



## Clemens Starck Oral History Interview, July 30, 2015

### Title

“A Good Mechanic Can Always Find Work”

### Date

July 30, 2015

### Location

Starck residence, Dallas, Oregon.

### Summary

In the interview, Starck discusses the details of his working and creative life, stopping at points to read a selection of his poems.

The session begins with a recounting of Starck's upbringing in New York state, including his memories of the war years, his abbreviated stint as an undergraduate at Princeton University, and early jobs that he held as, variously, a journalist, ranch hand, construction laborer and merchant seaman. He likewise outlines his evolution as a writer, noting the key importance of the Bread Loaf Writers Conference; the emergence of poetry as his preferred literary form; his development as a poet in locations including Taos, New Mexico and the San Francisco Bay Area; his perspective on the construction of a poem; and the role that receiving awards has played in his writing life.

Starck next reflects on his connection with Oregon State University. He describes the circumstances by which his family set down roots in Oregon, his initial work in heavy construction, his arrival at OSU in 1986, and the range of duties that he assumed as a carpenter working for the Physical Plant. From there, he shares his memories of the atmosphere on the OSU campus during his years of association, including the indifference shown toward his work by the university's humanities faculty. He then recalls a more fruitful relationship that he established with the English department at Willamette University, where he taught and made connections with colleagues who enabled his interest in studying Russian and traveling in Russia.

As the interview nears its conclusion, Starck lends his thoughts on the usefulness of anonymity to a writer, the dichotomy of his work as a carpenter and a poet, and his activities in retirement. The session ends with remarks on family and the reading of a final poem.

### Interviewee

Clemens Starck

### Interviewer

Janice Dilg

### Website

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

## Transcript

**Janice Dilg:** So, today is July 30th, 2015, I'm Janice Dilg, oral historian with the Oregon State University Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, and I'm at the home of Clem Starck in Dallas, Oregon. Welcome, and thanks for participating in the project.

**Clemens Starck:** My pleasure.

**JD:** So, if you wouldn't mind starting with just a little bit of brief background; where you're from, where you grew up?

**CS:** Sure. Well, I grew up back east; I'm not a west-coaster, initially, anyway. I grew up in upstate New York, western New York State outside of Rochester, small town called Irondequoit. And I left there to go to college when I was seventeen, which would have been in the mid-fifties, wound up living in New York City for a while. I went to school in New Jersey, went to Princeton for a couple of years, lived in New York City, New Jersey, travelled all over the country, lived in New Orleans for a while, wound-up living in New Mexico, I lived in Taos for a while, eventually came to San Francisco, lived in San Francisco for a long time and moved to British Columbia, lived in Canada for a while, finally came to Oregon in the mid-seventies and bought this house that we're sitting in, which was a fallen-down old farmhouse that I totally rebuilt, being a carpenter. I picked up the carpentry trade at one point to support myself as a poet, basically, and that's how I wound up going to OSU and working at OSU as a carpenter. I worked as a carpenter in the Physical Plant.

**JD:** Well, let's go back and fill in a few of those gaps, or a few in-between those places that you were. So, you were born in 1937.

**CS:** Correct.

**JD:** So, you were a young child during the Second World War.

**CS:** I was.

**JD:** And the then Cold War, following on its heels.

**CS:** I was.

**JD:** Talk a little about if you have recollections of what it was like on the home front.

**CS:** Well, I remember the Second World War, I remember rationing. I remember I was infatuated with airplanes as a kid, and so my heroes were the World War II pilots and I was an avid reader of books on flying, and that was my dream, to be a pilot when I grew up. I was just talking the other day with a fellow poet saying that I had no intention of being a writer when I grew up. I wanted to be a pilot. So anyway, that was during the war, and then of course you mentioned the Cold War; the Cold War certainly left an impression on me. Growing up in the Cold War there was, it was that kind of dark cloud that hovered over us all, the threat of nuclear holocaust, very much. I don't particularly recall so much during school, that it affected me in terms of—we didn't build an air raid shelter or anything of that sort, but it certainly was a dominating influence, so to speak, the threat of the enemy, Russia, the enemy. Of course, as an avid—we'll talk later about the fact that I've been studying Russian language now for about twenty years and have spent some time in Russia. But yeah, that was definitely a time of threat, I guess.

**JD:** And did the research that I uncovered accurate in that you were part of the Ground Observer Corps?

**CS:** Yeah, I was.

**JD:** Talk a little about what that was.

**CS:** The Ground Observer Corps, well it was part of the civil defense network, basically, again because I was interested in airplanes and that I was into Boy Scouts originally, and after the Boy Scouts I was in the Air Scouts, the Air Explorer Scouts. And I guess it was through that connection that I became part of the Ground Observer Corps. Every Monday

I would take the bus from high school to downtown Rochester and I would climb or take the elevator as far as I could and then climb the rest of the way to the top story of the tallest building in Rochester where there was like a penthouse cupola of sorts. And there I would sit with a couple of other people and our binoculars and would watch for enemy aircraft approaching.

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**JD:** Which was a real concern on both of the coasts.

**CS:** Oh, absolutely, yeah, it was a real thing, and there was a whole system of—you know, for a kid, a high school kid, it was pretty exciting. So, anytime we spotted an airplane, which we would occasionally, we would report their position on the radio to the headquarters in Buffalo, whatever it was. It was, yeah, Ground Observer Corps. I'd almost forgotten all about that. I don't know how you discovered that. I didn't know that was in anybody's records.

**JD:** That's our job. And you mentioned that you were an avid reader and that you went off to college, sort of what was your view and your family's view about education, and was there an assumption that you would go off to college?

**CS:** Yeah, I think so in my family. My dad—neither of my parents had really been to college. My dad had gotten a job at Eastman Kodak Company during the depression and they sent him to night school to a place called Mechanics Institute, which later became Rochester Institute of Technology, RIT. And so, I was a first from the family to—I was the oldest of three children, so I was the first. I was always a good student, so it was somehow assumed, and I assumed that I would go to college, which I did.

**JD:** And how did you end up selecting Princeton?

**CS:** [Laughter].

**JD:** Or did they select you?

**CS:** Well, eventually they offered me a scholarship. But originally I applied to three colleges; I remember I applied to Dartmouth, Wesleyan and Princeton. And I was drawn to Princeton because, at the time, President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was a Princeton graduate and I, at that time, was determined to be a foreign diplomat. I had changed from airplanes to foreign policy. So, it was John Foster Dulles—I'm embarrassed to mention it as a staunch Democrat—but a Republican, Dulles, who swayed me in choosing Princeton.

**JD:** And so, you went off to Princeton, and talk just a little about what your experience was there.

**CS:** Well, it was a real intellectual awakening. I was a provincial kid from a public high school in Rochester, I had, you know, as I said, I was an avid reader, but I was not in any way schooled in the classics. I didn't have any kind of structure to my - at Princeton I discovered Literature with a capital L. It was just totally, blew me away. I took, first semester at Princeton, I took a course in modern European literature, literature in translation. And we read Dostoyevsky and Chekhov and we read Rocca and Kafka, we read Sartre and Camus, Pirandello, Unamuno, Lorca and these, this reading just absolutely ignited me. I just was absolutely enthralled with what these writers did, what they did with language. And I had never encountered anything of the sort before. It was a totally new world to me. And eventually it...eventually I was so taken with this intellectual stimulus, and I did not encounter, although I made some friends at Princeton, I did not encounter very much of the same enthusiasm on the part of my fellow students. It was like I was more serious than they were. So, and that eventually led me to drop out and continue my education on my own, which I did.

**JD:** Which you said took you to New York, and I believe a stint as a reporter, or a journalist?

**CS:** Yes. I was. I worked on a trade weekly called *The Oil Paint and Drug Reporter*. On the masthead it said, underneath the title *Oil Paint and Drug Reporter*, it said "the chemicals market authority," which it was. It was. So, we reported, each of the reporters had a particular subject, a particular field of chemicals. I started out the first, the beginning reporters were always given the one called petroleum derivatives. So, I wrote a column on petroleum derivatives for a while. Then I graduated to coating materials, and then finally drugs and fine chemicals. And I wrote a column. Basically the column was not so much about the item itself but its price, its market status, the degree to which it was in demand or not

in demand and various things related to it. Yeah, so I worked on Wall Street, just around the corner from Wall Street, downtown Manhattan.

**JD:** And this was a trade paper that was distributed nationally or regionally, or?

**CS:** Oh yeah, internationally, I think.

**JD:** Okay. But at some point then, you decided to hit the road.

**CS:** Well, I had started writing poetry. So, actually the stint in New York was after I had dropped out of Princeton and spent a couple of years riding freight trains and hitchhiking around the county and wound up, for the first time, in Oregon in 1957, '58. I worked on the railroad, worked as a railroad section gang in northeast of Oregon between Pendleton and La Grande, and then I went, worked on cattle ranches in Grant County. It's John Day, in the north fork of the John Day, worked on cattle ranches and wound up living there for almost a year and a half in an old homesteader's shack that a rancher allowed me to live in. I worked for him part time. Basically—

**JD:** Is this the Leo Flower?

**CS:** Leo Flower, yeah. How did you know about Leo Flower?

**JD:** The internet's an amazing tool.

**CS:** Oh, I guess, I guess. Anyway, yeah Leo gave me a place to live and sort of he took me under his wing. He was an interesting guy. So, I was interested in continuing my education. I was not, you know, I was a serious student. I didn't drop out of Princeton because I didn't care for intellectual things. I had acquired a library of quite a few books. I had my parents send me out boxes of books and I sat in this old homesteader's shack for over a year with a pile of books, reading by a kerosene lamp and a woodstove.

**JD:** Cow punching by day and—

**CS:** Cow punching by day, yes actually. Yeah, I was a cowboy actually. This was a remote area that was still crank telephone on a party line, and just as I was leaving there in 1959, probably, television came in. So, this was all pre-TV, this was very old spot. So, they still herded cattle on horseback. It's a big throw for a kid from the east to be cowboying.

**JD:** Sure. Learn to ride a horse, and—

**CS:** I rode a horse. Let's say I rode a horse, I never really learned to ride a horse.

**JD:** And perhaps dug a few fencepost holes and?

**CS:** I did a lot of digging, a lot of pick and shovel work, yep. Water lines and building corrals, rebuilding barns, reroofing barns and that sort of thing, mmmm.

**JD:** So, you were definitely putting together some carpentry skills, even before you did formal training.

**CS:** Well, I don't know that there was so much carpenter skills. Certainly a feeling for manual labor. The first thing I did, actually, when I dropped out of Princeton, I lived with my parents for a summer. I had the idea of going to—I wanted to go Europe, that was my idea. I had been to Europe as an exchange student when I was in high school. I went to West Germany in 1954, and I wanted to go back. I was intrigued with Europe. To me it was where it was happening; it was the place to be; that was the—you know, all these writers that I had encountered in Princeton were European.

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So anyway, so when I dropped out of Princeton I went back home, lived with my parents for a summer, and I got a job eventually. The first thing I did when I got back to Rochester, I started studying Greek, I started studying classical Greek and found a tutor at the University of Rochester and I got a job first as a night watchman on a construction site, and so I would study Greek while I was sitting, watching this construction site. And then I got a job, managed to get myself into

the laborer's union, and I worked as a construction laborer, which was my first experience at physical, physical work. It was quite painful. I was a soft, flabby kid, you know? And just to be out there on a construction site, and this was a lot of pick and shovel work, it was not—there wasn't a lot of heavy equipment on the job I was working on. So, but anyway, I made a good deal of money in those days, and since I was living at home with my parents I was able to save my money and that was my nest egg, and I planned to go to Europe with it.

But in the meantime, I had, when I was still going to Princeton, I had hitchhiked back and forth from Rochester to Princeton, because I had learned about hitchhiking when I was in Europe, that summer that I was an exchange student. I hitchhiked all over Germany. So, I hitchhiked back and forth from Rochester to Princeton and I met a guy at one time, one fellow who picked me up, gave me a ride, who had been a merchant seaman. And he took a liking to me, I was an unusual kid, I guess, with dreams of adventure and travel and so forth, and told me I should go to sea. You know: "go to sea, young man." So, I said "well, how do you do that?"

Well, he told me how I needed to do that. And I had to get seaman's—in order to qualify for a job on a ship I had to have seaman's papers, seaman's documents. In order to get seaman's documents I had to, from a coast guard—they were issued by the coast guard—in order to get those papers it was necessary to have the promise of a job. So, it was a Catch-22. In order to get the papers you needed to have a job; in order to get the job, you needed the papers. So, you had to break into that loop somewhat. So, I decided to try to do that, so after I had built up a bank account of something like the enormous sum of like thirteen hundred dollars, I set out hitchhiking down the east coast, first in New York and then Baltimore, Philadelphia, Charleston, wound up in Mobile, Alabama and I managed to grease the palm of a union official in Mobile to give me a promise of a job so that I could go to the Coast Guard and apply for papers, and that's how I got my seaman's papers. And I planned to ship out.

I went to New Orleans, I lived in New Orleans for a while, lived on Skid Row in New Orleans and found that it was very difficult to get a ship because shipping was very slow in the Gulf ports that particular time. This would have been 1957, '57, '58. And so, about after a month of trying, a month and a half or so of trying, I finally gave up. And I had been living on Skid Row, met a lot of interesting characters. This was a big change from the Ivy League, obviously, and from my life as a sheltered, middleclass kid. Anyway, I had learned about, from one of the denizens of Skid Row, I'd learned about riding the freight trains. So, this guy was, through the winter in New Orleans, was living during the winter there. I still remember that. It was the first snow in New Orleans in sixty years. Anyway, after spring came this other fellow, this tramp, basically, that I had met said he was heading for Houston. He was going to take the trains to Houston, and did I want to come along? He showed me how to catch a freight train. So, he taught me about riding the freights. So, that was a whole new chapter in my life, riding the freight trains.

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And I wound up, well I wound up, after much traveling back and forth, that's how I wound up in Oregon for the first time and wound up working on the railroad up in the Wallowas, and then I was working on the ranch in Grant County.

**JD:** So, you mentioned that you had started writing poetry during this time period, or—

**CS:** Well, I started writing poems, I did—I was not writing poems yet. I was sort of, I did not know how to begin writing. I was not particularly taken with writing poetry. It was writing novels that really interested me. You know, I love stories, I love telling stories, reading stories. So, I did not know how to begin. There were no writing workshops or all those kind of things that exist now for anyone who aspires to be a writer. So, I justified my existence as gathering material for what I would eventually do. So, I had been in eastern Oregon living on the cattle ranch that I had mentioned. And again, another thing that had happened during—between the two years that I was in college, I went to Middlebury College, French summer school. I was a language major, I was going to major in French.

So, I got a job there as a waiter to pay my way and when the—so that was, I don't know, six weeks, six or eight weeks, and when, toward the end of the summer session, there was an announcement that they were looking for waiters at an event, or a place, called The Bread Loaf Writers Conference up in the mountains near Middlebury, Vermont, and I thought well okay, I could do that, because I wanted to hike the long trail, which runs from the Canadian border down to Massachusetts—the length of Vermont. So, I thought well, that'll put me closer to the trailhead, so I'll go up there and

work as a waiter. So, that's how I learned about the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. I was not a writer, I was a—I had just finished my freshman year in college.

So anyway, I did that and I had that in the back of my mind as I then, years later, quit Princeton and did this whole traveling that I just described. So I needed, now I needed a—I was living in eastern Oregon, living in this homesteader's shack reading a lot of books and I decided that I wanted to continue my original dream of going to Europe. And so I, as an excuse for getting me back east, I wrote to the director of the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference to see if they needed waiters again this summer. This was a few years after I had been there before. So, they said "okay, come on out," and so, then what happened, I had—this is like the late fifties, I had grown a beard and I had long hair, believe it or not, long before this became popular. So anyway, I showed up in Bread Loaf with a long beard and long hair and that was such an usual thing at that time that they were, the woman who was in charge of the kitchen and all the waiters just was, there was no way. I was going to have to shave off my beard in order to be a waiter. Well, there was no way that I was going to shave off my beard.

So, the director decided that they had some extra money, some extra scholarship money, so they decided they would give me a scholarship. So, I had a scholarship to go to the writer's conference, even though I had never written a thing in my life. I was not a writer at all. So, in the future I could always put that on my résumé, that I once had a scholarship to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference.

So anyway, the story is that there I met a man, a poet, an Anglo-Irish poet named George Barker who took a liking to me as this young odd fellow. He was actually quite a, I won't say— well I guess I will say, a nasty man. He was very caustic in his attitude, basically, toward the writers conference and the people who were there; a lot of pretense and a lot of egotism. But for—I had no pretense whatsoever, I was just a kid, and I'm traveling around the country working as a cowboy and so forth. So anyway, he took a liking to me and he asked me—I told him about my desire to be a writer, and he said "so, what have you written?" And I said "well, um, I haven't written anything." And so he said, and I still remember this, he said—he just looked at me in a very kindly way and he said "well, I think it's time you began." I was twenty-one.

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And it was as though that, this opened up my life. I mean, it changed my life from that moment. I went back home, visited my parents whom I hadn't seen in a couple of years, because I had been traveling around, although I had always kept—I was always in a good relationship with my parents. It wasn't as though I had run away from home one night, you know, and so they were very, very supportive of my eccentricity, I guess. Anyway, I went home and I started writing. And I did not know how to start writing a novel, which is what I intended to do, so I thought well, I'll start with a poem. That's something easy, something small, you can put it on a single sheet of paper. So anyway, that's how I got started writing. But that was after I had dropped out of school, spent a couple years wandering around the country, and then subsequently I went to New York and worked on the newspaper. Just to get the chronology straight.

**JD:** Well, and so then that ended up giving you some experience writing, even though it was a very different type than either novels or poetry. Some of it's in just the practice of putting words on the page.

**CS:** Yeah. Well, I became fascinated with poetry, I became fascinated with the idea of being able to put, in such a small space, to be able to contain an experience; to make something like a miniature. You know, a poem is a miniature of something, a small thing. One of the other things I haven't mentioned about my childhood, involved with my love of airplanes; I was a model builder. I built models, model airplanes mainly. And it was the discovery that writing a poem was like making a model, you know, it was just a model and it was something small that represented something large, and that a poem was like a model airplane. And I still think of it as such.

**JD:** And I guess what sort of kept moving you forward with delving into that craft?

**CS:** Well, the craft itself. The craft itself, trying to master the craft. It was fascinating to me to just—so again, I had no, there were no poetry-writing workshops of the sort, so how did I start? I started by imitating them. I started reading, I got a couple of anthologies of English language poetry, all of which I was not, I had not—I had been a French major at Princeton, so I was more familiar with French literature than I was with English literature. I had not read the English

poets; I had the romantics, Keats and Shelley and so forth. So, I started studying the English poets and the tradition of English poetry and American poetry. And I would find those poets that I really—those poems and poets that I really admired and I would try to imitate them. I would just try to model a poem based on the particular poem that I found at that given moment.

And I did that for a long time. Years, years. Just—and I went through a lot of poets and I discovered the so-called moderns in the American, you know, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Robertson Jeffers, Wallace Stevens, all those early twentieth century American poets, many of who I really loved. I loved what they were doing and I was trying to do what they did. It intrigued me that they could, with so few words, move me; that that was something that I aspired to do. And I set myself that task and I worked day and night at it for a long time.

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I eventually, that's how I wound up going to New York. I met a—the other thing that happened at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference the time that I was inspired was I met a girl, whom I eventually married. And so, she was still going to school in New Jersey, so I went and I worked in New Jersey. And as I say it, this was the time I had just started writing. So, I got myself a job as a laborer in a precast concrete plant in New Jersey, Bound Brook New Jersey. And I worked there for a while and I was involved in an accident in which I got my foot crushed by a forklift, and one thing led to another; eventually I recovered enough so that I, fortunately, did not lose ability to work. And that then led to my going to New York and eventually getting a job at the newspaper.

**JD:** And as you're exploring writing poetry and reading a lot, are you in community with other poets? Are you doing this kind of in isolation?

**CS:** None whatsoever. None. Total isolation. Almost total isolation. I did meet—there was one fellow that I had met that summer at Bread Loaf, a young guy who lived in New York, and I had a little bit of a connection with him. But no, for the most part it was a completely solitary effort. I was completely isolated. At one point, I don't know how long I had been writing, maybe a year or two years, I started sending poems off to magazines, to journals. You know, poetry magazines, to see if I could get published. And I had no luck whatsoever. I just compiled a great stack of rejection slips. So—but it didn't deter me. I wasn't interested—that didn't prevent me from doing it.

**JD:** So, it was really the craft and the writing of the poetry that motivated you and that—

**CS:** Oh, exactly.

**JD:** And the recognition or acceptance of poems for publication wasn't making or breaking that.

**CS:** It had no—no, it had no effect on me whatsoever. No, I was dedicated to the craft.

**JD:** And then at some point you stop or you gradually move away from more of the—using other forms or imitating, and how did you—I realize it was probably a long process of discovering what your style was.

**CS:** Well, I'll tell you actually. It's pretty simple. I was in New York working on the newspaper for quite some time; in the evenings and weekends I was writing, and I then, through a connection from Princeton days, I learned of a writer's foundation in New Mexico. And so, I applied for a grant from this foundation and I sent them some of my work, and lo and behold, they accepted me. So, I quit my job on the newspaper, went with my wife, my then wife, and we went to Taos, New Mexico.

And I wound up—the grant was for a three-month stint, you know; they gave me a place to live at a hundred dollars a month. And I was almost able to live on a hundred dollars a month, and I think I had to supplement it somewhat from my savings, but I had a little house, a little adobe two-room, adobe house to live in on the outskirts of Taos. And I wrote. I just wrote day and night, my full time. I didn't have to work for a living, so that was great. So, that was just a three-month stint, but then I applied for a renewal of the three months and then another renewal and another renewal and I wound up living there for a year in Taos.

And there again, the director of the foundation was a very similar story to the story that I told of the poet, back when I started writing poetry. He too was a very acerbic, nasty man, but again, I have an ability to ingratiate myself with people, I guess, and so he was a teacher to me, and not so much in terms of writing but just intellectually. He introduced me to a lot of books, a lot of literature that I was unfamiliar with, and also gave me—I was very apolitical, he brought me a political awareness that I had not had before then. So, I count him as one of my teachers.

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Anyway, I was there for a year, my wife at that time wanted to go back to school. She had graduated from college in the east and she wanted to go to grad school at UC Berkeley. And I had, in my hitchhiking days, had made some contacts in the Bay Area. I had communication with them since then, but I had names and addresses of people that I had met. So, she applied for grad school at Berkeley and was accepted and we drove off in an old hundred and fifty dollar Chevy, with our life belongings in the car, to the Bay Area. Wound up living in Berkeley for a little bit, and of course I needed to now go—the free ride was over from the writers foundation; I needed to make a living again. So, I looked up one of the contacts that I had had from previously, and he was a carpenter. So, he told me about the carpentry apprenticeship program, and I was immediately interested, because I had worked construction as a laborer back east, so I had that little bit of experience.

And anyway, he again showed me, told me the ropes and I applied to the—I was actually an overage apprentice, because I was twenty-five by that time. So anyway, I got into the program and I went out and I got a job, you had to look for your own jobs, but San Francisco was a union town, this was through the union, the apprenticeship committee, and I managed to get a job as an overage apprentice, which was not easy, because as an overage apprentice, I had to be paid eighty percent of scale, whereas a regular apprentice was only sixty percent of scale. So, I knew no more than a sixty-percenter, but they had to pay me eighty percent. But I was a quick study, I learned fast and I got on.

So anyway, I went to the apprenticeship program and that's how I got to be a carpenter. In the meantime, I'm still writing poetry all the time, and now I've spent, oh, maybe I'd been writing now, I'm going to say I'd been writing maybe for five years like that. And I was writing a very form, a very traditional; I was writing rhymed poetry, I was writing sonnets and villanelles and all those traditional forms of poetry. Now, suddenly here I was working as a carpenter on a job, a construction site in San Francisco, and it was very exciting. It was very exciting just to—it was, what time of year was it? Well, it was actually the wintertime. Our winter in San Francisco is not formidable, you know.

So, it was beautiful being outside, working with my body and learning about carpentry, learning about this ancient trade. All these words, all these words that I was unfamiliar with, it was like a whole new vocabulary. It was a little bit like discovering literature again. It was a whole different area. So, that was exciting. And so, I wanted to get some of that experience, of course, into my poetry, but it just clearly didn't seem appropriate to be writing sonnets and villanelles about working on a construction site. So, that's when I really shifted and started writing a freer form, free-verse form, and started actually writing about my job experience. And that was a revelation in itself. And so that was like a quantum leap, in a way. So, I had had that background, and in the fundamentals of writing, training myself to be able to write in regular metrics and so forth, and now I was able to apply that feeling that I had acquired for language to another, freer form, that I was able to encompass a lot more variety of experience. So, that's...And then you mentioned something about not writing for a whole, is that?

**JD:** Well, I believe there were periods where you weren't writing.

**CS:** There was one long period when I didn't write, when I quit writing, basically, and that was a few—well, it was a number of years later. So actually, just to, I guess to continue the story, so at some point I did get my—so, I started sending poems to magazines and everything, and I finally did get an acceptance from some rural magazine that was mimeographed in somebody's garage, real small-time stuff.

[0:40:21]

**JD:** I think they would call them zines today.

**CS:** Nowadays, yes. So again, one thing led to another and at that time, that's when I first started the—okay, so now we're into the sixties, the heyday of the hippiedom. I was too old to be a hippy, but that sort of came along. Haight Street in San



Francisco, where the, you know, Haight-Ashbury, Haight Street; my first experience with Haight Street was a hardware store where I furnished myself with all my carpenter tools early on. It was on Haight Street in 1963, that's before there were any flower children on Haight Street. So, and then all the hippies starting flowing in and changing everything. But in the meantime, I had started giving—really the first public readings I gave were in coffee houses on Haight Street, and that's when I first learned about being able to read a poem to an audience. And again, I had a teacher, a guy who was actually my then wife's psychiatrist who taught me a lot about overall presentation of poetry.

**JD:** Because that's a completely different skillset than writing.

**CS:** That's a different skillset, it is. It is, it is, it is, very much so.

**JD:** And can you think some about what it was like, what you were like in the first readings and the things that you learned that made it more effective?

**CS:** Sure. Yeah, well when I first started, the first readings that I gave was reading the poem off the page, just sort of in this manner that I somehow imagined was poetic. It's what I call the poetry drone. It was not—there was no connection with the audience. And what I learned from this fella who taught me was trying to connect with the audience, to be able to look at the audience, to be able to express the poem as though it were, which it in fact is, an attempt to communicate with other human beings. So, to be able to look at them.

So, that then led me to a whole new way of composition, and that was composing in my head, composing the poems. Because I didn't want to have to look at the page. I wanted to be able to just express the poem directly. So, I started that and that has paid off for me, the rest of my poetry career. That's basically how I, to this day, that's how I compose. I don't write poems down, I compose them in my head long before I write them down, and then at some point, of course, I put them on paper and then I go through a whole other process of revision and changing, so forth and so on. But it was those early days of giving poetry readings on Haight Street in San Francisco in the sixties that I really learned about connecting with an audience and being able to—and of course, then that affects the way you write it. And I began discovering the difference between a spoken language and a written language. There's a difference between those too. So, that was revelatory.

**JD:** So, we talked about interspersing some of your poetry into this interview. Since you're talking about it, perhaps this might be a point to have you select a poem.

**CS:** Okay, I could do that, sure. So, I guess we could, since we're talking about a carpentry poem, or carpentry and poetry, maybe I could...So, I began writing and then I discovered that I could write about the particular job that I was on. So, actually this is my first book, *Journeyman's Wages*, which contained—so, I wrote for, I'd been writing for—this was published in 1995 and I started writing in the late fifties. So, I wrote for many, many, many years before I ever published a book. So, this has a few poems, a few quite early, early poems. One, perhaps...So okay, here's a very early poem, this is one of the first poems I wrote in which I was able to write in a free verse form about a specific job.

So, there's an epigraph to this poem, which is from one of the books that I had to study as an apprentice, during the apprenticeship training that I went through. So, this is from a book called *Forms for Architectural Concrete*, Portland Cement Association, 1952. And this is a little quote. The poem is called "Raising the Grain." And this is what it says in the book, this is what I learned:

"The grain of rough lumber will show plainly in the finished concrete even though raising of grain is prevented by oiling the forms. If more pronounced grain marks are desired, the grain can be raised by wetting the lumber before oiling. A still more effective method is to spray the sheathing lumber with ammonia.

--*Forms for Architectural Concrete*. Portland Cement Association, 1952.

[1]

The lot is vacant / except for me / and my tool box. My tool box / is huge / and is painted brown. It contains  
little racks and holsters, / numerous compartments, / which hold all the tools I'll need for this job, / including a hacksaw.

What am I waiting for?

Everything is ready.

My chisels were dull, but for two hours / I've been sharpening them.

[2]

I am holding a hammer. / I am going to drive a nail.

But my hands, my hands are smashed / and bleeding! / The knuckles are raw.

It won't be easy— / It's never as easy as it looks...

--"what are you building, a piano?"

And when I have driven the nail / I am going to clinch it.

[3]

Already this year I've built / a Serbian Orthodox / Church, / and a mortuary / (Chapel of the Sunset, 26th Avenue / and Irving). Plus a number of other less tangible / structures.

My union dues are all paid up, / and I plan to continue / in the trade: / bookshelves for a crippled lady, a cage / for a boa constrictor... / The country is / going to hell, but a good mechanic / can always find work.

**JD:** That's great. As you wrote more and continued, you clearly were learning a lot of skills, apprenticeships were pretty rigorous in those days, how did you continue to put those two elements together? Did they naturally fit?

**CS:** Yeah, they really did. I mean, it always surprises a lot of people when they learn that I'm a poet and a carpenter, but I have to say that the two really fit together very, very well for me, and it really, I mean both carpentry and poetry are crafts. I mean, you take raw materials and you put them together and make something, whether it's a stack of lumber or the dictionary. I mean, the dictionary has all the material you need. It's all in there. All the words are in the dictionary and you just have to choose them and put them in the right order. Well, it's the same with this stack of lumber. I mean, you just take it, there's the material, and then you fashion it, you cut it and shape it and fashion it together and build something, you know; this table or this house.

[0:50:22]

**JD:** Although, when this table is finished, it's clear when it's finished. When the building is constructed and the door's closed and the occupants move in, that building's finished. How do you know when a poem is finished?

**CS:** Well, that's a good question...Well, first of all I'd work for a long time on an individual poem. A long time. As I said, the first phase of composition is in my head, just I'll come up with a phrase which will serve as a first line, and I don't really know where it's going, necessarily. I don't necessarily know where it's going to go. Sometimes I have an idea of a certain, a picture, a job that I've worked on or something or other, be writing about that or some particular person, individual perhaps. But it's always—I never start a poem with an idea. I only start a poem with a few words that just catch my attention somehow. And that serves as a beginning, an opening line or two lines, or three lines. And then I will repeat those lines over and over and over again to myself, aloud when I'm by myself. I mean, my commuting to OSU was a great time for composition. It was fifty minutes driving and then in the evening and I would just be talking to myself, reciting a poem that I was working on.

So, it's an incremental process of just building, building, line after line, stacking bricks maybe, something like that. And then at some point I come to a conclusion of some sort, an interesting way of finishing off this little thing that I was—little contraction of words that I'd made. And then I would put it down on paper, and I'll start putting it down on paper. And I have visualized to myself what it's going to look like in terms of line, length and arrangement of words on a page, with

regard to a poem, with regard to a free verse poem. It all has to do with, well, for me a poem on a page is like a piece of sheet music for a musician. It's just the instructions for you, as the reader, how to perform this little thing called a poem.

So, I've reached that stage where I'm satisfied with it and it really sounds good, and now I write it down. And then inevitably I go into a state of despair, despondency; it's really not that good, it just doesn't—there's some things that are good about it but—the thing is, you can do so much with the spoken voice. You can do so much. I mean, what I'm doing right now, I'm moving my hands, my facial gesture—my facial expressions are changing, the coloration, the tonality of my words, there's an incredible amount of variety to what I'm saying. And so, when you transcribe, you're going to transcribe this thing I'm saying right now and it's going to be very different on the page.

**JD:** Absolutely.

**CS:** It's going to be very flat, and probably a little bit boring [laughs]. So, so now I've got to somehow bring this poem back to life. I've got to do some things with it in order to give you the instructions as to make—because there's something here, this is, you know, I mean there's something legitimate in this little thing that I've made, something interesting, something that is worth saving, so then I will work on it on the page.

So, by the time I finish that, at least a month has passed, if not more. Maybe several months that I work on it. And I don't work on multiple things at the same—I'm not like a painter, maybe, who can have various canvases in his studio and work here and work there. I'm working—everything that happens in my life is being funneled into this poem. It's like I'm this—I have my antenna out and I'm just, I'm receiving whatever's happening, and it's all going into this poem that I'm working on.

[0:55:00]

So, when I feel it's finished, it pretty much is finished. It's a feeling of satisfaction, of completing, completion, and occasionally I'll go back to a poem and make some slight emendations to it, but not drastic, for the most part. It's just it's an intuitive thing, of it finished. I know that among some poets it's like the phrase "a poem is never finished; it's abandoned," something like that. Well, I don't feel that way. I mean, when I finish it, I'm finished, I've done with it what I can do, brought it to its full fruition, I guess.

**JD:** And you mentioned just a few minutes ago about sort of learning this whole new vocabulary around construction and carpentry and that it was, in some ways, a very ancient language—

**CS:** Oh, absolutely.

**JD:** -and skill. And perhaps, maybe even more so today, I'm not sure, that terminology isn't necessarily known by or understood by a lot of people.

**CS:** True.

**JD:** And yet it's important to be precise and use—how have you worked to help people understand that, or that's part of our work as listeners and readers, is to go figure that out, if we don't know?

**CS:** I would say the latter, what you just said. Yeah, yeah I have no compunction about using specific terms which are not, in no standard—or everyone's common vocabulary. Yeah, I mean there's the dictionary, go to the dictionary. People now, they just use their smartphones.

**JD:** It's a dictionary of a different type.

**CS:** It's a dictionary, sure.

**JD:** And—

**CS:** And I take pleasure from—not, I'm not, you know, thumbing my nose at people who don't know carpentry terms, but I take pleasure in us—I mean it gives an authenticity to someone who knows a particular field and endeavor, to use those

terms. So I mean, I can't offhand think of an example of a poet who is skilled or knowledgeable in a particular field and uses terms that I'm unfamiliar with, but I get the feeling of this person knows what they're talking about. And that, to me, is the real thing. I mean, that's what counts. I mean, this is a matter of honesty, this is true, I'm trying to come to a truth of a situation, whatever the poem's about. I'm trying to get at a truth. So, that word "authenticity," which has to do with the word "author," you know, "authority." So, to use terms that are unfamiliar to most people is not—I don't worry about that.

**JD:** You also touched on, at the completion of a poem, you might despair that it was no good. And so, particularly *Journeyman's Wages* actually did win the Oregon Book Award for Poetry, and you've won other awards. What role do awards play in your writing life?

**CS:** Well, what that meant—you know, the story of that book, *Journeyman's Wages*; the manuscript was rejected by fifty-eight publishers before one finally accepted it. So, that tells me, and it will tell you and anyone else, that publishing poetry is a very fickle business. You better not take your rejection slips too seriously. So, when the book did win the Oregon Book Award and the other award that it won, well that was good but it wasn't a big deal. I mean, I was inured to being rejected over the years, although I had, I mentioned earlier how I had, early on, attempted to have poems published in magazines and journals and had just gotten rejection slips.

[1:00:28]

But then, starting with my stay in San Francisco when I started giving public readings and sort of—and then I became acquainted with other poets in sort of a little small community of poets, which was a really lively thing in San Francisco in the sixties. And then—and so I had, by the time this book was published, I had published in magazines to some extent. But the good thing that winning the award did, I'll tell you what—the good thing that winning the award did was it got someone to write an article about me in the *Oregonian*, and that one article led to an enormous number of—it led to an awareness of my existence as a poet, so that I then became invited to give readings, and I became a known player in the scene. So, that's what the awards did. But as far as kind of firming my own confidence in my own writing or anything of the sort, no, no. I mean, if I had never, if I had never won an award at all, I would still be—I wouldn't be sitting here talking with you probably, but I would still be writing poems.

**JD:** Well, you were still part of the OSU community, so—

**CS:** True.

**JD:** It's entirely possible we would still be sitting here doing this interview.

**CS:** Yeah, that's possible. But I could tell you the OSU story. So, I went to work at OSU in 1986 as a carpenter, and no one knew that I was a poet, and I kept two lives. There was my life as a construction worker, as a carpenter on the job, and there was my work in the evening and weekends writing poems. And they were totally separate and there was no crossover, really, between the two. But finally what happened was I had given—well, I never, we can get back to that later. After San Francisco, I quit writing for eight years. I didn't write a thing for eight years. I took a complete—cut it, you know, went cold turkey, just did not write. I went to sea, that's when I finally did go to sea, shipped out for a couple of years.

Anyway, I had come back and then I emigrated to Canada, to British Columbia, I told you that, built custom homes up there a while, and then—and had acquired a family. I had remarried; divorced, remarried and had three kids and came back down here to Oregon in the mid-seventies. And I started writing to, again, to see, after hiatus of what, eight or nine years. And I've forgotten, really, how this happened, but I got...well I guess it was through a friend that I had made, a poet friend that I had from San Francisco days who introduced me to the editor of a magazine in Portland, and I'd published a poem there. Somehow it became known that I at least had been, at one time, a poet. So, I gave a reading over in Monmouth at the college with a few other local folks, and someone from the Corvallis newspaper, the *Gazette-Times*, was there and learned that I was a carpenter at OSU, and that of course piqued her interest.

And so, she made arrangements to interview me, just like you're doing. And so, she was going to interview me on the job, on campus. So, I was off working somewhere on campus and we would come into lunch, carpenters would come into lunch and have lunch together in our carpenter shop. Anyway, she came to the carpenter shop with her apparatus, her

camera and her tape recorder, whatever, and was looking for me. And I was a little bit late in coming back for lunch, and so everyone was like astounded; "what do you want with Clem?" "Well, he's a poet." "What?!"

**JD:** Worlds collide.

[1:05:11]

**CS:** Right, it was a big to-do. So anyway, that's how she...that's how I got publicity from having published a book, gotten a newspaper article written, winning the book award, one leads to another.

**JD:** And how did that meeting of the two worlds play out? I'm guessing there aren't—it's not common to have carpenters who are poets, who are writers in their off hours, or perhaps the other way around.

**CS:** Sure, sure. Well, I was well-liked by everyone and they were pleased, happy for me. I mean, said "oh wow, great," so, that's wonderful. I mean they—other than there was one guy that I got to be pretty close with, I worked partners with at OSU, who was interested, and he—I had never told him I was a poet either, you know. But he—I then gave him a copy of my book. But I don't know, I suddenly had this little feather in my cap [laughs]. It was strange. It was okay. It was fine, it was fine, it wasn't detrimental in any way.

**JD:** And when you went to OSU, you were kind of shifting gears a bit, because you had been doing I think what you define as heavy construction—

**CS:** Oh yeah.

**JD:** Which there's evidence of your work around the area.

**CS:** Right, yeah. You crossed the bridge coming today, the Marion Street Bridge, I built the Mari—

**JD:** Absolutely. I felt very safe.

**CS:** [Laughs]. So yeah, that's heavy construction. So, actually the more appropriate term would be commercial construction; union carpentry is commercial construction. The only time I really did any other kind is residential construction, and the only time I did that was when I was up, really I was up in Canada. I built custom homes up there. But heavy construction is bridges, dams, highways, that sort of thing, and I did a little bit of that, but mostly it was working on commercial buildings. So, like hospitals or the mortuary, the church, Serbian Orthodox Church, and what else...schools, shopping centers and so forth.

So, what happened was, in the early eighties there was a recession and jobs were—there was nothing going, nothing happening out of the union hall, and so for the first time in my carpenter career, I was up against it. I had to—you know, I had a family and I had to make a living. So, well the first thing I did, actually, was I teamed up with another, a friend of mine, a counterculture guy who had a business of tearing down buildings for a living and selling the salvaged material. He was part of a group of old hippies who had a lumberyard out in Rickreall called The Other Lumber Company. More simply referred to as "The Other," going to the—"I'm going to The Other to see what they have."

Anyway, he, after the demise of that business, he went off on his own and was tearing down buildings and selling salvage material onsite. So, I teamed up with him and for a year and a half, almost two years, we worked together doing that. But in the meantime—let me think a minute. Prior to that, the last job that I had before the recession came; I was actually working in Portland, I was commuting to Portland back and forth into the long haul, at least an hour and a half; with traffic more like two, two plus. So, I said this is, I got to do something other than this. This is just eating up my life, spending all this time driving back and forth to the job.

So, that's when I applied for a state job as a carpenter, and for well over a year I didn't hear a thing. I think I had one call for a part time job at Western Oregon University, but I didn't get it, which is just as well. And then finally I got a call from the foreman at the OSU, and this would have been 1986. So, I had been here ten years, I'd been in Oregon. We moved here in '76, so I'd been here ten years working commercial construction out of the—I worked out of the Salem local. You know, when I left San Francisco, I had worked out of the San Francisco Carpenters Local 483 and went up to Canada by

—even though I wasn't working union up in Canada, I kept my dues paid. So, then when I came here, bought this place, I simply transferred my book to the Salem Carpenter's Local 1065 and worked out of that local for ten years. So anyway, I applied and I got this call from OSU in 1986 and I went, and lo and behold, I got the job. That's how I wound up at OSU. Mainly because I was having to travel so far.

[1:10:46]

**JD:** So, what was the, kind of The Physical Plant, I guess, is really the name of the sort of department, I guess, that you're hired in?

**CS:** Right.

**JD:** And what was the size of it? What were the range of duties that you had? It was quite different from what you'd been doing.

**CS:** Yes, it was. First of all, I should use—I use the term Physical Plant, that's the generic term for the manual labor, I guess, at an academic institution. Most of the employees are involved in mental as opposed to physical, but they don't look down like this is too crude or too coarse or somehow not politically correct, so it then be—so when I went there I referred to it as the Physical Plant. I think other people did too, but at some point that term was superseded by Facilities Services, so now it's referred to as Facilities Services. I don't particularly like that term. First of all, Facilities Services, it's something silly about the sound of Facilities Services. So, I always refer to it as Physical Plant, but that's just aside.

Anyway, so when I went there there—let me think, I think there were seven carpenters, or there were six and I was the seventh. I was replacing somebody who had retired. But when I left eighteen years later, there were three. Well, there were four when I left, yeah, I left, there were three others. So, everything changed over those eighteen years. So, there was a huge shop which—and I don't know, I just drove past OSU the other day, I went to the Corvallis Knights, the baseball game, Goss Stadium, and drove past for the first time in quite a few a years, and oh my god, all those buildings have been torn down where the carpenters shop was. So, I don't know where the carpenters shop is now, if—I think there still is one, but it's certainly scaled down considerably from when I first went there.

And I could see, over the course of eighteen years, how everything was being scaled down. Much, much more work was being contracted out. We did far less actual carpentry work, it was quite different. But when I came there, it was this vast carpenter shop with a huge table saw and all kinds of heavy power equipment. And I could tell just from the stories that I heard how everything had been scaling down from the twenty years before that I came. It's been a slow, slow, a downhill slide. And there was always a threat of even eliminating the carpentry position, the carpenter position. Everyone would be a Maintenance Worker I or a Maintenance Worker II or a Maintenance Worker III, some kind of generic thing. It was this homogenization of the whole structure of the place, which is sort of what's happening in the world.

So yes, but it was quite different from working construction or on a job. It was what we call a gravy tree. I mean, it was easy work, it was not back-breaking out in a construction site stumbling around rough ground. And I still—you know, union carpentry you're paid by the hour, it's an hourly wage, and every moment, you're accountable for every moment. I used to smoke and I would roll my own cigarettes, roll Prince Albert Tobacco, but when I was working on jobs, you couldn't take the time to roll a cigarette. I mean it was like you had to be in—you were in motion all the time. If you weren't working you had to pretend that you were working.

[1:15:27]

So, suddenly to find myself in this leisurely, in a leisurely situation—I still remember the first day I was working. I was working up on the corner, Monroe and right opposite the uptown Beanery. It was the Oceanography department. There's an old adobe building there. We were remodeling the—doing a remodel of the inside of it, and the guy I was working with—so I was assigned with another carpenter who had been there, and somebody, an electrician or somebody, came by and this guy stopped doing what he was doing and just stood there talking, and they were having this conversation, and I'm looking, you know, I'm very uneasy. This made me very uneasy, just not to be working, not—who's going to see us not working? In other words, it had a quality of leisure to it that I was totally unaccustomed to. So, it was easy, easy work.

**JD:** And can you talk a little about just what the campus was like, the atmosphere at OSU when you started, and perhaps some of the change that you experienced, outside of the specific work-related piece?

**CS:** Well, I don't know that I could say that I observed a change in the campus itself. Well, there was a lot of building, during those eighteen years there was a lot of building, a lot of new buildings that went up. So, a lot of green space was no longer in existence. There's a huge building—I can't even remember the names of the various buildings that went up during my time there. I think I noticed more, well, I think the changes that I noticed had more to do with what I just said earlier about the change in the plant, in the Physical Plant itself, the diminishment of work that was actually done by the OSU carpenters, plumbers, electricians and so forth, that an awful lot of work was contracted out. There were various—and then there were various changes within the Physical Plant itself, within Facilities Services. At one time there was a director who was really, really good. She's a woman who really changed the, I would say changed the climate somehow, just in striving for excellence in terms of turning out quality work, put an emphasis on that.

My experience, curiously, was when I first—well, for quite some time when I first worked there, of course it was not known, as I told you earlier, I was a poet, so that was not in question, but after I did, after my book won the Oregon Book Award and so forth and so on and I gained some notoriety as a poet, what I noticed always—well, even, not even having to do with the whatever publicity that I had gotten, I noticed a considerable difference in the way that I was treated as a worker by the various departments. Almost without exception I was basically snubbed by the English department. They all had their nose in the air somehow, whereas in the Science departments I was acknowledged as a person with knowledge that might be useful, so that people would ask me about some project they had at home, you know, how to fix their sliding patio door or something or other. They would acknowledge me as someone who possessed knowledge, whereas I never got that kind of treatment from the Humanities, basically, which I always found amusing, for one reason or another.

[1:20:18]

**JD:** So, and did that remain in kind of those relationships throughout, or?

**CS:** Well no, because then I got to know some of the individ—you know, personnel changed, some younger people, newer people came on and they were themselves writers or poets and whatever, so then I became acquainted with them. And then always, of course, found it amusing when they would see me with my tool belt on, walking through, working on a door or something like that, and they're in their good clothes going to do a lecture. And I enjoyed that disparity, I enjoyed the irony of that. I've always found that amusing.

**JD:** Although there was—there were a few opportunities where you actually joined the ranks of being a teacher at college at Willamette University.

**CS:** I did that at Willamette, never at OSU. OSU never asked me to display my poetry skills, but yeah, that was an unusual situation. I had given a reading somewhere in Salem, I guess, and a professor in the English department at Willamette heard me, came up afterwards and asked me if I would be interested in teaching a course. And I just laughed at him, told him I had no degree, I had no college degree, and I'd never done anything like that before. But he insisted I would give it a good—they would be open to my teaching it without any kind of credentials, simply as a poet. And that was before I had published a book, too. That was 1990. 1990 or 1991.

**JD:** Sure, several years.

**CS:** And my book never came out till '95 or '96, I think. So, to their credit, they took me for who I was, not for who I appeared to be on paper. So yeah, so I did, I taught a one-semester class there and then I did again, three or four other times; on five occasions I taught for a semester class. So, that was a new experience. So, I worked during the day at OSU and then this was an evening class, Wednesday evenings, and then I would meet students on Fridays, because I was working. I've forgotten how I did that. I worked—oh I know, I started working ten hour days, four tens. I was working four tens so I had Friday off so I could meet with students at Willamette on Friday afternoon. So, I did that in 1991.

And that's how I got started studying Russian. Through my connection with Willamette I wound up being given a room to meet with the students. And I was going to share it with a visiting professor and that professor happened to be this

woman from Russia. This was 1991, just after the Cold War had, you know, Iron Curtain had collapsed and I was, of course, having grown up during the cold war all that time, I was absolutely fascinated as to what was going on, and here was the straight story right off a plane from Moscow, but she couldn't speak English very well. So, as a joke I said I would help her with her English if she would teach me Russian. That's how I got started. Here I am, with my Russian dictionary [holds up dictionary].

**JD:** And so, learning Russian kind of took on a life of its own and then you ended up visiting there not many years later.

**CS:** I did. I went there in '94, 1994. A few years after that I had the, I've forgotten how this happened, I think I saw a flyer at OSU, and I had no connection with—at that point, I had no connection with the Russian—no, that's not true. Actually here's what happened; so, I started the Russian studies at Willamette with this woman and then she finished, she was at Willamette for a semester. She went back to Russia. But she introduced me to a woman at OSU, a Russian woman at OSU who was teaching at OSU, so then I transferred from Salem to Corvallis with my Russian study, and I then proceeded to go through five different native speakers, all of who were students, graduate students or undergraduates at OSU. And I had made arrangements, because I was working on campus and I knew the ropes, I made arrangements to have a carrel at the library reserved for me every Tuesday and Thursday or whatever it was, and I met with these Russian students.

[1:25:31]

And so, I did that for a few years and then I saw this brochure or flyer on campus somewhere about some program that was—program that was offered, it turned out, by an American guy who was married to a Russian woman, and he offered to arrange for lodging in Saint Petersburg and language lessons, for whomever was interested. You would arrange your own travel and your own time. It wasn't as though there was any specifics involved. It was entirely loose, up to you. So, I got in touch with him, one thing led to another and I went to Saint—I got leave of absence from my job at OSU and I went to Saint Petersburg and I lived in Saint Petersburg for three months during the summer, 1994. That was a great, great experience.

I came back from that, continued my Russian studies with whomever I was studying at OSU; students, not in the department. Maybe at that time, maybe it was then that I got in touch with the—there were two professors of Russian at OSU, which now has changed. There's no longer a Russian department at OSU. That's the kind of diminishing of things that has happened, that I have seen happen on campus. So anyway, maybe then I began auditing classes with them. And then that led to, because of the previous experience at Willamette, and maybe I taught another creative writing class at Willamette in the interim, and then I had the opportunity of going back to Russia too years later in 1996 as a chaperone of Willamette students. Willamette had an arrangement with a sister university in Simferopol, in the Crimea. And so, I then went back and I spent four months in Crimea with these Willamette students.

**JD:** So, that first visit that you did, what did you do there?

**CS:** I studied Russian [laughs]. I sat, just like I'm sitting here today; dictionary, text. No, I wandered around the city, I became acquainted with the subway system; I just went places. And the fellow who had organized this and the family I lived with, it was a man and his wife and a younger, well not young, they were about teenagers, a son and daughter. So, they would go to the country to their *dacha* and take me along, or they would go to parties that their friends had somewhere else in the cities and take me along. So, I was sort of this—I tagged along with the family events. And then the fella, the American guy who had organized the whole program, he too would organize little sightseeing tours and various historic things, and there were other American students in the city and I would see them at these events. We would gather with half a dozen or maybe seven or eight students. So it was, I mean I was just totally free and—

**JD:** Did you connect with any carpenters and/or poets while you were there?

**CS:** No, I did not, I did not. To this day it's a regret of mine, and I never had any connection with Russian poetry circles and Russian literature in any way. And people ask if I would ever go back to Russia, and I think I would only go back if there was some—I need a pretext of some sort. I need some connection, something to do with Russian, poetry in Russian, literature.



**JD:** So, as we think about the arc from the Cold War and you being in the Ground Observatory Corp, I mean did that ever enter your mind as you were there in "Red Russia"?

[1:30:03]

**CS:** Oh sure, sure. I mean it was a shock to see. This is 1994, this is soon after the Iron Curtain had fallen, so there was still a lot of evidence of the cold war, a lot of—all the trappings, banners and the kind of superficial trappings that I have seen in newsreels, all those were gone, but there was still statuary everywhere. I mean, Stalin was gone but Lenin was everywhere. And then of course, then when I went back again in '96, I was in the Crimea, but on the way, after the stay in the Crimea, I took the train from Crimea to Moscow and then to Saint Petersburg, and so I got back, I got to see Saint Petersburg two years after I had been there before, and even in that two years, a lot of the statuary of Lenin had disappeared. So, slowly it was all being wiped out.

**JD:** Could we perhaps include another poem? Because you had written specifically about learning Russian and your visits there, if you would please.

**CS:** Yeah, yeah, sure. So yeah, so I put together this little book called *Studying Russian on Company Time*, which I did a lot. So, I could read to you the title poem, it's "Studying Russian on Company Time." So, this was written before I went to Russia for the first time. And it was, I actually had a date in this, 1992. So, 1992 would have been, if anybody was celebrating it, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1917. 1917 to '92 would have been seventy-five years. So anyway, I wrote this poem, as I say, before I ever went to Russia. So, it's written as kind of a how to do it, a how-to-do-it poem. This is how you study Russian on company time:

Act like you're reading the sports page. / Pretend your textbook's a sandwich, and start eating it. / When the foreman asks what you're doing, ask him / if he knows where Olga and Ivan are. / Enunciate carefully: Olga / and Ivan are not in the library, Olga and Ivan / were not in the library, / Olga and Ivan / will not be in the library.

Now it is time for the Great Terror. / Take Tukhachevsky... / Take him and execute him. / Let the German tanks encircle Stalingrad. This / is an example of the perfective aspect / of the Russian verb.

When Vladimir Ilyich stepped off the train / at the Finland Station, / a band struck up! Thousands cheered! Red and gold / banners / flapped in the wind! It was a scene / out of a dream / dreamt by the Petersburg / League for the Liberation of the Working Class.

Seventy-five years! / Week follows week, day after day: / *Ponedel'nik, ftornik, sreda, chetverg*... These are words / that bounce off the teeth. Remember, / the genitive singular of feminine nouns / is often the same / as the nominative plural.

Don't ask stupid questions. / Throw a quick glance over one shoulder, throw salt / over the other. Soon / you shall speak perfect Russian— / so flawlessly, / so fluently, / not even your comrades / will understand.

**JD:** Lovely.

**CS:** How to do it [laughs].

**JD:** I think one thing that's been coming up for me as you've been talking about your carpentry work and your poetry is what's the emotion or sense at the end of the completion of a project and the completion of a poem? Is it similar?

**CS:** Oh very similar, very much so, very much so. It's that satisfaction of completion, that satisfaction of completion, that satisfaction of having completed, of completion, of putting something together that fits. It fits, you know.

[1:35:19]

**JD:** And as you worked at OSU and kind of things changed, did that change sort of how—because you'd written so much about the work that you were doing, did that start to change over time?

**CS:** Well...no. I could read you an OSU poem.

**JD:** Please do.

**CS:** This is a—so this one was composed on the job, again in my head...have I got the right book? No. It's in here. So, it was a little different, it was a different kind of work but still it was work, working with tools. So, the background to this poem, it takes place on the OSU campus, is in the library, I guess it's called the Valley Library.

**JD:** That's right.

**CS:** Maybe it had another name earlier on, I don't know. But it was an asbestos removal project. And again, they had contracted it out, there was a contractor who was—who had taken—so okay, so in commercial buildings like the library, schools and so forth, you have a false ceiling, grid work and then these two-by-four, two-foot by four-foot acoustical panels dropped in place. And then above that false ceiling, between it and the real ceiling, which is a concrete slab providing a slab for the next floor up, is all your utilities, with all the plumbing, all the ductwork, electrical work, everything's up there. And of course this was what the asbestos was wrapped—a lot of asbestos material was wrapped around the ductwork, plumbing and so forth and so on. All this was being removed. So, in order to get there, the ceiling had to be taken, the grid—the panels had to be removed and the grid work had carefully to be removed in order to access.

So, we came—we, the carpentry crew, came along after the contractor had done his work and replaced all the grid work, all the grid, in order to put the ceiling panels back in place. So, I've just explained what we were doing, but I wrote this poem called "What We Are Doing," which gives you another more detailed slant on it.

What we are doing is hard to explain. / It would take diagrams and curse words, complicated / facial expressions / and lengthy descriptions of little-known tools. It would be / like trying to explain *quarks* and *leptons* / to someone who had merely asked / where the rest-rooms were.

However, to put it simply, / Davey and I / are on the fifth floor of the library, working / partners, jockeying stepladders / back and forth in the narrow aisles between the stacks, / not soaking up knowledge, but Pop- / riveting ceiling grid.

Davey has his ladder, I have mine; each / of us has a small vise-grips. / From Microbiology to Astrophysics, / dragging our tools and our bodies along with us, / we push on / inexorably, zigzagging / through the Dewey decimal system.

Pausing for a moment in Immunology, / naturally I think of Holub / peering into his microscope, making a poem / out of lymphocytes! / By the time we reach *The Bella Coola River Estuary* / and *Holocene Carbonate Sedimentation*, / it's noon, and time for lunch.

And cards! The game / has been going on for years, / at least since the time of the Pyramids, if not coeval / with carbonite sedimentation. / Five-card draw, jokers wild. We ante up... / Frank's three queens beat my two pair. / Davey's deal.

The afternoon will be a scorcher.

[1:40:30]

And those are the actual—I never change names. I use real names; Frank, Davey. And I didn't mention before, when I read that poem I have to explain Holub. Miroslav Holub was a Czech poet who was a world-class poet. He's always mentioned for the Nobel Prize. I don't think that he ever won the Nobel, but he was always mentioned in line for the Nobel Prize as a poet. But he was also renowned as a scientist, and so he would, in fact, I guess peer into a microscope and write poems about lymphocytes. Anyway, so that poem, that poem really was composed entirely in my head while I was working at OSU.

**JD:** So I, I'm sort of getting this vision of you walking around campus and having this secret.

**CS:** Yeah.

**JD:** And clearly at some point you had more acknowledgement of your poetry writing, but I guess it was also fairly easy to remain anonymous.

**CS:** Sure, sure.

**JD:** And was that anonymity useful to your writing? Or irrelevant?

**CS:** Oh yeah, yeah. No, I mean it was useful, I guess I would say. I mean I've got a poem about it somewhere, but I always fancied myself as a spy. You know, pretending to be one thing but actually concentrating and getting information on whatever spies are involved in. So, I always felt like a spy. I always feel like a spy, I still do. I felt like a spy—I mean it's like one of those feelings that you have from childhood of being different than everybody else and having come from a different planet or something. So yeah.

**JD:** So, you're often out doing readings, you attend conferences, or like Fishstock is one that kind of I ran—

**CS:** Fishtrap? Fishtrap?

**JD:** Oh, I thought it was called Fishstock, in The Dalles. I might have that wrong. I probably have that wrong.

**CS:** Mmm [nods].

**JD:** But I guess I was wondering whether when you're out in the world as a poet—

**CS:** As a poet.

**JD:** Do people have similar questions or trying to wrap their head around you as the carpenter? Because that's not their world?

**CS:** No, not any more, I think. You know, I mean...you know, I published that, *Journeyman's Wages*, I published that in 1995. That's sort of when I came out as a poet, so that's what, that's twenty years, right? Yeah, twenty years ago. So, in those twenty years I have made many, many, many public appearances, public readings, and I've been to conferences and workshops and stuff like that. So, when I go to those things I guess I'm—people in the back of their mind must—I guess they find me a little different, maybe, because I have this background as a manual laborer. But you know, I get acknowledged as a poet.

**JD:** And is it just a dichotomy that we should all get over? That it doesn't really matter what people are doing?

**CS:** Well, I kind of, you know for a long time I kind of objected to being pigeonholed as a hyphenated poet, a carpenter-poet, a carpenter hyphen poet. But what the hell, you know. I mean it's who I am, I mean it's—and I have, I've made use of my carpentry in my poetry, so I should be grateful. I shouldn't object to being pigeon-holed like that. But yeah, yeah. But I would like, I certainly would like to be acknowledged for the merit of my work as a poet, not because I'm colorful as a human being because I did this other thing to make a living in order to support my poetry. But I mean, I would like to be judged on the quality of the work itself, apart from biographical background.

[1:45:38]

**JD:** So, you've been retired from OSU.

**CS:** Yeah, I think I retired in 2004 officially, but then I stayed working half-time for I think a year and a half. So, it's like sometime in 2006. So it's been, yeah, nine years.

**JD:** So, I assume you're still writing.

**CS:** Oh yeah.

**JD:** And I guess perhaps talk a little about your inspirations now.

**CS:** Well, I have a new book coming out later this year, little book, a chapbook of I think about eighteen poems. And thinking about those poems—so I actually, since retiring, I actually published another book; this book *Rembrandt, Chainsaw* was published in 2008, I think. Something like that. Anyway, since I'd retired, was it...no, 2011. That's more

recent than I thought. Yeah, 2011. So actually, it's almost as though my recent poems are divided into two kinds; one, the ones are things that take place in the present, things that I'm involved in currently, that I could actually, I could write about in the present tense, and the other things are going back into the past and recalling, a lot of the things that I described to you earlier in this interview of the events that happened to me when I was looking for a ship, when I hitchhiked down the east coast and wound up in Mobile and New Orleans. There's a couple of poems in the new book in which I've revisited the past.

So, I think of it as an old man's book. I mean I've got a rich past to draw upon, and then things that are happening at the present time as well. So, it's all—I don't know that it's all—I mean I could take the poems that I have that were going to be published in this new book and shuffle them like a deck of cards with poems from my earlier books and I don't think anyone would know the difference. I mean, they have a particular style, I guess, that I have acquired from writing for so long, and they're personal, a lot of them, in the sense that I use a first-person singular, the "I." But it's always the same; I write, I start a poem, as I said, with words. With some words that come about.

The last poem that's going to be the last poem in this new book started when I was in Corvallis, I was going to a reading. Some writer was reading at the Art Center in Corvallis and I parked my car in a parking spot, a parking lot behind city hall. And there are train tracks that run through Corvallis and I heard—this was just about dusk and it's just getting dark—and I heard a train whistle. And somehow it just crystalized something in me of riding the freight, a particular moment in time back in 1957 or something like that. I was riding on the deck of a flat car through west Texas. It was this beautiful starry night, early spring, and I was nineteen years old, I had the world on a string. I had discovered this new means of locomotion, you know; riding the freights. Anyway, that little moment behind the City Hall in Corvallis prompted this little poem that will be the last poem in the new book.

[1:50:17]

**JD:** Well, you've been talking a long time here, so I don't want to make you go too much longer. It's hard work. And I wanted to give you an opportunity if there are things that, as we've been talking or from when we've spoke before this interview that I haven't asked you about that you really want to make sure that we capture as part of your interview? I want to give you the opportunity to do that.

**CS:** I haven't talked much about my family.

**JD:** Well, please do then.

**CS:** Okay, so I told you that I was married before, for six or seven years. We parted company amicably, I will say, and the sometime shortly thereafter I met another woman who became my wife for forty-four years, until she died a few years ago. She had Alzheimer's and we went through that horror of Alzheimer's, which is—I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. But we had three kids; we had one child, one biological child, and then we adopted two other children. So, girl, boy, girl. They are now all in their early forties and are, as a result of their provenience, coming from three different gene pools, they are quite different, each from the other. But they're all doing well. They had a wonderful childhood here, they all loved this place. I'm not sure what's going to happen to it when I die, but they don't want to give it up, because they have very fond memories.

So, when we came here in nineteen seven—so they were born, let's see, Rachel, my oldest, was born in 1970 and then the two adopted children who, by the way, are six months apart. So, because that's just the way, it's another whole story about how the adoptions happened. The first was kind of planned and the second one just happened, so they were always thought of, and they were as, twins. Boy and girl, my son and my youngest daughter. So, they were both born in 1973. So, they were three and Rachel was six when we moved here. So, we came down from British Columbia where we'd been living for a couple of years. Rachel was going to start school here in Dallas. So, this house—and I told you how this house was just a wreck, it was just a fallen—it was unlivable, uninhabitable, considered of no value by the realtor. So, I camped out here for months during the summer. My brother, who was a school teacher down in Eugene and Springfield, had summer off as a teacher, so he came up and helped me during the summer. So, we were working on this place together and Barbara, my wife, and the kids were still up in British Columbia.

But then Rachel had to start school, so we moved them down here and I rented a place in town for three or four months while I was—I came out here every day and worked on this place to make it ready. So anyway, they all grew up here. We had—I built a barn, I've got—you saw the workshop out here that I built. I had a barn up on the hill. So, we had a horse, the kids grew up with horses. My wife was, you know, involved with the—I told her at one point, said "I'll build a barn, you take care of the, you do the horse thing." And she did, I didn't. So, earlier when you said something about how I learned to ride a horse, I didn't, and I said "no, I never learned to ride a horse, I rode a horse."

So anyway, so my family grew up in this place, and that became a part of my life, and my family's in my poetry too; some family poems about my kids. I, at one point, that's a real challenge, working a job, raising a family and then having this other thing that you're doing called writing poetry. At one point I just, there was no psychological space, I guess, for me to write on the weekends. So, I wound up—I have a little pump house, the water supply here is a spring and I built a pump house around it, poured a slab and had it developed. A contractor person and I poured the slab and built a little pump house, a little eight by eight building. And so, I set that up with a little desk and that's where I did a lot of writing on weekends, and I would go up there in the evening and spend my time in the pump house to get away from the insanity of teenage kids. But, so it's all been good. It's all been good.

[1:55:47]

**JD:** And I believe you mentioned that your son, at least, had taken on your profession as a carpenter?

**CS:** He has. My son's become a carpenter, yeah. To my astonishment, because he—I mean he obviously got, through osmosis, he got some of it from growing up with me, but it's not as though I took him under my wing and taught him carpentry. It's a total surprise to me that he did wind up becoming a carpenter. So yeah, he's a contractor down in Northern California, very accomplished. So, we had some really good times earlier on just talking on the telephone about jobs, you know, the carpentry problems that he was involved with. And he's very articulate and somehow, without a pencil and paper, we went through a lot of very complex discussions about rafters and framing and loadbearing members and so forth and so on. So yeah, that's been grand. And my daughter, my older daughter followed in her mother's footsteps and became a therapist, a psychotherapist. And my son-in-law, my younger daughter's husband, is a union carpenter.

**JD:** Any poets? Any budding poets?

**CS:** No poets, no poets and no real writing or literary bents in any of the three of them. I of course read to my children aloud at night. That was a daily, nightly routine, reading. But none of them took to literature or to writing. Which is okay. I didn't anticipate that.

**JD:** That's how it works.

**CS:** Yeah, right. But the fact that Daniel, my son, became a carpenter is really a surprise, you know. Gratifying.

**JD:** Well, I wonder if we might go out on one last poem of your choosing.

**CS:** Sure, sure. Well, why don't I read the little poem that I just mentioned as being the last poem in this new book. Might be a good one to...

**JD:** That sounds lovely.

**CS:** To end on. The one that was prompted by a train whistle in Corvallis. So, this is just a mock-up of the book. It's going to be a—well, you know these two books, both *Traveling Incognito* and *Rembrandt, Chainsaw* are what are called letterpress, you know, chapbooks. In other words, it's all hand-set type.

**JD:** They're lovely.

**CS:** Yeah, they're beautiful. They were both done by a guy up in Seattle, Paul Hunter, did a really nice job. So this new one, of which this is like a digital mock-up, is going to be done by a guy here, nearby just in a place called Summit outside of Corvallis, back on the coast range. He's going to do a letterpress version of it. So, we were working on that together. I've been very fortunate, by the way. We haven't talked about that at all, but for someone who had such poor

luck for so many years in getting published, you know, I never published a book until I was fifty-five years old, I've been enormously, extraordinarily fortunate in having a hand in all the books that I have published, from the very beginning. *Journeyman's Wages* was designed, basically, by myself and another fella, who was actually just an intern working for the publisher. And we conspired to put this, design this book together, and eventually to get it published. And then the same with the second book, *China Basin*, I basically, I learned enough about a computer to put this on disc, the whole book, so it was then printed by the same publisher that published *Journeyman's Wages*.

[2:00:24]

**JD:** And they've all been small presses, which...

**CS:** Yeah, yeah. This is Storyline Press, and then the *Studying Russian*, which is actually the second book, this was—this, again, I co-designed with a friend and it was published by a small press in Eugene.

**JD:** Which has wonderful block prints throughout.

**CS:** Oh this one, yeah. Yeah, those are all woodcuts from a—want me to, here's one. Can you see that? [holds book open to page 22 with a small woodcut of a Russian building].

**JD:** Here, let me come close on that. That's—I like that one.

**CS:** Yeah. Yeah, this is actually just being reprinted. They sold out the—this was 1999 and this publisher in fact has another poetry project that I'm involved in and making sure that the—that got it?

**JD:** Uh-huh.

**CS:** Good [sets book down].

**JD:** Well, and small presses, I would guess, are just kind of more amenable to that sort of collaboration.

**CS:** Hmm...

**JD:** No?

**CS:** Not necessarily. It's not exceptional that I have somehow—first of all, I'm a perfectionist, I've put a lot of effort into these poems and I want them to be presented in a fashion that does justice to them. I mean you know, my poems are my children, I want them to be dressed well when they appear in public. So anyway, I am very much involved with this new book. So, a little short poem, I've already given you the background. It's called "El Paso."

The high whine of a train whistle / Heard at dusk / From the parking lot behind city hall in Corvallis / Is all it takes / To put me back aboard / A Southern Pacific freight / Crossing west Texas / On a starry night in early Spring / Sixty years ago / Stretched out on the deck of a flat car / Looking up at the sky / I had the world on a string / I couldn't imagine the years I had / That would lead / To my being here now / An old man / I'm telling you this / When I got off the train in El Paso / I knew my life / Would never again / Be the same

**JD:** Clem, thank you so much for sharing your poetry and your wonderful recollections for the project.

**CS:** Well, thank you Jan. It's been a pleasure. I enjoyed talking with you.

**JD:** Likewise.

[2:03:20]