation was going on out in the football field and the afternoon mail call came in. I had a letter from the chair of the department of history at Oregon State, George Carson, offering me a 1-year job at about a $1,000 reduction in salary. But that didn't matter. It was a job.

MD: It was a job, yeah.

BR: Holy cripe. I had to pick up a U-Haul truck that night. So I called his home, this was late in the afternoon, and his wife Dorothy answered the phone and said "George is at the airport picking up his son who is just returned from China." And she said, "I don't know if this is possible you could speak with him." And I told her my situation, and she said, "I'll have George call you." When he arrived home I just wanted to know if his job offer was serious." George says, "Yes it is." And "We'd love to have you come here."

Anyhow, my two boys by this time are in, let's see 1971, they're in school so we drove that evening to Corvallis, found another garage to rent to store furniture in, and phoned Eugene and cancelled our rental of the unit there and picked up the U-Haul truck that night, put all our furniture in it from the small duplex we had and drove to Corvallis, stored the furniture, and took off for the east coast. So I had a visiting appointment here for one year. I had a visiting appointment the second year that was made possible by a research grant that William Appleman Williams had with the proviso that some of his money would go to rehire me. So I was rehired again. During the summer of 1972 - I was setting chokers on a logging show - department chair Tom McClintock asked me if I was interesting in teaching a class in India history. I said yes!

MD: Yeah.

BR: I taught the course in the spring of 1973 immediately in the wake of the occupation at Wounded Knee. 250 students in Milam Auditorium. Let's see [looks down to hands to count] I've got to make sure I get— '71, '72, fall of '73 I'm on my third year of visiting appointment, and it wasn't until my fourth year here that I was placed on a tenure track appointment. That had to do with faculty politics.

[1:20:08]

MD: And the politics of the time, and—

BR: Jealousy directed towards William Appleman Williams, who was an internationally prominent historian. He was interested in hiring a group of young, leftist historians and so forth. And those charges really were not true. There was not much substance to it, because that was not the case. The case was people interested in doing research, publishing, writing, who were good scholars.

MD: So you're in a period of time when the History department is changing, and you—

BR: Well it was [shakes head], yeah—

MD: —were right in that wave.

BR: Well I started in the fall of '71 and it's really not until 1979 the department hired Lisa Sarasohn and Paul Kopperman. That didn't give the department too much leverage, but by the mid-1980s the department hired Bill Husband, David LaFrance, Bess Beatty, and then 1987/88 Mina Carson and that's the upward trajectory of the History department. I might add that the History department followed the general contours of the College of Liberal Arts in terms of the hiring of people who were much more active scholars, publishing. By the mid 1980s: 1986/1987 then president John Byrne, Provost Graham Spanier moved the College of Liberal Arts teaching portfolio to the same as other colleges, the professional schools in the university.

In other words, from roughly three courses per term to two courses per term as in the College of Science. It's not until that point that we reached parity and I argue in the OSU history that it was a morale booster for people in the College of Liberal Arts who worked very hard and with a three course load to do any kind of scholarly endeavor. To research and write, you had to have research grants and you had to have time away from classrooms.

MD: Yeah. So you have a long story career teaching history. A couple of questions I always like to ask longtime teachers, compare a student from 1971 to a student from about the time you were leaving in 1997. What's the comparison?

BR: Actually I taught my last lecture class in 2002.

MD: Yeah.

BR: Well, I loved, I'll use Indian History as an example because this is—what has fascinated me is that in 1973/'74/'75 I had a few Red Power students in my classes. They were great people. I say I got along with them famously. It was fun teaching Indian History. I loved it. I had sizeable classes through that whole period of teaching Indian History, enrollments always around 125/150 people in Peavy Auditorium. Then I started teaching Western History, Western American History, with the idea that I could have the best of both worlds, because Indian History would obviously be a vital component of Western History. So I stopped teaching Indian History. I taught it once in the early 1990s. Then again, I don't know, in the late '90s and there was a difference in the students. Especially the Indian students who were in my class. They weren't people who were from the reservation, and I think a lot of them, some of them became good friends, they became aware of their Indian-ness as adults.

[1:25:06]

My approach with those people seemed to be a much more touchy-feely relationship than any of the reservation students that I had in the early 1970s. That was a pretty riveting experience. I don't want to make a lot of it, but it was a big change for me from the early '70s, mid-'70s through the 1990s.

MD: When you were going back a little bit for your early time here at OSU one of the things—they're still lots going on in the United States. We were still not out of Vietnam. Can you compare the U of O with OSU in terms of activism and the activities around all that?

BR: I made no bones about this that when I first came to OSU, the story I would tell people was that if I did anything to get out of line, a giant Beaver tail would whap me down in the quad somewhere and I would have trouble getting up [laughs].

MD: [Laughs].

BR: Well, that was misplaced arrogance about coming here from the University of Oregon where I was very active in anti-war activities, and of course that was an experience that was wild and furious and crazy in some respects. Late in my graduate career there were 4 or 5 of us who came up here and we spent much of the day on the stage at Milam Auditorium talking about the war, about the dangers of nuclear—unleashing the ultimate holocaust. I think at that time we had a sense that we were bringing truth to the hinterlands, which was misplaced. When I came here, I came here with some of those sentiments.

However, I very quickly, I became good friends with William Appleman Williams, who was probably the epitome of new left historians whose famous book *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* was the ultimate challenge to those who thought that American foreign policy, whether it be Vietnam and elsewhere, was proper and good. We know a lot, of course now especially about Vietnam. I met people on campus who shared fully the same ideas that I had. There were fewer of them, but I became friends with people, most of them are retired, virtually all of them are retired now. The campus and Benton County were in the midst of incredible change, too. I use as an example Benton County, City of Corvallis pretty much dominated by Republicans of all stripes. Today we would call them very liberal Republicans. Then, Benton County commissioners were all Republicans.

And in the 1980s that begins to change, and I guess the example that I could cite would be the Republican conservative nature of Corvallis and Benton County and Oregon State University in the early 1970s, with 1994 when the marriage amendment to the Oregon Constitution ballot measure was voted upon. Only two counties voted not to add the man and woman marriage amendment to the Oregon constitution. Two counties: Multnomah County and Benton County. That I've also written about in the OSU history. A sea change in terms of the politics in this county, and today I would argue that Benton County's politics are certainly much more liberal than Lane County's politics.

[1:30:02]

MD: That's saying something!

BR: Yeah, that's a sea change.

MD: Well I want to touch a little bit before we go about your publishing career.

BR: Yes.

MD: You've written over a dozen books. I've cited many of them in my papers. Just a quickie about your process: what brings you into a topic and developing the book and what—because your books are all within the same genre: environmental history, economic and environmental history of the Pacific Northwest.

BR: I first got interested, and this largely was with William Appleman Williams, Bill Williams, my good friend, his approach to history. He was interested in political economy. In other words, the politics of economics. That's what drove my interest in my doctoral dissertation: doing history from the bottom up. Those who had no voice in politics, what was the nature of their economic status? That drove the interest in my doctoral dissertation. My first book: *Lumberjacks and Legislators*, published in 1982, I might add, was a study of the politics and economics of the lumber industry, 1890 to 1941, to the onset of World War II.

Those were the issues that drove my next major book, the study of Coos Bay and Coos Bay history: *Hard Times in Paradise*. Well, the title gives it away [smiles]. It comes from newspaper headlines over the years. In other words, a community that was very dependent on the lumber industry and then when the lumber industry went up in, you want to call it smoke, in 1979/1980, the closure of Georgia Pacific and so forth. It left a community that was bereft of virtually every mill in town except when the Coquille tribe built the Mill Casino. That still drives my interest. One recent example was the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in January of 2016. When that occupation was still underway I started gathering documents to put together a historical piece about the occupation of the Malheur Reservation, but really a history of land use, ownership in Harney County from the late 1860s when great cattle herds moved in from California and shoved out the northern Paiutes people. It was newspaper headlines that drove that interest and drives what I do in history.

MD: Yeah.

BR: My interest in history.

MD: I want to touch on the book that is just now coming in to publish.

BR: Yes.

MD: For the 150th anniversary of the college.

BR: Yeah.

MD: Probably one of the most comprehensive books that I can see about the history of OSU.

BR: There's none other.

MD: No. That's true, well, *The Orange and Black* just doesn't cover it.

BR: I'm not pounding my chest [smiles], but there is no other real history of Oregon State University. This is a little bit different from anything I've ever done. Six or seven years ago if you asked me if I would be interested in doing a history of Oregon State University, I'd tell you you're crazy. And Ben Mutschler approached me in late 2012 about doing a history of the university and I said, "Let's talk about it. We'll visit again and let me—." So I started scrolling through the archival records. I found much that fed my interest, including some of the major low points and high points of the history of this institution. I agreed. The College of Liberal Arts put up a small fund to support me—I have a retirement income.

[1:35:09]

I decided to take it on. I would say that, within a month, people would ask me how things were going. I had two words to describe my research: endlessly fascinating. It has been. And writing it has been too.

MD: It's due to be out in—

BR: This October.

MD: October.

BR: I have to say one of the things that I aim for in doing the research was to make it contextual. To not do a history of the university looking inward but to write a history of the university to place it in the context of the history of a community, a state, a nation, and a global context. I was convinced of that approach by reading I think a very good history of Montana State University, their centennial history, by three authors, and I said, "Damn, that's what I want to do." I strove mightily to stay away from, although it's unavoidable, of presidencies. You know those, we go from A, to B, to C and down the line [laughs]. I cast it in the network of economic depressions, of wars, of other crises, the McCarthy era and so forth. The one reviewer of the manuscript. This is the way presses work, they send it out to an anonymous reviewer —I still don't know who the reviewer is—saw that as the strength of the book. I felt doubly blessed.

MD: Well, we definitely can't wait. One of the things, a couple of quick thoughts of a storied historian—I have to ask this. As a lifelong educator and a prominent historian, what is your opinion about the validity of oral history practice? Are oral histories a useful tool—

BR: Oh [smiles and laughs].

MD: —in interpreting history? Not only this project here for the 150th but for writing history in general?

BR: I've done some oral history. When I did the Coos Bay book. I found some of the most riveting statements that are in the book that came from oral interviews, okay? That certainly has been very important to me. For this book, however, the great volume of oral histories that you and others have done I've stayed away from [laughs] because I have to survive. The archives themselves are so voluminous. You could write a history of every college in the university. One has to look at the drivers that frame the history of OSU, and if I started to look at that I would never live to finish the book [laughs].

MD: [Laughs] Yeah look, shiny object.

BR: That's a great question, Mike.

MD: It means a lot to me.

BR: Well, I want to say, maybe you can put this in parting. I retired to half-time in 1999, and I have been busy as hell since then researching and writing, and I've had the most glorious retirement I think of anybody who's retired from this place. Because doing history, and I'm quoting William Appleman Williams, is fun.

MD: That is the perfect answer to one of the questions that I also wanted to know as well, is what advice do you have for individuals today seeking a career in history? You just answered that.

BR: Thank you. You have to have a job, too [laughs].

MD: Yeah. Well, I know, yeah.

BR: The study of history can be many-faceted. You can go to law school. You can do public history, many avenues. Your professor, my dear friend, Katrine Barber at Portland State University is certainly very good at that. It's not just doing what I did: research, writing, and being in the classroom. There are many venues.

MD: Well, we always like to give a person a chance to have the last word. And so you have any final thoughts for the Beaver Nation who will be viewing this oral history and being a part of the permanent record now of Oregon State?

[1:40:17]

BR: Well, the portfolio of doing history has warps and woofs and it's not always uplifting and it's not always in the dredges and one has to accept all of that, in other words, that which has been prideful about this institution, that which has been less prideful but both of those components are part of the historical record.

MD: Bill, on behalf of the Sesquicentennial Oral History Project I want to thank you for putting a cherry on top of my oral histories.

BR: Thank you.

MD: Thank you.

[1:41:12]