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Dennis Camp Memoir

Camp, Dennis

Interview and memoir

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UIS Alumni Sage Society

Camp, former English professor at Sangamon State University, discusses his many years of service at the university. He was hired by George Cohen as part of what was intended to be a diverse faculty at SSU when it first opened, taught classes at the downtown locations because the campus was not complete, and looked forward to teaching only junior and senior students at the new upper-level only university.

Interview by Beverly Scobell, 2010

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Narrator: Dennis Camp
Date: May 20, 2010
Place: Springfield, Illinois
Interviewer: Beverly Scobell

Q. I'll try putting this right in front of you.

A. All righty; I'll speak up.

Q. Your answers are more important than my questions and maybe we'll stop after the first question and make sure we're getting it on one or the other.

A. Right.

Q. Ok. I'm speaking today with Professor Dennis Camp, former faculty of SSU/UIS. What college had you attended and what degrees had you received?

A. Ok, I was in a rut. I had an English BA from Hope College in Holland Michigan, an English MA from Rutgers University, and an English PhD from the University of Wisconsin.

Q. What years?

A. Well. Hope College was 1959, Rutgers was 1961, and the University of Wisconsin was 1969.

Q. Where were you working when you first learned about SSU/UIS?

A. Well I thought I was in the Garden of Eden. I had just been hired at Whitewater State University at Wisconsin. I had my first home. I had my PhD in hand, and I had been hired to teach the English romantics and all I could think of was years of Wordsworth and Blake and Coleridge and Shelley. And after three or four months, the Garden of Eden turned into hell.

The student demonstrators against the Vietnam War, this was 1969 now, burned down the main building on the campus, tried to burn down a second building. And it's rather sobering when the Garden of Eden is being patrolled by Wisconsin Guardsmen with big guns. That's when I heard a rumor that they were going to start a teaching university in Springfield, Illinois.

I went to all the usual sources; I couldn't find anything about it. I finally just went home and I picked up the telephone and I called a telephone operator in Springfield. And sure enough, she knew there was going to be a university. She put me through and the first Vice President of the university picked up the phone.

I told him what I wanted and his initial remark was, "Why should I hire you? You guys are swinging in the trees." So it was a challenging beginning. And because a lot of people wouldn't even know who the first Vice President of Sangamon State University was; his name was

George Cohen. And the reason that a lot of people don't know is that Bob Spencer, the President, fired him before the university opened its doors.

Q. So he wasn't around very long.

A. And when that happened, because George hired a lot of us. When that happened, I thought, "Oh Lord, I've got from the frying pan to the fire." You know I'm trying to get away from Whitewater right into the middle of a mess in Springfield, Illinois. Well George's key was he wanted to hire a diverse faculty, and boy did he succeed. It was a lot of diversity, the original university faculty so I told people several times that I was one of the odd ones because I had short hair.

Q. Who were some of your... some of the other teachers you started with then?

A. Well in English my favorite from of all time actually, Judy Everson and her husband David. And of course we had on the original faculty people like Richard Damashek who's not with us anymore. I don't mean... he didn't die. He just left for a different university.

Jackie Jackson, who is still with us, trying to remember a couple of the other original ones very quickly, we had Norman Hinton and Mike Lennon and Rich Shereikis, but they weren't part of the original faculty. I think one of the ironies was that Rich Damashek had actually been one of my students when I was a graduate assistant at Rutgers.

Q. Oh, really?

A. And he remembered me but I had a hundred or so students, to grade papers. Unfortunately it seemed like I took him to task for one of his papers because he wasn't real happy about sharing a campus with me, but I just didn't remember.

Q. That is funny.

A. I was original, yes.

Q. I remember the name but I know I didn't ever have him for a class. Now he may have been gone before I started classes.

A. He probably... four to five years is about all you can get without getting tenure, and he wasn't given tenure so he had to leave. So the latest he probably could have been there would have been 1975, probably more likely 1974.

Q. Yeah and I didn't take first classes until 1982.

A. Well he would have been long gone.

Q. Well the name, I remember the names. He was still around there somewhere.

A. Well you want to see if we captured any of this?

Q. Let's see if we did. First we have to stop that.

A. I don't know how much we talked about.

Q. Oh, this is great.

End of Interview Session 1

Begin Interview Session 2

A. So well ok, that one is working. This one still has a red light, so I think we're ok. You may have already answered this, but this is a great question. Was the original reaction one of enthusiasm or suspicion?

Q. Well, it was enthusiasm for sure because first of all, I was an English professor. I wouldn't have to grade papers freshman papers. We were an upper division school so juniors and seniors and graduate students. The freedom of being able to teach what I wanted to teach was even better than Whitewater where I was basically to teach the romantics. But the enthusiasm got darkened just a little bit when George got fired.

I have no idea what happened but obviously it was a conflict of some sort between Bob Spencer and George Cohen. And I really don't know what happened to George Cohen, but I liked that guy because he was not scared of somebody who was different. In fact, he wanted people who were different. So he put together a fairly interesting, I think might be the right word, crew for that first faculty.

A. And this was the entire faculty for over all disciplines or just the English faculty?

Q. Oh no, George would have been involved probably in hiring of almost all of the... I think there were forty-five in the original faculty. I imagine he didn't hire all of them, but I'm sure he hired a fair number of them.

A. He is somebody that should be remembered because a lot of those original faculty were still there when I came on board, and I think students today are not getting that same education. That's my own little bias.

Q. Well right at the beginning of the university, which was actually down at the Methodist Church in downtown because the campus wasn't ready yet, so we were teaching our classes out at the Methodist Church. Well one of the Board of Higher Education addressed us in some

sort of meeting and I'll never forget his message. "If you're going to be innovative, do it now because the longer you continue as an institution, the less innovative you'll be." And he was absolutely right.

A. Absolutely right. And I think you... well you might want to speak to this some more. Recount your experiences and reactions upon visiting for interviews.

Q. Well, the one interesting thing was and this is 1970 now, Rosemarie Roach who was one our first... kind of the equivalent of Dean of women students. She was assigned to take me to lunch as a visiting candidate. And so we went to the Sangamo Club in downtown Springfield, and we sat in the balcony because women were not allowed on the main floor of the Sangamo Club in 1970. So that I remember vividly, and I know that's all changed and changed for the better.

But I enjoyed the interview with George; I liked to be challenged and George was a challenger. Probably is what happened between him and Bob Spencer.

Q. More than likely, yeah. And I think you just answered this. When was this, whom did you meet, and what did you see?

A. Basically you saw the eighth floor of the Myers Building. Little did I know that I was at that point above where Abraham Lincoln had met Joshua Speed in his store, but there's a placard down there now. I didn't know much about Abraham Lincoln, and I didn't know much about Vachel Lindsay. But I learned a lot after I moved to Springfield.

Q. So there was nothing out on campus at that time?

A. They probably were building at that time, this would have been pretty early in the summer, but they never even did take me out there that I remember. Now remember, I already warned you that this was over forty years ago.

Now my fist memory of the campus as... this is before now we opened the buildings, before we were allowed to be out there, my parents visited and I took them out there. And I remember my father's comment. He looked around and he saw these temporary buildings and he said, "They've ruined a perfectly good corn field." Which in a sense was right because it had been a farm.

Q. That's funny. I used to work in one of those temporary buildings.

A. Well, those temporary buildings were to be torn down in 1978; they were to last eight years. And this is what? 2010?

Q. Right. So going on the 40th anniversary...

A. Exactly.

Q. They have remodeled; I no longer work where I can see the sky. There was a point at which we could see the sky.

A. Are you still over in what used to be the chemistry building?

Q. Yeah, yeah, it used to be old K10.

A. K, do they still call them by that?

Q. No, now it's the Human Resources Building. They didn't name it the Illinois Issues Building for some reason. How did the university seem to compare with colleges you had known?

A. Well, we had a lot more freedom. The initial faculty were scattered everywhere. I had Stu Anderson next to me on one side and he, of course, was an administration, educational administration. And I can't remember who my neighbor was on the other side, but everywhere you were before, English faculty basically hung around with English faculty. But this was quite a mixture.

I loved the challenge of putting in classes that I was responsible for developing rather than having a catalog that would designate a course. And frankly I used the opportunity of the early years as a learning experience. If I wanted to learn about eighteenth century English literature, I put a course in – not because I was a total expert in the field but because I wanted to learn with the students. And I really think that helped the teaching, too.

Q. Oh, I would imagine.

A. I do have to tell you though and I'm going to brag about this a little bit, I prepared hours for my classes. I was scared to death a student might ask me a question I couldn't answer. I had had one embarrassing experience at Hope College. I was to teach an Aristophanes' play and I thought I knew this play really well, so I didn't reread it before. It was a disaster. I never let that happen again, ever.

Q. I know what you mean. At that time, what was your understanding of the university's approach to learning and teaching? How did you react to that approach?

A. Well, it was the thing that attracted me to the university; the emphasis was on teaching. And you were evaluated by your students in a pretty rigorous fashion. And as I said earlier, I liked to be challenged and I found that something that the students could have input.

And I liked that a lot, but again I just liked the freedom of the thing. People think freedom is very relaxing; it's quite the reverse. It's a very challenging environment and that's what I enjoyed.

Q. What characteristics and practices most and least appealed to you at that time?

A. Well what appealed to me least was the fact that all the faculty felt that they needed to make all the decisions right down to arm chairs or not. There were some things that... you know we would have meetings that would last for hours and they would be about the little things like, what kind of furniture do you want in your classroom?

I picked this one because this is one of the funnier ones. I spent three or four hours and listening to all of my colleagues talking about this. We walked out and there was a huge eighteen-wheeler unloading tablet desks. That's like, you know, somebody forgot to tell us that the decision had already been made. So that's probably what I remember with the least affection is all this bickering and debating about a lot of stuff that I just didn't think very important at all.

What was really great about it was people like Judy Everson and they were so bright and they were fun to interact with. Norman Hinton had probably read everything ever written in the English language. Mike Lennon came along and Norman Mailer came alive. I really enjoyed that a lot.

Q. What factor or factors persuaded you to accept the job offer?

A. Well, for one thing I got a two thousand dollar pay raise.

Q. That always helps.

A. And for another thing I knew it was probably and I knew it would have been unlikely to get tenure at the Whitewater institution. It had just collapsed. Chaos is what that was, and I had a young daughter and a young son and I didn't want to bring them up in this kind of environment.

I still remember driving home from my first interview here realizing that I had been hired, not knowing cause it was a new school what was going to happen. Didn't help when George got fired, that kind of reinforced some of the uncertainty. But it was an exciting time. I really looked forward to coming down here. I knew that I was going to be able to accomplish something.

Q. Yeah, brand new open book.

A. Right, and a lot of people don't know this, but I think one of reasons that George decided to hire me was that when I graduated from the University of Wisconsin, I hadn't finished the thesis yet so I didn't have the PhD in my hand.

But in 1966, they wanted to start a new university in Janesville, Wisconsin. It was going to be a... it's not a community college; they are two year campuses that are associated with the university in Madison. So essentially it's the University of Wisconsin Madison brought down to

the university to Janesville, Wisconsin. And they asked me if I would chair the English Department there.

So I have actually been on the ground floor of two universities and that I think I spent three years at Janesville. And I think that is probably one of the reasons that George decided to hire me. I had some experience at putting a university together from the ground up.

Q. Yeah. Years at SSU and UIS, what were your initial impressions of one, the campus; two, the community; three, your faculty colleagues; four, the students; and five, the administrators?

A. Wow.

Q. First the campus.

A. Ok. I'm pretty easygoing and the temporary buildings and stuff like that did not, that didn't bother me at all. I know maybe some, but that was not a problem. In fact, I taught downtown at the Leland Hotel when we had a campus down there. As I said, we taught our first classes at the Methodist Church on Capitol Avenue, didn't matter to me. What's number two?

Q. The community.

A. Oh, I like Springfield. First of all, I try to know something about the communities that I've lived in and wow if you care about history and literature, this is a terrific community. So I was very pleased to have a chance to, my children to grow up here. I was pleased to have a chance to learn about the history of it.

Lincoln helped, of course. Vachel I got started on in 1972, and started working at the home on a volunteer basis with Elizabeth Graham who is part of your oral history. You've got an interview with her, so I... and I still do, I volunteer at the museum. I'm newly elected President of the Vachel Lindsay Association, which I had had thirty years ago.

Q. I thought surely at some other point you had been president of that. So thirty years ago you had been president and now again?

A. Right, exactly.

Q. Let's see.

A. Number three.

Q. Your faculty colleagues; we've talked about that a little bit.

A. Yeah, I liked my faculty colleagues a lot. But the only problem that I mentioned was this continual emphasis on the little things. And that would lead to hours of bickering and

meetings. I thought they were a waste. I wanted to get into learning experiences. I didn't want to be arguing about little things.

Q. Right and it's a little surprising that any of the other faculty would. Was there someone in particular who just kept...

A. Oh, there were several that loved to hear themselves talk.

Q. Not English faculty surely?

A. No, some of them were not English faculty. There were others, too. I'm not going to name any names.

Q. Ok. Now that might be fun.

A. Yeah, right.

Q. The students.

A. Well, the average age of our student body was over thirty in the early years of the university. You really could not have asked for a better group of people to try to interact with to teach. These were people who really wanted to learn, and these were people who really challenged you, too. I know there were occasions when I rubbed a student the wrong way, but overall I really enjoyed the student body.

As the body of students got a little younger and we got more towards this sort of attitude of, "I just want my A, and I don't want to earn it." Then I started having trouble with some of these students because I don't believe in giving away something for nothing. And they had to work if they were going to earn their grade. And if they didn't get the grade that they felt they wanted, I have to say it's probably because they didn't deserve it. I was challenging.

Q. I remember and I loved you for it; and then the administrators.

A. Oh, most of them were just fine. Bob Spencer was very special – out of the University of Chicago, Chicago ideas. I really liked Bob. We probably rubbed him the wrong way a couple of times, but we were a bit "waggish." I don't know if anybody has told you this story, but it was probably the second year. The Spencer's lived right in the middle of those temporary buildings at that white home there.

Somebody put up posters around the temporary campus, "Edith for President." Edith was Bob's wife, and we all loved Edith. I don't know who did it; it wasn't me. But that got under Bob's skin. He was a little crusty when it came to that sort of thing. I think I should quickly add there were a number of divorces in the original faculty. And Bob really didn't like that. And

unfortunately, I was one of them. It was just one of these things where you saw your colleagues were able to change things and you decided, "Well, I can do that, too."

Q. What did you understand to be the university's institutional mandates?

A. Well, we were to be innovative, and I think we were. We were to put an emphasis on teaching and I think we did. Basically I thought our mandates, my interpretation of our mandates were right at the core of what education is all about.

I have few beefs about the early years of SSU. I think a lot of things went right and by the way, about our administration to back up just a little bit. I liked Naomi Lynn. I thought she was one of our best presidents, and I've told her that. I don't want to pass that up without making my comment for posterity.

Q. Was she the administrator when you retired or did you have?

A. I don't remember, she could have been. I retired in 1993, so that would be easy to check.

Q. I think she was there still in 1995.

A. Ok.

Q. When we had the twenty year reunion or was that... that was when we went to under the University wing, I think, the U of I wing.

A. Yeah, it was still SSU. You didn't ask me but I really approve of the University of Illinois. I think it's a great thing for Springfield, for our students. And although SSU was a fine school, I'm much pleased that it's the University of Illinois.

Q. Ok. This is going to be a test I don't want to take. In one sentence, describe the SSU approach to educating students.

A. How about one word – challenging. I think we did. Judy Everson, if you passed one of Judy Everson's classes, you earned it. I'm going to tell you a story that's a little bit, got one bad word in it, but it's kind of an indication of things. My wife, Trula, had a cousin who worked at the State of Illinois in one of the offices and one of her colleagues, a young girl, said she was going to sign up for a class at SSU.

And did, and she came to work the day after the first class meeting and Mary, who was the cousin said, "How did it go?" And the young girl said, "Oh, that professor is a son of a bitch." He wants us to read six books. Mary said, "Well, who was the professor?" And the girl said, "Dennis Camp." And Mary said, "Oh, I know him. He is a son of a bitch." And then of course, couldn't wait to tell me the story.

Q. Oh, that's a great story. Did she take your class?

A. No, she dropped it.

Q. Oh, did she?

A. Well, why would you sign up for an English class if you didn't want to read a book?

Q. Well, yes. I think six books for you and Judy was a little light.

A. If you took Charlie Schweighauser or Mike Lennon or Rich Shereikis, you were reading more than six books.

Q. Yes, I took everybody but Charlie Schweighauser.

A. He's a challenge.

Q. I always regretted not getting his Dante's class, his Dante' class. Regarding what and how you taught in the first few years, what courses did you teach and were the subjects conventional or not?

A. Mostly conventional and almost always different. It wasn't until after I had been there for ten or twelve years that I started repeating classes especially when students would want them. So I taught pretty much all the years of English literature, American literature, especially nineteenth century, Greek mythology and Greek drama.

Literature in the Bible was a class I put in because I found out English majors who didn't know basic things like who Jacob and Esau were. And I thought, "How can you be an English major and not have some awareness of the Bible?" And that course I did repeat several times because that was a continuing need. We had research courses that we taught. In the freedom of being able to, I taught Dante because I love the Divine Comedy.

I didn't teach them more than once, just once, but I wanted to reread the Divine Comedy. I taught D.H. Lawrence because I seldom teach novel. Everybody else wanted to teach novel, so I was teaching poetry and drama. But there's a book by D.H. Lawrence that's a small novel. It's a novella called *The Man Who Died*, and I used that in my Literature in the Bible class, too. It is a fun book.

Q. I've surely read that because I took your Literature in the Bible class, but I don't remember it. I'll have to go back and look on my shelf.

A. Well, it's... Lawrence brings Jesus back to life, marries him off to a priestess of Isis because in Lawrence's thought, celibacy is wrong. The Man Who Died is Jesus of Nazareth.

Q. I've definitely got to go back and read that. How did you organize the courses?

A. Well I tried to, I tried to have some kind of structure but not something, I think since you took classes with me, you know I didn't sit here and read essays and lectures. Classical form is very important to me. I want to give you just a little story about Aeschylus. I encountered him on the streets of Athens one day and asked about his next drama. And his answer was, "It's finished, I just need to go home and write it."

What he meant by that was the he had the form; he knew how he was going to begin his play. He knew what his centerpiece was going to be, and he knew what the ending was going to be. I tried to teach that kind of structure. Shakespeare is wonderful that way; the Bible is full of structure.

In my own classes I tried to give students kind of a beginning and a middle and an end. And it wasn't something always planned; it kind of grew, it was kind of organic. But I didn't like the shotgun approach to education. I liked to have form. People would say, "Well, that's artificial." I'd say, "No, just look at your newspaper and the crossword puzzle sometime." It's going to have structure, it's going to have a theme, and it's there every day, so don't tell me it can't be done.

Q. Exactly. Where did your classes meet? How did you arrange your furniture?

A. Oh, you have to say all of the above. You know when we taught down at the Methodist Church for a couple of months, we had just had kind of a conventional classroom. Out at the main campus it was... well some of them were different shaped classrooms, but they were basically a classroom.

Down at the Leland Hotel, we had a kind of an amphitheater type thing where people sat... this never was very important to me. If the students could take notes, that was fine. I was a little unconventional in that I didn't often sit in a chair. I was sometimes sitting on the table and I walk around and stuff, which is just you know my style.

Q. Did you prepare syllabi, lectures, off-campus sessions, exams, visiting speakers, audio/visual programs?

A. Pretty much all of the above. A little less on audio/visual perhaps because we didn't have the kind of equipment that modern... we didn't have Internet, so we didn't have PowerPoint. I would have loved to have had that kind of thing. Basically I prepared, I was... I knew pretty much how I wanted to start a class, but I didn't know how it was going to end. I did my PhD thesis in part on Robert Frost, and Robert Frost had a continuing saying. "If you know how your poem is going to end, you don't have a poem." He liked to do it organically, and that's the way I used to write my papers as a student.

I remember one time at Hope College when I was a student there, I had to turn in an outline before I did my paper. It was an almost impossible task for me because I... I didn't do this for my PhD thesis of over three hundred pages. People just don't have faith that organic form is form. I even said to that instructor at Hope College, "I'll outline it when I'm done, but I can't really outline it before I begin except he made me do it.

Q. I understand totally. I've never been good at doing that. And as a reporter story, I was told, "Do an outline, do a draft or something." But it evolves, I don't know what I'm going to say next till I say it.

A. Exactly.

Q. Until somebody says something to me, and react to it.

A. And just together again it keeps it fresh, it keeps it real. It's not an artificial kind of thing, I'll defend organic form.

Q. I'm with you. Did you participate in any university week offerings, teach any PACs, oversee any applied study experiences?

A. Well again, all of the above. The first?

Q. University week.

A. Yeah, for university week, we'd stop teaching for a week and have some kind of theme. And I did participate; I offered a course, one week course – Poetry for People Who Don't Like Poetry. And that was pretty well attended by the way. Then at other times we would of course go and listen to speakers.

But applied study, I had... all my advisees had to do applied study and I had to supervise it. I would be at a Walgreen's Drug store, talking to management. I went to an International Harvester in Canton where I had one of my students doing an applied study. There was stamping mill there. It was so huge they had to warn the community before they used it because it broke dishes.

So that applied study got us out and a lot of student teachers; I know one term I had seven student teachers and they all had to be visited three times, so it was a demanding thing. Applied study, university week, and what was it? There was one more?

Q. PACs.

A. Oh yeah. Yeah, I taught regularly one that was called the Individual and the Institution and used things like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And tried to get into the issues of what an individual needs to do to survive in a structure like an institution.

Q. Some of those were really fun, the PACs.

A. I had fun with them except sometimes you'd have a student that just didn't want to read anything because they weren't English or they... that got a little bit rough at times.

Q. And of course without applied study, I wouldn't have had my job for the last eighteen years. That's how I found the magazine [Illinois Issues]. Was your teaching approach similar to that of your colleagues? And explain.

A. Probably. I of course can speak more easily about myself than I can about others. But I know Judy Everson was well prepared; Hinton was well prepared. I think we had an awfully good English department. I remember one student who dropped out of the University of Illinois campus in Champaign Urbana to get a master's degree with us because she wanted to have a chance to interact. That was pretty meaningful.

Q. And true.

A. I'll tell you another quick story. One of the gentlemen who was part of the Board of Higher Education had a son that went off to the University of Arizona, was that or Arizona State, but anyway in Arizona, flunked out. He was a good tennis player, went out to one of the California schools, flunked out and father who is pretty upset with son said and this is from the student himself. "You can just go out to Sangamon State and rot."

And I'm not going to tell you any of the names, but he came out to Sangamon State, and he just thrived. He was on our tennis team; he was really good. He just loved his classes, he graduated with honors, went off. So I think that says quite a bit about our faculty.

Q. That personal attention.

A. Right.

Q. And excellent teaching. Describe the most and the least effective teaching innovations you attempted.

A. Oh, I have to be making this up because it isn't something I've ever really thought about. I just think that especially the courses toward the last four or five years, I would have a handout for almost every course for every class meeting. And there would be some challenging questions and some of the things like that.

That was probably the more successful of them. I imagine I had plenty of failures. I think basically I didn't have any trouble with any student unless the student just didn't want to come to class, didn't want to read the material. Then we tended to knock heads.

Q. Did you have a favorite classroom or on campus or downtown?

A. No, but that's just not an important part of teaching for me. I even had one summer, I had students for an applied study come to my apartment.

Q. How did your students at SSU/UIS compare in intelligence, maturity, intellectual curiosity, and ambition to other college students you had known?

A. That's an easy one to answer. The early years of Sangamon State were an exciting time, exciting students, A+ students on every one of those issues. I had no problems there at all. It got a little more traditional as we got into the 1990s, but they still were a good student body. No I have no complaints about students at all.

Q. And you think part of that was because they were older and had experienced life a little bit more?

A. Yes and you know they weren't going to take any guff either. I said a couple of times, I liked to be challenged and they were challenging.

Q. Name three faculty members and three students at SSU who in your opinion most exemplified the university's highest ideals and explain.

A. Ok well the first two faculty would be Judy and David Everson. I often said if I ever had the privilege of ever starting a university, they would be my first two hires. We had Chinese faculty started coming over. I always insisted they take at least one class with Judy just so they could find out how fast English could be spoken. And then in a different discipline but a very special person was Larry Smith in Communication. Larry's no longer alive. Larry was dyslexic, but he was a PhD in Communication.

When I was his Dean for three years, I was stunned at how many students he advised. He was very, very popular. So those three faculty would be right off the top, to name others we had some really impressive faculty. Students, I'd really rather not go there. There were so many good ones, I would hate to try to pick out three and then forget somebody was... you could easily list fifty or a hundred, so I don't think I want to name names.

Q. That would be hard, just in the group that I went through. In retrospect, how closely have you stayed in touch with former students and colleagues?

A. Well, a few but thanks to the Internet and email. Brian Alley, who was the Dean of the Library and I correspond regularly by email. Brian with other faculty so I get it kind of second hand that way. But not a whole lot and there's a reason for that, too. When a person retires from a university, he really shouldn't be poking around trying to tell people who are there what to do.

I probably resented that a little bit when I was younger. I was thirty-two years old when I helped start the university. And then you have somebody retire and then come around aged sixty or seventy and then try to tell me this needs to be done this way; I didn't want any part of that.

Q. Do you ever return to campus? And if so, on what occasions?

A. Well yes I return there when people ask me to give a talk like I was asked last month in April to speak at your Sage.

Q. Yeah, our alumni group.

A. I spend a lot of time out at the library preparing for that, and of course I'm still working on Vachel Lindsay. And so I'm out there with some regularity. I'll give you a funny little story here if I'm not wrecking your tape.

Q. No.

A. I started back on Vachel about a year ago at the urging of my wife, Barbara, and she was right. So I went out to the school and I tried to work in a library and they kept asking for an I-card. And I said, "What's an I-card?" I had never heard of it. Well you have to have this, so they sent me down to the bowels of the Public Affairs Building to find some office to get an I-card.

Well, I go down there. "Well, you're not in the computer." I said, "I helped to start this university and I'm not even in your computer." So they actually had to send some messages up to some place in Chicago and get it authorized that I could get in the computer, and I now proudly carry an I-card. And I use it; I have quite a few of your books upstairs in the library.

Q. Good for you. I'm glad they didn't refuse you.

A. It's, well last... two years ago we had the race riot hundred year centennial and I gave a number of talks about that. I spent a lot of time at the library preparing for that.

Q. I wrote a play about that.

A. Oh, you did?

Q. Under Marcellus Leonard.

A. See it was in the aftermath of the race riot, that Vachel gave a series of lectures at the YMCA about racial diversity. And boy, are they important. They really attracted me to him, too. It took a lot of courage to take on Springfield in that manner.

Q. I've not read those and I'll have to go back and read them because I did some research, certainly not extensive because I simply had these people talking to me for some reason and I had to write it down so they'd leave me alone. What do you believe is the legacy of SSU and does it remain in place today?

A. Oh yes. I am fascinated by trips to the medical community, to other places around Springfield there are our graduates. And they're relatively happy and successful graduates. I have to say that I'm proud of having been a part of this, I think we've done a whole lot of good, whole lot of good for this university and this community.

Q. How did your experiences at SSU influence your career and personal life?

A. Well of course you know I got buried in Vachel Lindsay work, three volume poetry edition, took me about ten years to do. People don't know but I finished the web site for the Vachel Lindsay home and association. And on that website is a four hundred and eighty page edition of Vachel's unpublished letters to Sarah Teasdale all annotated and explained. That's taken me a long time and I'm still working on others, so just Vachel alone.

But I guess it's about four years ago, a little more perhaps, my wife, Barbara, and I went down to the Lincoln Museum. We didn't expect much. I mean after all, it's Springfield. It's a stunning place. So we came home, and called and got into the volunteer classes. So we not only volunteer at the Lincoln Museum, we travel.

We spent last summer visiting battle sites in the East and we've been to Vicksburg; we've been to Mary Todd's home in Lexington. We've been to all the Lincoln sites in Indiana and Kentucky. We started this maybe an hour ago and I told you it's a wonderful community if you like history.

Q. That is the truth, isn't it? And the last question, what are your feelings today about these experiences?

A. It's been the highlight of my life; I can make that one really simple. I try to stay away so I'm not meddling in other people's business out there, but I'm really proud of that university. My daughter was five years old when we started that university.

She's going to be forty-six; she's an MBA. My grandson just graduated and he's going to have an applied study taking care of the student union or something like that out at the university. I mean my family has been involved in this university. Yeah, I'm very proud of that school.

Q. Its home, isn't it?

A. Yes.

Q. Anything else you'd like to add that I didn't ask you?

A. Well there's a side of the university that I don't know if other people talk about it or not, but I think it needs to be brought out. I was thirty-two when we started this university and maybe one of the older faculty. We were a young faculty, and we got involved with sports, we men.

Rich Shereikas and Mike Lennon and David Everson; we had a softball team and we won two city titles. There were two great big trophies out there somewhere reflecting... we played flag football well into our forties. We used to have a kind of an all sports contest where you had participated in like seven different sports. We were young.

Every weekend in the summers, the faculty would take on the students in softball and beer drinking. The loser would have to buy the beer, and I used to tease the students and it was probably pretty close to being true. Faculty didn't buy much beer. We were good. I mean we had a good softball team. We played city, not at the very top but in the middle of it.

Q. Yeah, yeah. Now when I started classes in spring of 1982, the faculty were not much older than me. I had gone back, I was... what was I? Nearly forty? And when I got to go back to school and so it was such a great place to go to school. And the English faculty, I just was such a group of every talent and whatever you wanted to take you knew you had the best teacher for that discipline. And so many of them like you would overlap and Judy would overlap.

A. Yeah, we were a diverse group. See that diversity is what I think helps an awful lot.

Q. Oh, yeah.

A. Well, we had a flag football team when we were in our mid-forties. Rich and I and oh several others were playing on it. And we were doing pretty well until we came up against a group of eighteen-year-olds from Lincoln Land who had played high school football just like the year before. I cracked about three ribs and I really got nailed. And my doctor said, "When are you going to learn that you are too old to play football?" I said, "I've learned."

Q. Especially with eighteen-year-olds?

A. That brought it to an end. But it really was an active thing.

Q. The faculty became friends; it seems as much from a student's viewpoint.

A. And we competed with them, too. I mean this was just... we had girls on the team, not a lot but some. It was fun.

Q. That was a fun time. I'm glad I got to be part of SSU, too. And I think this is a good project that they are doing these interviews and capture this for students who have no idea that that kind of university and like you say, the freedom and yet the hard work.

A. Oh, yes, yes.

Q. I said, I don't know if you remember or not, but Barbara Burkhart and I both took one of your classes at the same time, the War Between the States class. Or was that Judy?

A. That was probably Judy because I don't remember teaching that.

Q. Ok, then it was maybe the Hawthorne class.

A. Could have been.

Q. But anyway, we took that together and I don't remember working so hard. I mean I worked hard in all my classes anyway, but then working and trying to compete with Barbara Burkhart is about the...

A. The chair of the English Department at Champaign Urbana was a friend largely through Vachel and research. When Barbara graduated, they were limited taking I think three or four, possibly five in the PhD program and this man's name was Jim Hurt. I said, "You really need to interview this gal." he did, they accepted her, and boy has she taken off.

Q. Hasn't she? The university is lucky to have her on staff.

A. I hope I'm wrong, but I heard through the grapevine that some of the younger English faculty are trying to get rid of Barbara Burkhart because she doesn't live in Springfield?

Q. Oh, that's just wrong.

A. Oh, I know. I hope I'm wrong.

Q. I hope so, too, because in this day of technology and online teaching, that's unnecessary.

A. And apparently there's another faculty, I met her years ago. Her name is Nancy but I don't remember the last name. But she apparently lives in New England and is teaching also. And apparently, they are not very happy about that.

Q. Barbara is the only English faculty I know of. All of the faculty that I knew have retired.

A. Well I mentioned that I've spoken with ... and there's Barbara, she ...

Q. Yeah.

A. That's a challenge because the stage that she's at.

Q. You more than held your own. That was the best program we've had, I think.

A. I wanted to come to the one before that but I had already scheduled a trip to Harvard to do research. It was a file on Vachel, on the last years of Vachel's life. It's been frozen for years and then in 2004 it came off. I wanted to read those.

Q. I guess so, how great. Well, I've taken all your time this afternoon and I appreciate it. I think this is going to be great. I'll download these onto the computer or I'll ask one of the techies who does it much better than I do.

A. Whatever.

End of Interview Session 2

53 minutes 28 seconds