



Roger Werth Oral History Interview, June 16, 2014

Title

“Photographing the Northwest's Most Famous Disaster”

Date

June 16, 2014

Location

Offices of the Longview Daily News, Longview, Washington.

Summary

In the interview, Werth discusses his upbringing, including his early interests in photography and the outdoors, his decision to attend Oregon State University, and his academic evolution as a college student. He also notes the important role that specific professors, especially Harrison Branch, played in his progression as a student photographer, and reviews his tenure as a photographer and editor for the *Beaver Yearbook*.

From there, Werth shifts focus to the beginnings of his career at the *Longview Daily News*, beginning with a three-month internship in the Spring of 1978, and reflects on the culture of the newsroom at the time.

The bulk of the session is devoted to Werth's memories of the Mt. St. Helens eruption of May 18, 1980. In this, he discusses the build-up over the course of that Spring to the major eruption, his activities on May 18th, and his recollections of taking and processing specific photographs over the course of a thirty-six hour "work day." He also describes his documentation of the devastation that ensued, including photographs of debris avalanches, flooding, and mud flows resulting from the explosion. He likewise makes mention of the process by which he and his colleagues at the *Daily News* were awarded Pulitzer Prizes for their efforts.

The interview concludes with Werth's thoughts on day-to-day life as a photojournalist, including his desire to spur community improvement through his work. Werth also shares his perspective on changes that he has seen within the world of newspapers and in the practice of photojournalism.

Interviewee

Roger Werth

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

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

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So today is June 16th, 2014. My name is Janice Dilg with the Oregon State University Oral History Project, and I am here today with Roger Werth, in the offices of *The Daily News* in Longview, Washington. And we are going to talk today about his recollections at OSU. So, good morning.

Roger Werth: Hi.

JD: So, why don't you begin a little about where you're from, and a little about your family, and how you ended up at Oregon State University?

RW: Well, I pretty much knew I was going to go to college, and I pretty much knew it was going to be Oregon State University [laughs], because both of my parents went there, my uncle and his family went there, and so it was a long tradition of Oregon Staters. So I pretty much knew that was the school I was going to.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, we lived in Portland till about 1969, and moved to a small town called Rainier, Oregon. And then I started doing—I started taking college classes when I was a junior in high school, and then I went to a community college in Longview, Washington my senior year in high school, before there was anything called Running Start. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RW: Now it's free, I guess. Actually, we had to pay tuition to go there.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So that put me a year ahead in school. I was a sophomore when I went to Oregon State, so. But I pretty much knew what I wanted to do with my life, but I took kind of an interesting route [laughs] to get to where I wanted to go.

JD: [Laughs]

RW: I started out in Forestry. [Laughs]

JD: And what appealed to you about Forestry?

RW: Well, the outdoors, because I avidly backpack, and I really enjoy that. One thing I don't—I'll back up one second. My father had a darkroom when I was a kid, and when he did his compulsory service in the military back in the fifties, he did a lot of photography, so he built a darkroom in our house in Portland. And so, I started taking picture when I was—developing and printing them, too—when I was about six years old. So, photography was always—was always there. I couldn't wait for *Look Magazine* or *Life Magazine* to come in the mail, or *National Geographic*. I pored through all of the pictures. [Laughs] Didn't spend much time on the words!

JD: [Laughs]

RW: But the pictures were important to me, so anyway, that's—I'm sorry; I digressed there. But I thought Forestry was a real interesting area and I could use photography for that—

JD: Mm-hm.

RW:—and sort of do something of a Communications major in that. Well, that didn't last long. So then I ended up, "Well, I have to figure out how I'm going to do here." So then I ended up in broadcasting. I said, "No, that's not a fit." [Laughs] So then I ended up in the Journalism Department of Oregon State. So I went through that, and had some very fine instructors here.

JD: Talk a little bit about who the instructors were, and the types of courses that one took at that point.

RW: Yeah, yeah. Well, the head of the department was Fred Zwahlen, and he was a unique fellow. [Laughs] He liked to eat a raw onion, so you could [laughs]—and it was at the Ag Hall at Oregon State, which is right off the Memorial Union there. And you went up to second floor, it filled the floor.

JD: [Laughs]

RW: [Laughs] So maybe students didn't approach him when he was doing that, but I didn't have any problem going in there and talking to him. So, the other instructors that I remember were Ron Lovell, and Bob Carson, and Jim Folts. And I spent a lot of time with Jim Folts because I started working on their more—trying to get photography integrated into their program. They had some photo classes, but they weren't developed at the time, and they were working to develop those.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: Pardon the pun. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RW: But the way, the area that—I found out there was an art photography discipline, so I started taking classes over there. So I went through as many art classes with Harrison Branch. He's been retired for a number of years now.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And thoroughly enjoyed doing that. [0:05:01] And it's a different discipline between photojournalism and art. You're trying to photograph what's—you're not trying to put yourself into your photography; you're trying to represent what's going on out there, versus art, which is very more personal. But on the same line, you still have a signature that's your own. You have a thought process that you developed, and that's how you perceive things. And so those come into play. Not to get overly metaphysical, but it's all tied in.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So I think the education, that you create that foundation to be able to—to have that vision. So I think Oregon State really helped me develop that vision with the classes I took, and the instructors I took.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And particularly Harrison Branch. He emphasized really trying to say something with your photography. It's okay to just go snap a picture, and everybody—most people believe photography is extremely easy. Well, you just press that button and it works. Well [laughs], sometimes it is, and other times it really isn't. Most of the time you have to really bring all of those skills to tripping that shutter and capturing something. And it can happen very quickly. So, getting back to my point I was trying make was I needed to figure out, start bouncing around, and I just needed to convince myself photography was where I wanted to go all along.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And so in what would be—I was a senior by then, in college, and I felt kind of anxious. I wanted to get some first-hand experience at a newspaper, because I knew I wouldn't get a job just coming out of school with a portfolio of images. I needed daily images.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: Images, you know, working at a newspaper. So I asked at an internship here, so I worked three months for free. [Laughs] So they must have thought I did something well, so I've been here for 36 years.

JD: [Laughs] Yeah, I guess so.

RW: So they must have thought I'm doing all right. So I'm sort of an enigma in that respect.

JD: [Laughs]

RW: I mean, what are you supposed to have? Seven jobs, or something like that, is the average in your lifetime. So I've had one job here as a photographer.

JD: Mm-hm. So before we move away from OSU, talk a little about the rest of campus life and your experiences at OSU, and the types of things you enjoyed outside of the academic aspect of college.

RW: Well, you were always studying. [Laughs] But I mean, I worked on a lot of—I worked on the yearbook publication. I didn't work on the newspaper. I thought the yearbook actually gave you more access to doing other things, but it wasn't a daily. In hindsight, I probably should have worked on the *Barometer*. But it didn't really matter for what I was—because I was the photo editor and chief photographer, whatever they called it at the time, on the yearbook, so I spent a lot of time with that. So if you're working on publications like that, it's consuming a lot of your time.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, and then I foolishly thought I could handle 21 credits, too, at the same time. [Laughs] So I was quite busy, so I didn't get involved in a lot of things on campus. I lived in the dorm—I'm trying to think. What's the one? Finley Hall, I guess, was the—yeah. It was one of the newer complexes at the time, so.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: But usually when you're out covering things for the yearbook, or that sort of represented the school during the whole year, so you were always on campus walking around with a camera, and documenting what was going on during that time.

JD: And so would there be a mix of candid shots, as well as you being assigned to games, football games—

RW: Yeah.

JD: —or basketball games? [0:10:01]

RW: Sporting events were always big, so you always had to cover all of those, so. We were on football, and at that time it was a struggle. [Laughs] We didn't have a very good team at that time, but so. It's something you can really get into now and they're doing very well, plus their baseball program as well, so.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: But I take that back; as far as basketball went, there was a coach called Ralph Miller.

JD: Sure.

RW: And they did really well. I mean, they went to tournaments and things like that, so they had a decent program at that time, too, so.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And football had—needed some help. [Laughs] So.

JD: So, talk a little about what the photographic process was like back then.

RW: Well, I guess the photographic process back then was slow in comparison to today's standards, because everything's digital now, and so you're not spending time in the dark room. But you had to—here I'm going with puns again—you have to develop those techniques to be able to print pictures, and print them quickly, particularly on a deadline. So you go out and shoot something, you need—probably about from the time you go and bring the film back to the paper and get it developed, you're saying maybe 45 minutes to get a print.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: Sometimes you had to try to squeeze that in a half hour. [Laughs] And so you would what they call print negatives wet. I mean, you wouldn't be able to dry the film. You put it in an enlarger and print this picture, and it had water on the top just to get the image out. So yeah, it was a different way of doing so. Digital was—it can save a lot of time, in terms of production, on the back end.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: But it doesn't—it's the same amount of time going out and creating the image. You still have to be able to be there, and be there at the time, and work effectively to get the image that you're after.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And so a lot of it's being there. But once you're there, getting back to what I was saying earlier, is bringing skills that you've acquired, through your education and life skills, to figure out what you're after, and what makes a good photograph.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And that's pretty nebulous. You can't—a lot of photographers—I think people want photographers to talk about their work, and describe what you did, and how you got this picture. I really shy away from that, because to me it's like, what's the point? It should be self-explanatory. You should have done your job as a photographer well enough that that picture speaks for itself on its own. You can look at that image, and then you gain your own perspective. You bring what you, your life's perspectives to what you're seeing as well. So, I think explaining some things about photography, I just don't like to explain them.

JD: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

RW: But what stands out for me from Oregon State was when I was taking photography classes from Harrison Branch, and also in the Journalism Department. I gained a real insight of how to cover a story, what to go after, what to look for, and what to do, and so the foundations were instilled. And I also spoke to other people, colleagues of mine that graduated from Oregon State out of the Journalism Department, and we sort of honed in on one little aspect of that. It was the foundations to be able to go out and know what news is, and to go after it.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And I found that very helpful throughout my whole career as a photographer. You always want to work effectively, and hopefully I am, but I think that makes you a better employee, a better worker, because you can go out and you have a short period of time, and you know what you need to get after it and to get that image.

JD: And is there a way for you to describe how they taught journalism students what news is?

RW: I think it was kind of just sort of driven home, and continually. [0:15:00] Okay, it kind of gets into that area of trying—I don't know how to articulate that to the point of—you have a skill set, obviously, to do the job, but you also get into the area of your own personal skills. It's kind of like taking a course, I guess, that's not related to, say journalism, or photography, or anything like that. But it's all a building foundation towards your way of thinking, and your particular vision. And so it's kind of—I can't really pull out one particular thing, but it's a building block on each particular—you take one class and it's built on this one, and then it sort of gets all interrelated.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And the longer I was in school, the better things got. [Laughs] You know, I really liked that. I liked that atmosphere. I liked the feeling. And I particularly liked Oregon State, just its pretty campus, and I thought it had good instructors. So I certainly enjoyed my time there, but if there was a thing in hindsight that I did that I would—that I sort of regret, because as I said, I started taking classes when I was a junior in high school, then I did my senior year in—and I've always told other kids, I said, "Well, Running Start's not for everyone."

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: You can be a very bright student and you still want that social atmosphere from, say, high school. So what I'm trying to say is I hurried my education, I guess. And I would have liked just to stay in school longer. But the opportunity of having a job here, they offered me a job and I said, "Well, I don't need to go back to school to do what I want to do. [Laughs] This is where I want to be, my life dream of working in newspapers." So, but I think as an instructor I would—you always have a particular instructor that you sort of create a bond with in one aspect or another, and I would say that would have been Harrison Branch.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: It was kind of making the point I was earlier about the foundations of things. It's like having a teacher that teaches you but doesn't really teach you. You know, that sounds strange, but it's like you work to make a connection with—he made that connection with me, and then it was sort of like he wasn't really teaching me, in that respect. I was just like, "Oh, okay, I'm learning here. But I'm learning through my—" he was developing my train of thought, and so. So I'm glad that people can go to college and find a particular instructor, or a couple of instructors that they just really connect with. And I would say that was one thing that stands out at Oregon State, was that connection, because I think it made me a better photographer, and certainly helped me with my career as I was starting out. So.

JD: Well, and it sounds like it was an interesting mix between this fine art photography that was developing part of your sensibilities, along with the very practical foundation of journalism.

RW: Right. Yeah, and the two worked very well together. And so I was kind of creating my own sort of specialized degree out here, I think. Because Oregon State didn't offer anything in—they offered fine art photography in the Art Department. But I didn't need a fine art degree; I needed to have journalism and an art background. So I sort of figured out a way to develop my own major with the resources at Oregon State.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: I don't have any regrets going there and getting those instructors that I've outlined helped me along the way, because they certainly did.

JD: Mm-hm. And then it sounds like as you got near the end of your experience [0:20:00], you were kind of going back and forth between the practical experience of working here at *The Daily News*, and then going back and finishing your degrees? Do I understand that correctly?

RW: Yeah. Well see, I got hired—there was the internship, was in the spring of '78, and I was hired for the summer, and I was hired full-time in the fall. But I fully intended to return to school in the fall of '78, but well,—"I'm doing what I want to do so I'm going to take this job." Since I took all of these classes ahead of time, I was only short a few credits—

JD: Okay.

RW: —to be able to have enough to get a degree. So that sort of goes along with saying I was sort of developing my own liberal arts degree. And at that time they were just starting to do that, where students could come in and work with an advisor, and outline a program through the School of Liberal Arts, and the Art Department, and figure out what you—this is what you want to try to do; let's shape a program that will help you achieve where you want to go. So, I think I did that on my own, then I just, I graduated later with just a straight liberal arts degree, but it wasn't in any discipline. But I think they call it Liberal Studies now.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: Yeah, yeah. So I was fortunate to have that opportunity to be able to do that at the time, and as I said, I think they've developed it now into a full-fledged discipline or program. So, I had the journalism background, the art background, and then all of the other classes that supported my education, and I guess I was on my way! [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Well, one of the issues that comes up a lot these days with college students is: how does one pay for college?

RW: Yeah.

JD: Talk a little bit about the economics of college when you were there, and did you—I know you were busy doing the yearbook and everything. Did you have summer jobs, or how did that work for you and your family?

RW: Well, my parents—my dad, actually, grew up on a farm. And my uncle was running the farm, and Dad had left to go on to pursue a chemical engineering career. And so I always enjoyed the farm. So the summers when I was a kid, I couldn't wait to get out of school and go to the farm. So I worked—boy, I think I remember starting at ten or twelve, and I just started earning money. I had a paper route prior to that, too. And I saved my money. I'd work all summer and I'd get paid at the end of the summer, and it all went in the bank. So I started saving for school, and so I had a fair amount of money in the bank, and then I got a summer job.

My dad worked at Weyerhaeuser here in Longview, Washington, and they had a summer job program at that time, which was great for kids because you got paid well, and you could earn enough money to last you all the way through school. And so I ended up working for Weyerhaeuser as a fire watch up by Mount St. Helens. So that helped me know the area really well, and it was—it was a great experience. So I got three summer jobs with Weyerhaeuser, and so that really helped pay for school. And tuition, I pretty much distinctly remember the last term I was there, I think I paid \$530 or something for a quarter. And I was just going, "Wow, this has gone up a lot!" [Laughs] Because a couple of times it was only 250, or something.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, but wages were different then and everything. But I had enough funds. And then working on student publications, I also got paid there, and those were grant monies.

JD: Oh, okay.

RW: And so all of that helped me get through school, so I got out of school with no debts. So that was nice; I was very fortunate in that respect.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And I know tuition, room and board, and all of those things going to college are just so expensive now. [0:24:59] I knew students when I was at Oregon State—and I started in '75, and this was just on the heels of Vietnam, and the only way some of these students could go to school was to enroll in ROTC. And so that was another avenue for students to get through school, that some of them really didn't want to go into the military, but that was the only resource they had. They were bright students, and they wanted to go to school, so. But I mean, I was fortunate. I had saved, and had jobs that paid the way for me.

JD: Mm-hm. So, you have this job that you'd been hired for, as staff photographer at *The Daily News* in Longview.

RW: Mm-hm.

JD: Talk a little about what that job entailed, and kind of how that mix of studies you'd just finished came into play in your day to day work then.

RW: Yeah. Yeah, well it kind of shot—[laughs] I can remember showing up as an intern, just kind of wide-eyed, and I go, "Okay, what do I do now?" [Laughs] You know? And I'm sure that's kind of true as a lot of people get on the first part of the job, but you jump in. And I had some mentors here at the paper that helped me, and one guy ended up at *National Geographic*. The guy that hired me as an intern—these were other photographers at the paper—I think right now he's the CEO of *Audubon*! So I mean, there are people here that, at that time, that helped me along, so.

But you had the deadlines, which were always, you had to—and we were a P.M. paper at the time, which was great for the news cycle, because you could cover things for that day. It was more immediate, because we had news that happened in the morning, and people would get that in the evening. A.M. papers, it's almost you have to wait a whole 'nother day to get the news. So it was much more immediate for the community. And so, sometimes you'd come in and you had to complete your assignments within that sort of four-hour period from 8 to 12. It would be pretty much—12 o'clock's pretty much the cutoff. Although, earlier times we got to 12:30 almost—

JD: [Laughs]

RW: —which is, the press was starting almost to run. [Laughs] And you were running as well! But those were sort of spot news events, things that were happening on a fast basis. But there was much more immediacy in our coverage at that time than an A.M. paper. So, just pick up your camera and you go.

JD: And, did you just cover all types of news? What was the range in the geographical area that—?

RW: Well, we're pretty much just southwest Washington here, which is probably, if you put a circle around, we're probably 60 or 70 miles in the circle around Longview. So, yeah. So not a huge area, but for a—and we were about—we have consistently been about a 25,000 to 30,000 circulation paper at that time, which is a really good size. And one thing about working in a small paper that's nice—you're always connected with your community, more so than on a large paper. You're a large newspaper; say you're covering the state, like say *The Oregonian* or *Seattle Times*, and you're probably going to see this individual just once, but we'll continue to see the same people.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: You want to be—and hopefully people that work at *The Oregonian* and *Seattle Times* are the same way. You want to be fair to the people you're covering. And some things are sensitive. I mean, spot news situations can get tense. There's a lot of fast-moving elements to that story, and some people don't think you should be there [laughs] covering it. [0:30:00] But I love spot news. I love really just a fast pace, things happening in front of me and trying to record them. It's a—it's a real rush to be able to do that. And hopefully I do it accurately.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: I think with photography, you can overthink things, too. If you're going—like I was saying earlier, if you're going with that feeling, and using the foundation skills that I alluded to earlier, those all come into play sort of subconsciously, I think, and then so you're using those skills to create images that are storytelling for your readers. But it's been a good career for me. I mean, I've photographed things, I tell people, and this is literally true, I photograph—I have photographed birth, death, and everything in between. It's not that there is something out there that I haven't, that I don't want to go photograph, but as far as just the general terms of things, I've covered most things that—and I have to be those eyes for people that aren't there. So that's a tremendous—I take that on as a tremendous responsibility, because I'm their eyes. And so I hopefully am recording things that are accurate for that news event, and doing it at a high level. But that all remains to be seen. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RW: So, you know, the things I've witnessed in the 36 years I've done this is many lifetimes for other people. I mean, "Oh, you got to witness that! You've seen this. You've been here." I go, "Yeah, but [laughs] it's hard work," it's just not—it's not just clicking that button and just walking away. It's thought processes that you have to have, and I think that's what I felt I got from Oregon State.

JD: Mm-hm. And as you're talking about the range of subjects and events you've covered, you'd been here about two years when a kind of unique opportunity came along.

RW: Yeah. Well [laughs], yeah!

JD: [Laughs] Maybe you could just take it from there.

RW: [Laughs] Well, I think I know what the opportunity you're saying—or the event, rather, was the eruption of Mount St. Helens, which I think the initial blast was in March of 1980. And we were covering a story in town here, and there was this huge sound; there was like a bang, and then the building just rumbled. We thought something blew up at the mills. There were several mills in this town.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And so, raced out of the—we don't have cell phones at that time.

JD: Right.

RW: You know, we didn't have all of those little modern conveniences. And so got back to the paper to try to find out what was going on. And there was a hole blown in the side of Mount St. Helens. So, flew up that afternoon and photographed that, and so we started covering it from the very beginning. So, as the crow flies from here it's like 45 miles, but in order to get to places where you could take photographs of what was going on in the towns that sort of border the mountain, is anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half drive.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, we took off and started covering that story, and started covering it throughout. And we're the closest newspaper to the mountain. And I think it was really fortunate to have the staff we had at the time. [0:34:59] They were very skilled writers, and they were very skilled photographers over here. And so that event sort of unfolded and kept building and building until May 18th and it was—I was describing that job I had for the summer at Mount St. Helens as a fire watch.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So I got to know all of the logging roads up there very well. So I knew the places to go to get views of the mountain, but the state and the county closed off access to a lot of places. But we were able to get in because of, as people covering the news event, as a newspaper, and I was there at Spirit Lake the day before it blew. And there were some cabin owners around Spirit Lake that—right near Mount St. Helens, a big, huge lake that's sort of north of Mount St. Helens. There's a real picturesque spot. And they wanted to come in and get their belongings out, and I was at Spirit Lake the day before it blew. So, 17 hours, sort of missed the eruption. [Laughs]

JD: And you were interviewing, or photographing?

RW: Well, what I was photographing up there would be Harry Truman, which was kind of an interesting character. [Laughs] He had a lodge on the lake, and he refused to leave. So I sort of took the last pictures of him alive, before we left. And I always remember that day was just like, he had his lawn sprinklers out there in his yards, nice sunny day. The mountain was real clear, and no real signs that anything was going to happen. But that certainly changed the next day. [Laughs] So I got a phone call from the air service. There was a small airport here in town that we flew extensively throughout the coverage, prior coverage. And he said, "Grab your camera. The mountain just blew!" And we've gone up numerous times in airplanes, and I thought, "Oh well, this is just another blast." But it was the big blast.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And we were the first news—from other accounts, from other people that were covering it, we were the first news people on the scene. It was Sunday morning; most people had the day off. And so we flew up, and the photographs that I—well, this particular one here was shot like three quarters away, away on the south side of the mountain. So we were that close to the eruption. And all the ash and clouds and everything were blowing to the east, and so this was shot from the south, and it was just clear. An easy flight, it wasn't bumpy at all. And so we were able to get in there very early and get out, and this photograph, which I never thought about it at the time, but it's kind of now, as time has gone on, it's turned into sort of the iconic picture of the event. I never thought that. It just was, I was out doing my job, and this is what I had to do, and went about it in the best way I could. But yeah, it's been on the cover of numerous magazines, *National Geographic*, *Life*.

JD: I think *Time* as well.

RW: *Time Magazine*, yeah. Yeah, I forgot about *Time* actually. I shouldn't have forgot about that! It was on the cover of *Time Magazine* for that week. So.

JD: And when you're up there snapping these photos, what are you thinking of, relative to just where you were the day before, and how close you were to this sheer force of nature?

RW: [Laughs] It's what I was kind of saying earlier. I was just—it's like an event [0:40:00], or a news event that I needed to cover, and I needed to cover it for people who weren't there, and that they would—and hopefully would find that what I photographed, the incredible power of that eruption, and so to be the eyes for the readers. And so it was so fast-moving, you're not thinking about each little thing. I mean, I wasn't thinking about danger.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: I was thinking about just getting the photographs and getting my work done, so. And then you have the deadline as well. So that whole day, I was up at 8:30; I think I went 36 hours straight. I don't even know if I ate. I think I ate—somebody got me something to eat in the evening. And I had to do all of the photographs, too. We did black and white pictures, and so I had to lay out pages, too, at that time, and develop all of the pictures. I think I gave that half a hamburger to someone else, [laughs] another hungry photographer!

JD: [Laughs]

RW: So, it was—and then I was back up in the air in a helicopter that morning, and so I didn't get to bed till way the next day. But, you were kind of running on adrenaline! [Laughs] But you do need some sleep, though, so I maybe went home and got four hours of sleep, then came back and started all over again.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And that lasted for several days, and then it sort of got back onto a normal work schedule, more or less. But that story went on for several years for us, because you had flooding problems, and they were still finding bodies from the eruption months later. The ash and everything was—well, trying to locate people and figure out where they were was a problem, but some areas you just couldn't get into because of the ash and the debris.

JD: Right.

RW: There were so many trees down.

JD: Right. Well, and you know, you held up that iconic photo of the explosion of the huge ash and steam and pumice cloud going straight up, but there were many aspects to that eruption, and I assume you were involved in photographing kind of—

RW: Yes.

JD: —all of the different kinds of ways that—maybe you could elaborate on what some of the other things were that you were capturing and chronicling.

RW: Well, the mountain really, the airspace around the mountain, got closed down shortly after we were there. In fact, we went up on that day, and we kind of got chased out of there by somebody, I think it was from the National Guard. They were in an airplane or helicopter; I don't know which. But they indicated just by how they flew the plane they didn't want us there. [Laughs] And so, then I continued on down the river, and then you had all of the debris avalanche that flew out of Mount St. Helens. See, the eruption from the mountain blew out a cubic mile of mountain, and that is a lot of material.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So that material went down what they call the Toutle Valley. So we followed that down in a helicopter and covered things from the air. And I distinctly remember being up about 500 feet and it was about 80 degrees. You could feel the heat—

JD: Wow!

RW: —on the debris avalanche that came down. And the mountain had quite a few glaciers on it, so those glaciers were melting and you were getting huge steam vents because of the heat of all of the other debris, rock debris. And so, the one thing I didn't get to cover in all of that was the human—I photographed what was happening from the perspective of the damage and everything, but I didn't really get on the ground until later, to cover what the human aspect was, and how that affected people. But it was very important to show what was coming down, these mud flows, and the impact of what's happening to people's homes. [0:45:00]

And numerous homes were just—it was strange to see this mud flow just sort of ooze across—creep is probably a better way to put it—creep across this nice green pasture, surround a person's home, and then the home would just lift up and be carried away. It was just take it right off the foundation, and it would go down the river and disintegrate. I was fortunate enough to get over one bridge that was on the Toutle River that broke apart just as we flew over it. You could just hear this sort of high screech, squeal, and the span of the bridge turned sideways, and we're talking a span of several hundred feet, and then just ran; it flowed right down the river and just broke into pieces, was just enveloped in the mud.

JD: Wow.

RW: Yeah. So, no other news person was around when that happened. We were the only ones in the air then. So, there was a lot to cover and do. You wished you could cover more, but you're [laughs] at where you had to be, and that was your area.

JD: Right.

RW: And you did the best you could.

JD: Right. And the coverage of the newspaper, the team, ended up resulting in an award, a pretty prestigious award.

RW: [Laughs] Yeah, it's kind of an interesting, the way the Pulitzer Committee did it. There's separate categories. There's news photography categories, and various reporting categories for news, and poetry and music, and everything. So there's all different kinds of categories entered. So I entered in the spot news category for the Pulitzer, and the paper entered in sort of a general news category, I guess. And so there was a board that meets; it's out of Columbia University. And so, they got the recommendations from smaller boards that the paper should win the Pulitzer, and I should win for my photographs as well. So they decided the best thing to do is to put this together in one thing, so they awarded me a Pulitzer Prize, and then the paper as well.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And so I was—I never really thought to enter. One time I remember going back to New York shortly after the eruption, and speaking to a few, various publications, and I remember speaking to this photographer who was the editor of *Parade Magazine* at the time. His name was Arthur Rothstein, and he did a lot of photographs from the Depression era work. I forgot the acronym for it, but anyway, they covered the Dust Bowl and the Depression at the time. Dorothea Lange was one of them.

JD: That was kind of a WPA project.

RW: Yeah, it was the WPA, yeah. Yeah. And he looks over at me and he says, "You're going to enter this into the Pulitzer competition, aren't you?" And I said, "Well, I hadn't really thought about it." [Laughs] And he goes, "Well, you definitely should." [Laughs] And so yeah, it was a great honor to have that. And age-wise, I guess I was 22 at the time. [Laughs] So as quite young as—I mean, most people wouldn't have those types of awards later in their career.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, I guess I did a good job that day! [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] And how do you think that prize either changed you, or the newspaper, or opportunities that came along?

RW: Oh, I mean, I shot sort of freelance assignments for various publications over the years. It brought notoriety to the paper, which was good. You're always, as a photographer or a writer, you're always chasing that next news event, or I'm always—I haven't shot the best picture of my life yet!

JD: [Laughs] [0:50:01]

RW: [Laughs] It hasn't happened yet! It's out there. I'm going to find it someday.

JD: And you'll know it when it happens?

RW: Well, maybe. Maybe not. [Laughs] Maybe the search will still go on. So, there's always news to cover.

JD: Sure.

RW: But I think it's brought me recognition as a photographer, and I guess it's brought merit to my work. I'd rather leave those to other people to figure out. I mean, it's what I was saying earlier, is I don't want to explain my work; I want it to represent for itself. It needs to stand on its own.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And so, if I feel I've done a good job, if people can gain something from that image that I intended, or gain knowledge from the event, then I feel like I've done my job, so.

JD: You've also written, in some pieces you've published or shared about your work, that while the St. Helens story clearly brought you the things you just described, that you really think that a lot of important stories are the ones that are dealing with peoples' lives, and ways that you might improve the present.

RW: Yes.

JD: Can you talk a little about some of those stories, and what you mean by that?

RW: Well I mean, as I've said, I've really enjoyed covering spot news, but on a daily newspaper you're trying to communicate what's going on in your community. And spot news is part of that, but I really enjoyed covering more sort of the sociological kind of aspects, and people relating to other people, issues that are problems for your community.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And my goal with my work, and as I've started out, kind of have to monitor for myself, is that I want my photography to improve the present. I want to have something that improves my community. And I'm not trying to put my spin on it; I'm trying to present something to people to make them aware of their community, and then they can sort of take that and then build onto that. But we've covered—some of the more memorable things that were kind of, I thought, heart-wrenching things to cover, was during the Reagan era there was a real shift in our community. Timber jobs were lost. There were a lot of people out of work, and there were a lot of food lines that hadn't appeared before, that hadn't really appeared for people around here since the Depression. And we had what they had surplus cheese; they had cheese lines. And they would go around the block, several city blocks—well, two city blocks at least. I can remember that. And people were waiting in line.

And it's difficult to cover those things because if there's an aspect I don't like about newspaper work, I don't like intruding in peoples' misery. But some stuff we cover is, that's what we have to do. But you can do that in a way that you're not intrusive and obnoxious. You can do it, you know, with compassion for what they're going through and stuff, and conduct yourself in a proper manner. And so I hope—I really try to do that when I cover those types of stories. But the images out of that are some of the most moving. I feel, that you're—you have aspects of people that are there that you could see that on their faces. You could see their toil or torment.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And struggles. [0:55:00] But I try to record that in a fashion that is representative of what is happening, and representative of who they are. So those mean a lot to me, because, just being able to help out the community and the readers that I serve. Yeah, so the thought process that goes into that is a sort of reoccurring theme for me, but I really try to hone my skills in that area. I don't want to overthink things, though. You have to kind of react on things and take photographs that way, but you have a feeling. Something crosses your eye and you think, well, this is going to be a good image.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And being patient and compassionate to what you're trying to do is, so. I mean, I really try to work hard on those over the years to be able to do that.

JD: And that's, I'm assuming, the mainstay of your career here. The St. Helens are the once-in-a-lifetime—

RW: Yes, that's correct.

JD: —that come along, and the rest is what you do day to day, week to week.

RW: Day in and day out, yes. And we're pretty organized in how we—from pretty much the day one I started here, in terms of figuring out what we call cover stories, what's going to be in the next day's paper. Some days they're slow news days, as every newspaper has.

JD: [Laughs]

RW: But we try to plan out things and plan for days ahead, and stuff. But if news comes along it's going to supersede those types of stories. So some of these can kind of lend—they're feature stories that you can plan for. News stories, you don't really plan for. They're happening, and you've got to go, so the other assignments sort of take a back seat.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So, but yeah. There's been a lot to cover in the time I've been here.

JD: Mm-hm. And newspapers are certainly undergoing some major changes these days.

RW: Yes.

JD: Maybe talk a little about just how the news has perhaps changed or not in the time that you've been here. And we were also talking a little bit earlier about just kind of the technology of taking photos. And now it's clearly a total digital era.

RW: Mm-hm.

JD: And just maybe talk a little about those two elements of your career.

RW: Well, when I started here it was a great situation. We were a family-owned newspaper. And so if you had a problem, the person you could go to the top was right in the building—if there was something that needed to be done, or you needed funding to do something, you had story ideas you wanted to develop. We were sold in 1999, late '99, to a small chain, and then subsequently sold to another chain, Lee Enterprises. And that's who currently owns the paper now. And when *The Daily News* was family-owned, there was more resources because of advertising. Advertising now is sort of spread thin. There's other avenues, being the internet.

And so revenue started to go down after the sale of the newspaper. And so they tightened up the newsroom, tightened more budgets. And we lost—at one time at the paper, I was the photo editor and we had three photographers, myself and two other photographers. So I was their supervisor, but we had plenty of things to go cover and everything. Now it's down. I work part-time now, and one of the photographers was laid off. So we're covering essentially the same amount of news with half the staff. So days get kind of long. [Laughs]

But digital's helped a lot in that respect, because you don't have to do developing in a dark room [1:00:00] but you're still—you're essentially developing on the computer, so you're using Photoshop to enhance the photographs, not change the photographs. People, "Well, that's been Photoshopped." Well, there's degrees of Photoshop. I mean, we don't change the color of someone's eyes, or hair color, or something like that, or remove something out of the picture that's in the image. But it needs to be able to be worked on for publication, because it's different than making just a normal print off your household printer.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: It's going on a press, so there's other aspects you have to do. So you take the image, the digital image, and you enhance it in Photoshop for production. So there's the budget situation. There's fewer funds and things, which is not good, and the news hole is a lot smaller. I mean, we used to have a very big news hole. Now it's very tight. I think that local newspapers, smaller market newspapers, aren't having it as rough as metropolitan newspapers, because of the infrastructure cost. I mean, the distribution has gone way up. The adage used to always be that your circulation would cover the production of a newspaper, the printing of it and distributing of it, and advertising covered everything else. So that share has really changed now, so they get more strapped for cash and stuff. But smaller markets' papers can adjust better than a larger newspaper.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: And we're still seven days a week. So we haven't gone—some newspapers have gone partly digital, and like two days a week they'll be online. We have an online presence, but I think we still try to put most of our focus on the printed version, and the online basis is more immediate. We'll get something, and we'll get it out online quickly for readers, but being our community the way it is, a smaller community, I think people are still picking up the newspaper and wanting to read it that way.

JD: Mm-hm.

RW: So. It's been an interesting ride! [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

RW: You know, you just have to adapt. You have to adapt to situations. But I mean, I thoroughly enjoyed working for a family-owned newspaper. You felt you had more autonomy, and I think you got heard more and things like that. But that's true of a larger—being a larger company, there's more people to [laughs] sort of go up the food chain here.

JD: [Laughs] So, you've looked back a little at kind of your time at OSU. Any other thoughts as you've kind of had a full career—it's still going—but kind of how college affected your career and life choices?

RW: How did college affect my career and life choices? I think that as I said earlier, I think I made the right choice in going to Oregon State. I enjoyed the campus, my parents went there. I still, when I drop in there for a football game or something like that, I still try to look up a couple of people. And Jim Folts is retired, but now he's working part-time there. In fact I just walked up the old, creaky stairs in the old Ag Building, and he's off in some corner room with a student. And I said, "Hello." He looks at me. I said, "I just wanted to drop in and say hi." I remember the students kind of like looking, like, "Who's that?"

JD: [Laughs]

RW: So yeah, I kind of make those connections. But it's nice to go back on campus, and I think any four-year institution you go to, you have that personal connection to your campus. [1:05:01] Because college is a time you really worked very hard, very—it's a stressful time, and you have five or six classes that you study for, all demanding the same amount of energy and thought. And jeez, I don't know if I could do it today! [Laughs] But you know, you reminisce about those things when you're on campus, and Oregon State's just a pretty campus. I go back, and "Wait a minute. That's a new building!" [Laughs] This has moved!

JD: Yeah, there's a lot going on right now.

RW: Yeah, yeah. But there's still some of the same old buildings that you—I remember sitting in that one, toiling away on this particular topic. But I think the Journalism Department was a real force, in terms of keeping my—getting me the base and direction I needed throughout my career, and I use those skills still to this day. And so yeah, I had a nice time there. I wish I could have stayed longer. I think that's what I—as I said, I kind of hurried my education through, but that's kind of part of my personality. I think I just want to move on to the next thing, the next level, and I felt I was ready to go. But there's so many other courses that I wanted to take that intrigued me.

Also, one thing I really liked about education is the dialogue you develop. And I hope that's still something that instructors work—not so much as getting up in the class at the bulletin board, and putting all of the information out there and lecturing, but as to engage the thought process. Because I think students, there are some students today; they go into college and they go, "Pfft. What's the answer? I need the answer. I'm looking for the answer." Well, in my line of work, there's really no, there is no concrete answer. You can do a mathematical and get this answer. You can do a chemical equation and balance that equation, and there's your answer. Well, what I do is there isn't—it's nebulous. It's not—you want to be truthful and accurate. So engaging students, engaging that thought process, and making them question and not just be—don't sort of cast yourself in a small area. Broaden out. Get that interaction back and forth, so get that thought process going. And that's what Oregon State did for me.

JD: Great. Well, do you have any other final thoughts?

RW: [Laughs] No, I think I probably said more than I need to say. I mean, I hope you got something that's worthwhile.

JD: Totally good.

RW: Yeah, I never handle these things that great! [Laughs]

JD: No, you did fine. You did fine.

RW: So, I always like to be behind it.

JD: [Laughs]

RW: I don't like to be in front of the camera.

JD: Well, we appreciate you putting yourself out to do just that, and thanks for your time and your recollections, Roger.

RW: Yeah, yeah. I really appreciate it. So yes, and I need to get down there again sometime soon. See, my mom grew up in Corvallis too, yeah, yeah.

JD: Oh, really?

RW: So, she was close by.

JD: So, lots of ties there?

RW: Yeah, yeah. Well, that's where my grandparents were at the time. So they passed on, but my mom definitely knew the whole area there. So, it's sort of a reminiscing tradition, my family at Oregon State. We all ought to plan a visit!

JD: [Laughs] Sounds good.

RW: Here's the hall you toiled in! Oh, but this one's worse over here, this one.

JD: [Laughs] Compare misery.

RW: Yeah. Well, not misery, but just, this is hard work. It was hard work.

JD: Yep. Absolutely.

RW: Necessary hard work; necessary hard work, so. Yeah, so.

JD: Great.

RW: Great, well thank you very much.

JD: Thanks so much. [1:10:04]