



## A Remembrance of William Appleman Williams, March 27, 2012

### Title

“Remembering William Appleman Williams”

### Date

March 27, 2012

### Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

### Summary

The interview begins with Robbins introducing himself and providing a thumbnail sketch of his education and path through academia. The session then turns to its intended focus, Robbins' memories of William Appleman Williams.

Robbins begins by detailing his initial interactions with Williams, which came about while Robbins was still a graduate student at the University of Oregon. He describes the impact that two of Williams' books in particular made upon him - *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and *The Contours of American History*. He then notes his understanding of Williams' courtship and hiring by Oregon State University in 1968, and his sense of Williams' assessment of the History department and of the university at that time. He also reflects on Williams' facility as a skilled editor and traces the early stages of their relationship as colleagues and friends.

The session then turns its focus to Williams' personality, with Robbins speaking of Williams' social circle and his love of games, including pool and basketball. Robbins likewise describes Williams' sense of humor and theorizes on both the sources of Williams' innovative ideas and the influences that helped to shape his world view. From there, Robbins discusses the physical space where Williams worked on the Oregon coast, details the schedule that Williams kept as he traveled by bus back and forth from Waldport to Corvallis, and shares his thoughts on Williams' work habits, both as a reader and a writer.

Robbins next addresses the perception that the quality of Williams' scholarship declined during his OSU tenure, and in so doing discusses the growing fascination with community that defined much of Williams' work in his later years. He also conveys a sense of Williams' teaching style, the evolution of his role within OSU's History department, his larger presence university-wide, and his activities as president of the Organization of American Historians.

Near its conclusion, the interview returns in focus to an examination of Williams' personal characteristics. Robbins comments on Williams' love of jazz, photography and fishing, his struggles with alcohol, and the op-ed columns that he wrote for two Oregon newspapers. He also shares his memories of Williams' wife, Wendy, and of the maritime history courses that Williams developed late in his career. The session ends with Robbins reflecting on Williams' death in 1990 and the role that his valued friend continues to play in his life.

### Interviewee

Bill Robbins

### Interviewer

Chris Petersen

**Website**

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

## Transcript

**\*Note: Interview recorded to audio only.**

**Chris Petersen:** OK, if we could have you introduce yourself with your name, today's date and our location.

**Bill Robbins:** I'm Bill Robbins, formally William G. Robbins. Today is March 27th, 2012, and we are on the third floor of the Oregon State University Library, and this is an interview having to do with my long time esteemed colleague William Appleman Williams.

**CP:** So that is what we are principally interested in talking about today. But if you could give us a little context though, just a brief thumbnail sketch of your own life and career.

**BR:** Okay, I'm a Connecticut Yankee by birth and have some resonance with Bill Williams' career. I spent four years in the Navy. I did not, however, attend the Naval Academy. I was an enlisted man right out of high school. I went to undergraduate school after the Navy experience. I was actually five years out of high school before I went to school, got a degree at a small teachers' college in Connecticut, spent one semester at Syracuse University, and then moved to Oregon in 1963, taught school for one year, and began taking graduate seminars at the University of Oregon, and finished a Master's degree in British history at the University of Oregon in 1965. Moved east to the University of Maine, where I had ambitions to do a Ph.D. It didn't work out there for reasons that are not pertinent to this discussion, and I returned to Oregon in the fall of 1966 in American History, and received a Ph.D. in 1969, and began teaching here and there on visiting appointments, and wound up at Oregon State in 1971. And I was here for three or four years on visiting appointments. One of them, I know, was when Bill Williams took a research leave with the proviso that some of the money be used to hire me as another interim appointment for that year. And then I got on a tenure track, so I was at Oregon State from 1971, full time, until 1999, and I went half time, and retired full time in 2002.

**CP:** So Williams came to Oregon State in 1968 for good. But it sounds like there was interaction with him before then between the two of you.

**BR:** Well, briefly, and it's a fun story so I'm glad you asked that question. I was a graduate student. I first discovered Bill Williams when I was at the University of Maine, and it had directly to do with the anti-war movement having to do with Vietnam. And sometime in the Fall of 1965, or the Spring of 1966, I started reading Williams. I read *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* first, and then I read articles that he wrote and various publications, *Minority of One* and *The Progressive*, having to do with American foreign relations and so forth. So when I returned to the University of Oregon to work on the Ph.D., I was fully vested in my research project, but I was also fully vested in anti-war activities on campus, and in the Eugene community. And by the Fall of 1968, when Bill moved from Madison to Corvallis, I was writing my doctoral dissertation at that point, and stunned to hear that he had moved to Oregon State. I mean, speechless. And it had to do with the perception, mostly erroneous, that we had as graduate students at University of Oregon, that Oregon State University was a bastion of reactionary politics and so forth. That, of course, I learned was a far stretch, when I came here and joined the faculty.

[0:04:48]

But to make this story current, in late January of 1969, the University of Oregon history faculty invited Bill to campus, and it was his first appearance back on campus since he left - he had been there before - but giving a formal address on campus. On January 28th or 29th 1969 it was the onset of a huge snow storm. You can go in the newspapers and find it, confirm it. But it was on a Friday night, and he spoke to a packed hall in Erb Memorial Room 105, and I was there as were all of my graduate student colleagues, who were a pretty eclectic and very bright bunch. Maybe the best group of graduate students that the U of O ever had in History, would be my guess. Anyways, I can't remember what the substance of Bill's address was, but the next day, amidst mounting snowfall, Bill spoke to graduate students in Chapman Hall, which was a place where graduate students would gather, and I can't remember what particular college or department Chapman Hall was associated with. And it was kind of a Q & A, and of course I was enamored with Bill, and I was all fired up with a major question I wanted to know. 'What drove him to become the person he did?' Something like that. And I'm sure I articulated my question like an idiot. I will never forget his response. This is a direct quote. 'What the hell kind of a

question is that?' I was totally humiliated. And after I got to know Bill, I retold him that story, and he said, 'Oh I wouldn't have said something like that,' and I said, 'You sure did.'

In other words, Bill was a historian's historian. If you've read the essays that Paul Buhle is working on, the unpublished essays, [Ed: unpublished essays by William Appleman Williams later published on an OSU Libraries website. Buhle was developing an introduction to the essays.] they reek with history, with a sense of history, and my question had nothing to do with that. It had to do with political activism, presentist politics, and so forth. Just the opposite of the kind of person that Bill was.

**CP:** Did you ever get an answer to your question?

**BR:** No. I can't remember. It went on from there, and I think I started looking furtively out the window at the mounting snow, and I don't know how Bill ever got home - he was living in Newport at the time - because Eugene came to a standstill. We had, I remember, 43 inches of snowfall in a little over 24 hours.

**CP:** Wow. Well, it sounds like *Tragedy* was an important book to you. I assume *Contours* was as well?

**BR:** *Contours* much greater than *Tragedy*. I used to say that on my desk I had *Webster's Dictionary* and *Contours of American History*. And it influenced in a large way, because I consulted it regularly, teaching United States history. And I can't remember the details, but I can say - I was teaching Pacific Northwest history, about the Lewis and Clark expedition. I'd consult the index and find Lewis and Clark and Jefferson and so forth, and I remember a line that I would quote to students from *Contours of American History* that Jefferson was the Great American Democrat. Jefferson was the Great American Empire Builder. Right in the same vogue. *Contours*, and Paul Buhle bears this out, was a major, major book that historians still have to contend with.

**CP:** So your experiences was not isolated by any stretch, in terms of the impact that book made on you and your world view?

[0:09:46]

**BR:** No, I don't think so. But beyond that, when I came here and joined the faculty in 1971, in my constant association with Bill I began to think much more seriously and it really did direct my research and publication for many years, his notion of political economy. The intersection between politics and economics. Here I became interested in natural resource industries and the intersection of politics and economics is something that has stayed with me ever since.

**CP:** Well, it sounds like you came to OSU about three years after Williams, but do you know much about how the courtship or the hiring of Williams in 1968 came about?

**BR:** I do, and mostly from Bill. I should have brought my doctoral dissertation with me, because I have to say, in the Fall of 1969, I taught a US history course here, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and it was Tuesdays and Thursdays that Bill was here, because that was his schedule, and he read my dissertation, and he wrote in his beautiful script some comments. I'll try to remember to scan them and send you copies because they're interesting. He took young scholars seriously. What was your question?

**CP:** His hiring here at OSU.

**BR:** Oh yes. Well, the whole background to that is his failing marriage to Corrine, and I'm not sure if Paul Buhle is altogether right when he said Bill's theme was that a woman's place was in the home, and I'm not so sure about that, and I'm not sure my wife would agree with that either, but that's Paul's view, and there is enough evidence to say that's true. And Corrine's insistence about wanting to go on and get a degree, as it turns out, at Portland State, because they had a social work program... I'm losing my train of thought in response to your question.

**CP:** His hiring.

**BR:** Right. He had made friends with George Carson here, and I think that that is clear from recorded literature, and they liked each other. That was important. And George was very bright and he was no one's fool, and he liked Bill. Then there

were negotiations about the possibility of hiring Williams, and the President, I think, at the time was Jensen. And Paul Buhle has it that a Dean was involved, because there were questions raised about Bill's trustworthiness, because he was a radical and so forth. And I remember Bill saying that President Jensen put in a call to Fred Harvey Harrington. And I don't know if Harrington had yet become President of the University of Wisconsin or not, but he asked him. And I remember Bill saying it was Jensen who called and asked him, if Williams was trustworthy. And Bill said that Harrington said 'He is,' and Bill, I remember him saying, 'I got the job.' And that's about all I can add. And I know there is correspondence, George Carson and I think Tom McClintock - Tom was sitting in for George part of the time when George was on leave - but all of that correspondence is here.

**CP:** Do you have any sense of what his assessment of the university was, or the department was, at the time when you arrived?

**BR:** Well, it hadn't changed much by the time I arrived here in 1971, and there was a dearth of people publishing, and that's being very kindly. But that wasn't unusual in most land grant universities in other places either. One of the more active people publishing at the time in colonial history was Darold Wax. And he would, when Tom McClintock stepped down from being Chair of the department, Darold became Chair of the department, late '70s or something like that. So Darold was Chair through the rest of Bill's tenure on the faculty. Other than that, one well-known member of the faculty was promoted to Full Professor on the basis of three articles published, and I was going up for Full Professor the same year. And the Dean at the time, who's died a long time ago, tried to get me to withdraw on my bid for promotion to Full Professor because I hadn't been an Associate Professor for very long either. But I was publishing articles and I had a book in press, and I remember it was just before the Christmas break and he asked me, suggested that I withdraw my candidacy, and I was a little bit offended. But I was talking to the Dean so I said I thought I had the credentials, my resume was strong enough for promotion, and I had in mind this other person was going up for promotion and I assured him I wasn't going to jump off tall buildings if I was denied, and anyways was turned down. I learned subsequently that the vote among the senior review team here was close.

[0:16:24]

**CP:** Did you seek Williams' counsel as part of this?

**BR:** No but I remember talking to the person who actually I have become good friends with since, who told me, and he got promoted, that you just have to wait your turn, which didn't cheer my Irish sensibilities very much. But those were interesting times. I was feisty, cocky in some ways, but I was publishing a lot. My first book was published in 1982. Bill read the introductory chapter, I'll never forget it, before I sent it off for publication. Do you want to hear that story?

**CP:** Yeah.

**BR:** I wrote it and rewrote it and revised it until I was sure that it was near perfect, and my wife, my family and I were living out on the Alsea Highway at the time. And we drove down our long driveway, and for some reason she was driving, and I reached in our mailbox and there it was, with Williams' handwriting, and I opened it up as we were driving into town and pulled out the manuscript, and I told this to the graduate students: red pen. It looked like he had cut himself and bled on my perfect writing. But oh did I learn about writing. Not just redundancies but repetitive word use, the use of 'that' and 'which,' the proper use of 'that' and 'which,' the proper use of 'these' and 'those,' and I should have saved that. I don't think I have that anymore. It was a priceless piece of editorial work.

**CP:** It sounds like the two of you became allies, colleagues fairly quickly.

**BR:** Yeah, it took me a while to, as I used to say when I first came here, speaking to Bill, I always felt like I had a hot potato in my mouth. But I got over that. And I would say by 1973, '74, I was sort of beyond that, and became friends, and eventually very good friends. And I was divorced in 1972, so Bill never met my first wife, and I was single for three years. And Bill and Wendy were married in December '72, they went to British Columbia, to Vancouver, and got married. I didn't remarry until the summer of 1975. And this is what Paul Buhle misses, in his biography of Bill Williams, is his sense of play. A profound sense of play. Even the memos he would write to the History Department were fun reading. Part of it is his sense of play. Sometimes very cryptic, but a beautiful sense of play. Bill and Wendy came to our wedding

and when we walked out of the church at the end of the ceremony, tied to ornamentation on the outside of the church were balloons brought by Bill.

[0:20:32]

**CP:** Well, my next question fits along in this vein. I'm interested in learning a little bit more about his personality.

**BR:** Yeah. Well, Paul mentions this in his biography, but I don't think he struck how important it was to Bill. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we would go down to the Corvallis Hotel, and the Corvallis Hotel on the bottom floor, which has since long been gone, were two great pool tables. And you could buy beer or beverages there, and we would shoot pool. And Bill was the best pool player. There would be Ben Murdzek from our department, who was kind of a crotchety, cranky guy, really basically a wonderful human being, but sometimes hard to get along with, I mean, even for his best friends. One was Bill, and I was a good friend of Ben's too. Ben was a good pool player. Peter Copek, who was the founding director of the Center of Humanities, was a regular there, and there would be various others who would join at different times. But those were always wonderful get-togethers. And then Bill would catch the greyhound back to Newport. That was part of it. Bill...

**CP:** What was the conversation like at these?

**BR:** Oh, it varied from politics to history to sports. And I know there was a television set, and it could have been after the Corvallis Hotel closed and we moved on to somewhere else, and I think it was, but I can't remember where we played pool after that. But it was during the baseball playoffs and when Nolan Ryan pitched for the Houston Astros. Bill, he was a pretty eminent sports fan, and especially baseball, and he was pretty enamored with watching Nolan Ryan pitch. Well, he was a pain in the neck when it was his turn to shoot and he was up watching the television set, watching Nolan Ryan pitch. But Paul Buhle misses that part of Bill's life. And it was a really rich part of his life too. And you probably - I'm sure this is in my brief biographical sketch of Bill in the festschrift, a wonderful line, and I think it was from Lloyd Gardner and not Walter LaFeber, that in his seminars, Bill would chide them during the Fall semester when the Yankees were always playing in the playoffs, - well, there was no playoffs then, you simply won the American League Championship and you went to the World Series - and all of his graduate students would be Yankee haters. And Bill would chide them that they just didn't understand power. To understand power, you have to understand the Yankees. It was neat to see how he could take a sports metaphor and switch it into a discussion of his kind of history. His approach to history.

**CP:** Did he take an interest in the local teams?

**BR:** Oh yes. He was a very close fan of Ralph Miller's great basketball teams in the late '70s and early '80s. He met Ralph on different occasions, I can't remember the details. But he knew and liked him, and he had Ralph's daughter Shannon in his class at some point, and Shannon also was a student in one of my classes as well, and she was on the women's basketball team here and very good.

**CP:** And of course Williams had been a basketball player himself.

**BR:** Yes, right.

**CP:** How about his sense of humor?

[0:24:59]

**BR:** Well, I've given you a flair for that already, I think. His play with words, especially in the memos to the History Department which I think I've saved most of them, and between my collection and whatever you've gathered elsewhere, they're great reading. They're also steeped in historical metaphors. And what I always enjoyed about those was the sense of play, that this was part fun, part humor and so forth, and that you never could take yourself all that seriously. And I should have better responses too, but that was part of Bill's persona, I think, was that you never take yourself all that seriously. And I think that that was part of his differences with Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr. was that Schlesinger certainly took himself very seriously.

**CP:** And I assume that this personality characteristic bore itself out in conversation at the pool table?

**BR:** Mmhhh. I have to say one other thing. I told this to Paul Buhle when he interviewed me when he was working on the biography. I told him Bill was the best idea person that I had ever met and Paul came close to agreeing, but he had one other person in mind, the best idea person that he had ever met, and that was C.L.R. James, the Caribbean Marxist revolutionary, and one of the greatest cricketers of all time. Yeah, you can check Paul's biography of C.L.R. James.

**CP:** Where do you think this came from in terms of Williams', especially his academic writing, this kind of innovative thinking?

**BR:** Well, to use the old metaphor, thinking outside the box, no one thought outside the box like Williams. And Paul does a good job of that. He looked at historical questions from the side or kind of an opaque view and saw and raised questions that no one had ever raised before. Or thought about things in a unique and different way, and that's why I think his work is so transformative in American foreign relations, because old style diplomatic history never looked at it from the approach that Bill did. And his book *The Roots of Modern American Empire* is kind of a classic study of looking at American agriculture and its search for markets. And the force that that had in the late 19th century in shaping American foreign relations certainly is a powerful way of looking at that.

**CP:** Did he ever talk about influences upon him in terms of kind of developing his world view? I know that Beard was big--

**BR:** Oh yeah, Beard would be a common point of discussion over the pool table, and every once in a while Lloyd Gardner, Walt LaFeber, somebody like that would come up with something out of the Beard Papers, although Beard burned all his papers, I think. But it was a reference to Beard that they found in somebody else's correspondence and so forth, and he would share that with me, and probably some of it may be in what I've turned over to the archives here. So Beard was a constant point of reference, and I of course was well aware of Beard and his point about the influence on the shaping of America's early period of history, especially making the Constitutional Convention that the constitutional makers were not, as some of our current politicians today, descended from on high, but rather they had their hand in the cookie jar. And that was part of my understanding too of political economy.

**CP:** Did you ever visit his first residence in Newport?

[0:29:45]

**BR:** No. No, I don't even know where it was. No. In fact by the time Karla and I visited their Waldport, and I think the two of us were there, I don't think I ever visited Bill there alone. He and Wendy were married by the time I was making trips to the coast to visit them. What Bill did was he bought two cabins and then when he and Wendy were married, they built a partition which housed a kitchen, a small dining room, and so forth, and then one end became a study and their bedroom, and the other end was their living room. And eventually after we knew them several years, they built a bigger bedroom and a garage over the other end. But it was very livable and very appropriate for them, and it backed up right over a bluff on the ocean, as you probably know.

**CP:** Yeah. We talked earlier, before we began recording, about his study. I was wondering if you could reiterate your recollections of what that space was like.

**BR:** This was not recorded though. That was over a coffee. The study was austere, spartan, beautiful desk, bookcase, hardbound books, not many of them - the study was not filled with wall to wall books. It was the neatest study I had ever seen. It was probably an expression of Bill's work.

**CP:** We've talked about this a little already, but how did the logistics work out of living on the coast and working in Corvallis?

**BR:** Well, he had an agreement when he signed his contract that he wouldn't have to be here every day because he wanted to live on the coast. He wanted to teach on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule and I know there was some resentment over that. I was privy to it. And I thought it was nonsense because it came from people who were doing nothing and had zero prestige in terms of the historical profession. Bill gave his all to the department. He did his share, taught his fair share

of classes, he advised students a lot, did individual student advising, although probably not too many. Students who matriculated in his class, undergraduates, I would say 98% of them never knew who they were taking a class with. A striking example of this is I was attending a Western History Association meeting in Sacramento, and I was in an elevator, and a fellow saw my identification card for the conference and asked me 'Is William Appleman Williams still teaching?' and I said yes, and he said 'You know, I had a class with him as an undergraduate and I never knew who he was.' So that was kind of an eye opener for me, or at least it was something I never forgot.

**CP:** So he would take the bus over in the morning each day and take it back?

**BR:** And take it back, yeah. And I think it was about seven o'clock return bus, and he would be home - well, by the time I was here he was living in Waldport, so he would leave his car in Newport, or Wendy would drive and pick him up, or something like that. I don't know how that worked out.

**CP:** So he didn't keep an apartment or anything like that?

**BR:** No he didn't. And when he did stay over, if he stayed over Tuesday and Wednesday night, because he had other commitments, and he did that pretty regularly, he stayed at the Towne House. It's still the Towne House isn't it?

**CP:** Is that on 4th street?

**BR:** On South 4th and its Tommy's Bar and Grill. Then it was just the Towne House bar.

**CP:** So we talked about the Corvallis Hotel. Are there other hotspots?

**BR:** No. Corvallis Hotel, and I can't remember where we migrated for a while, and then the Towne House, we would get together there for drinks sometimes.

**CP:** There were pool tables there?

**BR:** Can't remember. There is now, but...

[0:34:56]

**CP:** We're at about thirty-five minutes right now.

**BR:** Yeah, I'm watching. I've got about 18-15 minutes or so.

**CP:** Okay. How would you characterize his work style and work habits?

**BR:** Well, I have to back up because by the time we were talking about writing drafts of papers and so forth, and he would use long yellow pads—he called it 'foolscap.' And I don't know if that's just an early 20th century term, and I use the 8.5x11 pads now, they're lined and so forth, but he used the longer ones, 14 inches, I suspect. And he would write drafts of material on that in long hand, and then he would transfer that, he would type it on a first rough draft after doing some editing, so by the time he did that it was more like a third draft, by the time he did some typing. I know that was part of his routine. Beyond that, I know that if he was writing, let's say *Empire as a Way of Life* or something, the process of revision, once he had a manuscript completed, you know I tend to go back through chapters individually, and then the whole manuscript, but that's of course, I'm using computers. Bill never graduated to using computers, but he was a fast typist, and pretty error free, if you look at his typescripts, they're usually pretty good.

**CP:** So those three days on the coast were generally pretty generally dedicated to reading and writing then?

**BR:** I would say yes, and some of it late night. He tended to work at night, and that's a habit he developed probably when he taught at the U of O and certainly when he was in Madison.

**CP:** Yeah, I recall reading that was part of the circumstance of basically having to raise kids.

**BR:** Yeah, he had a houseful of children, you know, two of Corrine's and he and Corrine had three children of their own.

**CP:** At some point he seemed to have resented having to do that, but maybe it became more familiar.

**BR:** Yeah, I don't know. I think he worked, I mean he was so incredibly productive then. In addition to turning out forty-two Ph.D.'s in eleven years, can you imagine that? Now some of them were still finishing up, obviously, when he was here, and I don't know when. He told me at one point that he had placed his last candidate in a job, and it might have been the late '70s and it might have been Peggy Morley, or Henry Berger, I can't remember whom.

**CP:** We talked a little bit about *Tragedy* and *Contours* being hugely influential books. There is sort of a sense that his scholarship kind of declined a little bit in terms of its quality during his OSU days. Will you comment on that?

**BR:** Well, he said he would never write another book, and actually my wife and I called him on it when he published *Empire as a Way of Life* - and actually *America Confronts a Revolutionary World*, he even made that comment before that book - but he didn't call those books. He called those 'extended essays.' So there was a difference. You could call *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* an extended essay, whereas, like his first book *Russian Relations* or *Roots of the Modern American Empire* which were detailed, annotated, documented, books. Maybe he called those books. I don't know. But I would say I was never enamored by *America Confronts a Revolutionary World* but *Empire as a Way of Life* is an incredible piece of writing. And I was telling my friend Sunday, Bill Lang, a historian who was visiting our home, that *Empire as a Way of Life* - I don't know how many languages it's been translated into. You probably know. Japanese, Chinese, Italian, German, French... ad infinitum. I mean, it's a testimony to the influence of his career, of his body of work, and I think as a capsule - a reading of Paul Buhle kind of reminded me of this - is how important that book is. And after reading Paul's book, I want to go back and read *Empire*.

[0:40:15]

**CP:** That's part of his sort of growing preoccupation with the idea of community. It seems like that was one of the really defining themes of his whole scholarship.

**BR:** A lot of people have asked me about that and, in fact, because I was Bill's good friend for so many years, that I knew more than the snippets that he published here or there about community. Community and democracy - with a small 'd.' And pretty much everything is in his writing. There is nothing hidden anywhere else. It's kind of an exploration of ideas, I think, that he was interested in.

**CP:** I've wondered to what extent Waldport played in the development of this.

**BR:** Oh, it all has its roots in Atlantic, Iowa, which I stopped in on a Sunday morning, when I was traveling from east to west - I think I was back east and coming west - and had breakfast. It's like a lot of other small Iowa towns. You drive in and find a diner, you go in on a Sunday morning and everyone is there for breakfast, and I don't remember much about it.

**CP:** Did he ever reflect on Atlantic around you?

**BR:** Oh yes. And his grandparents. And it's funny, Paul makes more of Mildred, I think, then Maud, his grandmother. But Maud and his grandfather, what's his name.. Tossie Appleman?

**CP:** Porter?

**BR:** Porter! Porter Ickler Appleman. They were a real presence in his life. And you know, Paul makes more of a psychological play on the boy who grew up without a father or something, but Porter was a pretty pronounced presence in his life. His grandparents were very important. And he was very proud of his mother, of course. I have one other thing I want to say about his upbringing in Atlantic, and that is that he makes mention of 1927, so Bill would have been 6 years old, maybe 7 years old when Charles Lindbergh flew over Atlantic, and supposedly at his father's - and this may be an apocryphal story - Bill remembers seeing the plane, the dipping of the wing, and so forth. I've always wondered about that; I mean, Bill was a good story teller. Very good story teller. So I wonder if this was something fashionable that he remembers from his childhood and so on and so forth. I tend to have those same romantic notions myself about my own childhood.

**CP:** I think we have a scrapbook, actually, where some of that is documented.

**BR:** Is that right? Well then it's not an apocryphal story.

**CP:** I'm interested to know more about his teaching style.

**BR:** It was eclectic, Socratic. He wanted to engage students in dialogue. I would say it probably worked greatly for sophisticated - for older students. Not sophisticated, but inquiring minds. I know because I tried it myself and it worked one term, then I tried it with a larger class and had to give it up and went back to lecturing. And I would have a lecture format, a framework of discussion in mind, but I don't know. Bill, he was a master at that. And I think that he would lecture from a general outline. He would just have three pages of notes in his beautiful penmanship, but they were profound.

[0:45:04]

When I was away at a conference one time, he met with a night class that I taught, and he left me with - it was a colonial history class and it was very early Fall term - and he left me with a copy of the notes, and they're in my papers in your collection. And they were unbelievable. I mean, the world view of what the coming of Europeans to the American continent did, and I used to do it in more immediate ways. Bill's however was framed into how you impose on a people new languages, new frames of reference, new world views, and so forth. I'd have to go back and look at it. But I even put that in one of my books, and cited him. It's very profound.

**CP:** So he came to this university without a graduate program to speak of. Do you have any sense of frustration that rose out of any of that?

**BR:** No. Despite what Paul Buhle said, one of his reasons for coming here was to get away from training graduate students, because he had enough of training graduate students. He wanted to settle in a place where he didn't have to shovel snow in the winter. And he wanted to be close to the ocean. People have asked me about this at conferences when they first learn that I taught at Oregon State and Bill Williams was here. 'Why does he want to come there?' And I would repeat these three reasons, and I have never heard him say anything other than that. He told that to interviewers, he would tell it to Karla and me when he had a couple of bourbons, and he never said anything else.

**CP:** How about the quality of the students at a land grant institution with undergraduate students in liberal arts?

**BR:** Well, I think there was some sense of frustration with that, obviously. But he would be very proud of some of the papers his students did here, I know that, from time to time.

**CP:** My impression is that he was a fairly demanding teacher, expected a lot of his students.

**BR:** I'm not sure that he was all that rigorous of a grader. I can't - I was less interested in those kinds of things.

**CP:** You mentioned he didn't do a lot of advising.

**BR:** It's hard to say. We all shared advising, and usually they were students from our own classes, so we would have advisees assigned that way. I had huge classes. I know in the '70s I was teaching Indian history, and I was, in fact in retrospect, overburdened with students and I had to use different kinds of rouses to go through grading exams and so forth. Just one more question.

**CP:** I'm interested in knowing, as time moved on, what sort of role did he assume within the department. He was never the head of the department, and you mentioned that there was some resistance initially when he was hired. Did that resistance disappear, or did he become kind of a mentor to some of the junior faculty?

**BR:** Well, I know some of the resentment early on, when I was hired, jealousy, accusations, that Williams was trying to develop a department full of radical young people, and so forth. And part of it was focused on me, and part of it was focused on a young French historian that the department hired to teach African history and French history. And this fellow was very bright but very flawed, and he never got tenure. I think by the time this fellow was denied tenure, and that was by '76 or so, he was gone, that had fallen by the wayside, but that was very prevalent at first. I need to go out and plug my meter.

[0:50:21]

**CP:** Okay, go ahead.

**BR:** One of the best pieces I thought, that appeared in northwest newspapers, and I don't know the exact date, was a piece that Foster Church published in the Sunday *Oregonian* in about 1983-84. I don't know when the exact year was. I know I clipped a copy of that and I'm sure you have it, but the best part of that, I think, is the photograph of Bill on the back deck of his home, looking south along the coast. It's a great photograph. It's on the back of Paul's book too.

**CP:** So, just continuing on, is there anything more to talk about in terms of the role he assumed in the department over time?

**BR:** No, except that the overweening jealousy thing that I mentioned just before we took the break was something that bothered me. And part of it had to do with those of us who were really interested in building a department in which people published, and taught, and engaged in the profession - went to professional meetings, gave papers, and so on and so forth - and those people who didn't. And I think some of that went away by the time of Bill's retirement in 1985, but there were still sharp divisions in the department. And between what kind of was the quasi-progressive Williams faction and those opposed. And it was pretty pronounced. And it lasted until I served one year as department Chair, and I did nothing brilliant, but there were four people in the department who came to me - and I was an interim appointment - at different times right after I was named Acting Chair, and expressed real concern about the direction of the department. And what I told them was I was a democrat with a lower-case d, and that I had no intention of making end runs around people or pushing any special direction in the department, or ideological agendas. And by that time the department was changing a lot. There was a cadre of people who had published books - you had to have a book to get tenure and so forth - and by the time I was through with my year, three of those four people came to me and told me what a good job I was doing. And I wasn't doing anything brilliant, we were just a different department then. Those kinds of factions went away. But that was part of the hangover from Bill's presence here. He was President of the Organization of American Historians in 1981.

**CP:** How about his presence in the university? Was he regarded to be something of a star or a celebrity, or...

**BR:** Oh yes. People knew who he was. And Presidents knew who he was. He actually got along well with John Byrne. You should interview John because Bill assumed, with good reason, that he could speak to John Byrne as an equal. And there weren't many faculty who presumed they could speak to the President of the university as an equal. Bill did. Bill also played a great role, and you'd have to look into the records of the Center of the Humanities, in getting the Center a major endowment, and it became part of the university... Not the foundation, what's the development?

[0:55:07]

**CP:** OSU Foundation.

**BR:** OSU Foundation. They had four major objectives, and one was the Center of the Humanities, and Bill was a huge player in that. And obviously because of his prestige and stature in the profession, he lent his voice to that, and I'm sure that the Center, and I know Peter Copek was always very thankful to Bill for that.

**CP:** Was the Center something that he and Peter and others sort of envisioned and brought into play?

**BR:** No, it was Peter's idea.

**CP:** So Williams was enlisted?

**BR:** Williams was enlisted. Yeah, Bill was not a player. It began as the Humanities Development Office over in Moreland Hall, and it kind of morphed beyond there. And then when it became a full blown Center for the Humanities, that's when Bill was brought in as a good friend of Peter's, along with a few other people, and he was a major force in how that worked out.

**CP:** We talked about the social setting of the pool table. At larger kinds of gatherings, professional gatherings perhaps, was he the sort of person who enjoyed commanding the room or did he--

**BR:** No.

**CP:** No?

**BR:** No.

**CP:** Can you talk a little bit more about how he sort of operated in that sort of situation?

**BR:** Well, in department meetings?

**CP:** No, in a professional gathering of sorts.

**BR:** People liked to talk to him. I've only been around him at professional meetings when he was with his former graduate students, who were - they were friends. They were former graduate students. There was Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, Ed Crapol, and others. They were just dear friends. He liked them, they liked him, and when they came here to give talks, Bill would introduce Lloyd or Walt LaFeber as someone he knew when he first started teaching at the University of Wisconsin, and he said 'It's like your students are smarter than you are,' or something. He paid them great compliments. I remember my first social occasion, Karla was with me. It was when Bill - the Organization of American Historians was meeting in San Francisco, and we were at the Hyatt Regency down on the waterfront, and it was late in the afternoon, cocktail hour, and kind of a rotating bar at the top that you sat at and you would see the Bay Area skyline all around. Karla and I were there with Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, I don't think Ed Crapol was there, I don't remember Gerald McCauley being there, but there were a couple of other people from the Organization of American Historians. And yeah, it was a fun gathering, and Lloyd Gardner was probably the most garrulous of the group, because Lloyd always had this glint in his eye about some devilish story, and he was a better story teller in some ways than Bill. Bill was just part of the crowd.

**CP:** We've mentioned his presence in the Organization of American Historians. He was very proud of that, wasn't he?

**BR:** Yes he was. It was recognition long deferred. As Paul Buhle says, Eugene Genovese had been President three years prior to Bill, and it's funny, people who have controversial, or quasi-radical positions become presidents of major organizations long after the fact. I just learned in my own field of Western American history, Donald Worster is the forthcoming President of the Western History Association, and he's retiring. And Don, should have been president in the early 1980s, when he was publishing good books. He's published good books ever since, but he's been a person who's been a bit edgy, maybe not as much as Williams, but he's finally going to be President. And he knew Bill. He spent time in his house.

[1:00:02]

**CP:** And this was not an honorific for Williams. He had an agenda - he was trying to...

**BR:** Yes he did. And he worked very hard in his year as President, and started I think something that Gerda Lerner, who followed Bill as president, gave him a lot of credit for, his initiatives. Although they didn't bear fruit, especially with the National Endowment for Humanities, he got nowhere. He appealed to several historians who made thousands of dollars writing textbooks. And he had ten or fifteen of them in mind, and he wanted each one of them to donate a thousand dollars to create this, and he put five grand in himself to do this, to no avail.

**CP:** Along the lines of the sort of deferred honors that we mentioned with the OAH, he also only received one honorary doctorate in his career, from a historically black college in Chicago.

**BR:** Yeah, Paul makes mention of that. My answer is, so what?

**CP:** I mean, did he ever...

**BR:** No. When he did get the honorary doctorate at the Columbia College or something, in Chicago, his address had to do with Duke Ellington. I remember that. I remember reading the talk. He would give Karla and me copies of the talks.

**CP:** He listened to jazz, correct?

**BR:** Oh yes. Loved jazz. Miles Davis.

**CP:** That was his favorite?

**BR:** Pretty close. Dizzy Gillespie... Who did I just mention?

**CP:** Miles Davis.

**BR:** No, before that.

**CP:** Duke Ellington.

**BR:** Yes, Duke Ellington. Yeah, they were kind of classic jazz. And I know when we would go to the coast he'd invariably have Miles Davis on his stereo.

**CP:** What were some of his other hobbies? I know he liked to take photographs.

**BR:** He fished. In the ocean. I went fishing with him once. We didn't catch anything. We went down on the rocks in Yachats, and I had to stop in a store when coming through Waldport to get some bait, and then I drove up to Bill's place and then we drove south to Yachats. But yeah, he liked to fish.

He loved - we have some of his photography in our house, and his photography goes back, evidently, to his childhood, and we have - I don't think you have a copy - a photograph he took when he was a student in Annapolis, and it is striking. It's so damn creative. He climbed up on a transom over one of the major public buildings at the Naval Academy on a Sunday, and the sunlight is shining through the door, and people who walk through, when they're approaching, cast shadows. And there was a woman, evidently, approaching the door, and he captured her shadow from up high, over the transom, and we have it framed in our house, and it's - what do you call it? - maybe a marble inlaid floor. Black and white. And it's a black and white photograph. And I imagine it may be black and white in real life. And then he would take close-ups of items along the coast, like a rusty hinge somewhere really close to the water, or gnarly wood that had been weathered and so forth, and we have several of those. Those were wedding gifts. And he had photographic exhibits too. I know Paul mentions when the new bridge was being built in Waldport across the Alsea, that's the only photographic exhibit that I know he did. He may have done others, but that was one of his avocations. Paul mentions that he went back to building model airplanes again in his later years, after he retired.

[1:04:57]

**CP:** There's--

**BR:** Do you have any of those here?

**CP:** The photographs?

**BR:** No, the photographs or the model airplanes?

**CP:** None of the airplanes, no.

**BR:** Huh. I wonder what happened to them. Ward, his son Ward, may have them. He'd be a good person to interview.

**CP:** Sure. There's several references in the biography to - he drank a lot.

**BR:** Mmhhh. No, that's well known. And I don't think Wendy liked that in the biography. She didn't like the references to womanizing. I know this, she was visiting us—staying with us actually—when we lived in Philomath, and my only response to Wendy was that I had been with Bill in thick and thin, when he was drunk, sober, - well, he never was really drunk - or points in between. And he never, ever, said anything negative about Wendy. I had to tell her that. And I remember I had tears in my eyes and I said, 'Wendy, you have to know this.'

And he also could recover dramatically. And I know on the eve he introduced Carl Degler as the President of the Organization of American Historians, and it's a very prominent historian, and I can't think of his name right at the moment - in 1981, when we were at the Hyatt Regency. Karla and I sat in a lounge with Bill that afternoon and Bill had, he might have had a drink or two before, then he had another one with us, and boy he was... And I said 'Hey Bill, you know, you have to introduce Degler at 8 o'clock for his presidential address.' And he said 'Okay.' So he goes to his room and he naps, and we saw him at the dinner, I think, and it was like he had never had a drink.

**CP:** I'm really interested in his newspaper column.

**BR:** They were great! Yeah, I loved them. I saved a lot of them, but I'm sure I missed several. I used to clip them and put them in a file.

**CP:** It seems like such an unusual thing for a historian to do on such a regular basis. And the perspective he was sharing in the newspaper was pretty unusual for the newspaper as well.

**BR:** Yes. It started with the *Statesman Journal* because he knew one of the executives in the *Statesman Journal*, and I can't remember whom... Ed Bassett, and they liked each other. And that's how it started. And it got so, he used to tell me about this, the word limits, and how you take an idea and develop an essay and get it down to, I don't know, 700 words or whatever it is. And he became very good at it. Then there was a change in command in the *Statesman Journal*, and then he migrated to the *Oregonian*, and he did that, the *Oregonian*, for a little while. And I think he did that, in part, through David Sarasohn, who was in his early period with the *Oregonian*. And then, they killed a piece that he wrote. And they paid him, you know, the kill fee. Then never again.

**CP:** That was it?

**BR:** That was it.

**CP:** That's a real testament.

**BR:** He took that as a real affront.

**CP:** Right. The column, I think, is a real testament to the amount of ideas that he had and needed to share, and the sort of medium that he could--

**BR:** And they're very eclectic too.

**CP:** Yeah. Well, we talked about a lot of this. I guess I'm interested in learning about time spent with Wendy, and sort of recollections of visits to Waldport.

[1:09:46]

**BR:** On our collective visits to Waldport we always had a lot of fun. Invariably we would go out to dinner, occasionally with friends, or we would go there and they would have friends over, and the people I remember best were a couple named Barbara and Rob Davidson, and they were a lot of fun. Rob was quite a bit older than Barbara and he passed on eventually, and I saw Barbara just a couple of years ago, and she's since remarried and she was a very good friend of Wendy's. But Bill liked both of them. And he liked Barbara, I know, immensely. And they were fun people. Occasionally they would have people from the OSU community over, just a handful. One of them was a fellow who retired in engineering, David Bella.

**CP:** Oh yeah.

**BR:** Yeah. You might want to interview him. David's kind of an iconoclast in his own right. He'll talk your ear off. That's where we met Dave. Dave was a really young professor. Bill thought a lot of him. He liked people who had good ideas, and prided himself in that. Dave was over there one time, and I can't remember anyone from the department - oh, a fellow named Jim Kohl who was here as a visiting professor. Jim was a good friend of Bill's. But Jim was kind of crazy. I mean, Bill would say that, and Jim would admit that himself. He was undisciplined. Bill McMechan, he's the fellow who

didn't get tenure who came from Wisconsin, and was actually Harvey Goldberg's student. A radical guy, and Bill had all kinds of problems with booze, primarily, and I think he couldn't finish his... he finished his dissertation, but couldn't get anything published. And that was his own failing. And I was good friends with them both. And Bill McMechan too.

**CP:** So the gatherings were usually dinner conversation?

**BR:** Yeah, or just snack food, and drinks, and talking about music for a couple of hours.

**CP:** Did you play cards?

**BR:** Bill and Wendy did, yeah. Bridge. Karla and I never played bridge. We were probably, of people from the valley, over there more often than anyone else. And on special occasions, like Wendy's birthday, we would go to Yachats for dinner. One time we went over, I think, during the Christmas/New Year's holiday, and Carla and I stayed - our kids were getting a little bit older by then so we left them in a motel - and went into Yachats for dinner with Bill and Wendy. And then we would call them every hour to make sure they were, the kids were, okay. By then they were 7, 8 years old or so.

**CP:** Talk a little bit more about Wendy.

**BR:** Well, she was her own person and very, very bright and very hard working. She loved to garden. Bill built her a little green house, plastic, where she could do pots and so forth. She also played the piano, and she worked in a gift shop up in Newport that's still operating, and I can't remember the name. If my wife were here she would remember. She was a very hard working woman and very bright. Very political. And I think that's where their friendship certainly materialized, because of Bill's politics, and Wendy, a Brit, who came to Corvallis via British Columbia, was kind of keen on somebody who had politics that she appreciated.

**CP:** So his scholarship was something that they would discuss?

[1:15:06]

**BR:** I'm sure. And she read voraciously. I don't think she ever edited anything that Bill wrote. He might have, when he wrote public talks, he might just have her read it to try it out on her to see if there was something he had gone astray on. Yeah, Karla and Wendy were very good friends, and we remain good friends to this day.

**CP:** Well, we've talked about his love of the sea a little bit, but I don't know if there is anything more to share there. I'm interested too in the maritime history class that he developed.

**BR:** The two were one. Just to give you a quick answer. The maritime history class actually originated, I think, in part through the Center for Humanities. I know there were several of us—I wrote a course that I taught on community through the Center for Humanities. Bill did the maritime course. And I think there were some others. I can't remember the details but we got some stipend or something for doing that. It wasn't much, but... And that was kind of an avocation for Bill, you know, touring off and part of his affection for the sea and maritime history and so forth, to do something like that. He got interested, of course, in the early Chinese navy and famous, I don't know if it was the eleventh or twelfth century, a famous Chinese who—I saw his name in Bill's book the other day, but I can't remember his last name—decided, the Chinese had gone out on the high seas and came back and scuttled the navy, and Bill used that as a metaphor for no empire, which I love. And he wrote a paper, having to do with something to that effect, and he was going to read it at the Pacific Coast Branch meeting of the American Historical Association in Honolulu in 1986, and I was there presenting a paper on another panel, and Bill, something happened to him and he couldn't make the trip.

**CP:** 1986.

**BR:** 1986. And it could have been another meeting with the PCB. It was about that time. It was '86, or '87, '88. Maybe somewhere else. But anyway, he couldn't make the trip, and I read his paper. And I had a lot of fun doing it because there were a couple of people on the panel - a commenter was a person whose area of expertise was Chinese history, and here Bill's venturing in with this paper talking about a Chinese commander and so forth, and I had to add a bit of humor to it, and I told them why Bill couldn't be there and I said I refuse to defend this paper, because I know nothing about the subject, or something like that. Anyway, it was received very well, including the commenter, and somebody else paid

very nice compliments about the paper, because nobody else in American history was thinking in these venues unless they were specialists in Chinese history or anything, and Bill had the guts to venture out.

**CP:** It's interesting to me that he taught this class at a community college.

**BR:** Yeah. He taught it here too.

**CP:** Right.

**BR:** Yeah. And then he taught it again at the Coast Community College for a while. I don't know how successful that was.

**CP:** Well, of course, his health declined and he died. I don't know to what extent we need to reflect on that. Are there any thoughts or memories that you would like to share?

[1:19:28]

**BR:** No, I know the week before he died, the cancer metastasized, and he had a stroke because he came walking down the hallway and he was gesturing to Wendy, he couldn't speak or anything. And within five days he was dead. Karla and I went over and saw him in the hospital, but he was - David Cleaver was a famous physician in Corvallis, was a good friend of Bill's, and David was there when we were there, and he explained. He said he's semi-comatose, or something, his eyes could open a little bit but he wasn't corresponding or anything, and he was under morphine then and he was on the way out. Wendy, of course, had worked in hospitals a lot of her life, and she knew the end was near. I felt bad. I know I told Wendy, because I was busy with my own work, and I enjoyed going over to talk to Bill, and I would just drive over and have coffee with him, or something like that, and I felt badly because I hadn't been over for a month. And she put my soul to rest, she said it was neither here nor there.

**CP:** What was the local reaction? How was he memorialized?

**BR:** Well, this is something I learned, and I learned this from Ed Crapol. I always thought that Bill and Wendy went to the Episcopal Church, because of Wendy's influence, and I was totally wrong. That was Bill's decision to go to the Episcopal Church. And I don't know if he helped with the sacraments or something, I don't know, but Wendy went just to accompany him. Wendy is a radical Quaker. Her sister, her husband Alan - Wendy's brother-in-law Alan - they're in the truest radical Quaker tradition in England. And it was Bill, Ed Crapol told me this, so I said 'You mean Bill is high church? Not Wendy?' And he said yes. So Ed Crapol is the guy you should talk to about that. And that was striking to me. And I think, and I was reading between the lines in what Paul said, his kind of sense for order and maybe hierarchy later in his life maybe attracted him to the Episcopal Church. And I don't know what his church bringing was, it wasn't Episcopalian I don't think, in Atlantic, but I do remember that.

**CP:** That's interesting. Well, is there anything else we should touch on? Anything we missed?

**BR:** No. Oh, I do have one final thing. Bill's passing is something akin to my mother's passing. She was killed in an automobile accident in 1972, right after she had retired as a factory worker. And obviously I had an immediate period of grieving, but when I went back east, going through a wake - my father was Catholic but my mother wasn't. My father wasn't a practicing Catholic, but he just thought that Irish people who die need wakes, so we had this damned wake. And I met my mother's friends from the factory who came in by the droves and I never shed a tear, and it was nice to meet all these people. And Bill's passing is sort of like my mother's because my mother has a living presence in my life. Bill has a living presence in my life. I mean I remember him as if the conversations happened yesterday and that's healthy.

**CP:** Sure. Well, thank you for sharing.

**BR:** You're welcome.

[1:24:20]