

**Oral History Interview of
Gary Elbow**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
February 17, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

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Preferred Citation for this Document:

Elbow, Gary Oral History Interview, February 17, 2017. Interview by Andy Wilkinson, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

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Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: N/A

Audio Metadata: 96kHz/24bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews: Elbow was previously interviewed on June 20, 2012. He would later be interviewed on March 31, 2017 and May 23, 2018.

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Laura Warner

Editor(s): Katelin Dixon

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Dr. Gary Elbow. Dr. Elbow talks about his background as a geographer, coming to Texas Tech, and his involvement with the Honors College.

Length of Interview: 01:14:55

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Keywords

geography, higher education, Texas Tech University

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

It's the seventeenth of the seventeenth year of the second month. Andy Wilkinson with Dr. Gary Elbow at his office in the afternoon—on a nice spring afternoon—with wind, but no sand, so we're glad to get that. I like to turn the recorder on, because it always seems that one or the other of us will say something prescient and clever before we get it turned on. [laughter] So I hate to miss my opportunities with that. First of all, one of the things that I'm interested in, because had I known that it was possible to major in it—and I'm sure somebody had mentioned it somewhere, but it was never in my consciousness—and that is to major in geography. I would have done it, because it seems to me like you geographers kind of have the world by the tail. Anything is it's all your oyster.

Gary Elbow (GE):

Well we tend to think that. Not everybody agrees. One of the things I often ask my students is I'll say—now you know if they're geography majors—I'll say, "Okay, you go to a party, and one of the standard opening questions always is 'Well, what's your major?' and you say 'Geography.' You get one of two responses: One is, 'Oh I loved/hated it in the seventh grade.' Or, 'Oh. What do geographers do?'" [laughter] It's a greatly misunderstood discipline, and it's one that I agree with you. I think it's really important to understand both the kind of rote things that geographers do like learning where countries are, developing a mental map of the world.

AW:

Yeah, the seven-color or the four-color map problem. That sort of thing.

GE:

Yeah, but also beginning to understand how people relate to space.

AW:

Exactly.

GE:

That's the real significant part of it. The rote part—anybody can learn that. You don't have to take a class to learn that kind of stuff.

AW:

Though a lot of people go through life not learning it. [laughter]

GE:

Yeah, well that's true, but it's not something that—You know I used to, when I taught World Regional Geography, I used to make them memorize, be able to identify countries. I gave up on that years ago, because if they want to learn it they'll learn it. If they don't want to learn it

they're going to forget it the minute they walk out the door of the classroom anyways. So it's kind of wasted. So what I do with the introductory classes that I teach now is I talk about where things are. I'll put a map up and I'll say, "Okay, here's la-di-da and whoop-dee-doo," and so on. You learn from seeing what I'm saying about different places, but I'm not going to sit down and say, "All right, now you sit down and memorize. Here are twenty countries. I want you to be able to tell me where they are tomorrow." You know, that kind of stuff.

AW:

Right. Right.

GE:

But that's the stereotype of geography is "Okay we know how many bananas Honduras produces, and we know where it is in relationship maybe to some other things," but that doesn't really get at what geographers really do.

AW:

Yeah, it just strikes me—with my particular interest in place—that geographers are the most closely related to studying in a scholarly way the idea of place. What does that mean, you know?

GE:

I think that's—in terms of absolutely trying to work it out—you're right. There are a lot of people who write about place, you know, and you sing about place, or you write your songs and poems about place. I've got somewhere over here—I've got a whole book about place, and that's not the only book around. There are a bunch of them.

AW:

Yeah.

GE:

That's one of the things that is a main theme of geography.

AW:

Well, all this is to ask the question: How did you get interested in geography?

GE:

It was easy. [laughter] When I a kid—I tell people this story—my parents, and this is back in the probably late forties, early fifties—

AW:

Where did you grow up?

GE:

I was born in San Francisco. We left there right after World War II. It was 1945 and moved to a little town in Oregon, a place called Tillamook up on the Oregon coast.

AW:

I buy cheese, Tillamook.

GE:

Yeah, that's it. That's it. I worked in the cheese factory when I was in high school.

AW:

Did you? [laughter]

GE:

Yeah, I was dating a farmer's daughter, so I had the inside track. Anyway, I went all the way through high school there, and then I went to college at Oregon State, and started graduate school at the University of Oregon.

AW:

So back to your parents and geography?

GE:

Oh yeah, they subscribed to the Book of the Month Club. They never remembered to send the card in that says, "Don't send the book." [laughter] And so we had this big library of unread books, you know? A lot of them were travel books. I don't know if you ever heard of Martin and Osa Johnson, for example.

AW:

I don't think so.

GE:

She wrote a book called *I Married Adventure*, and that was her husband. And they traveled around—

AW:

Oh, I remember that title.

GE:

Well they went off and lived with head hunters in New Guinea and all this kind of stuff, and then wrote about it. So that was really exciting. Richard Haliburton, and a little bit later on *Kon-Tiki* and those kinds of things.

AW:

Oh yeah. I don't remember how young I was when I read *Kon-Tiki*, but it was mesmerizing. In fact I would get—I don't know if this happened to you—but I would get a little claustrophobic when I was reading about going through those tunnels, and once they got to Easter Island it was—but still being interested in these places—I mean, you can see them in *National Geographic*—how did you connect that to that there's actually a topic—a major.

GE:

Well nobody starts out as a geography major, and I didn't.

AW:

[laughter] Oh really? Okay.

GE:

So I started out—I was a pre-medy—and that happened because I got to Oregon State and I didn't have a major picked. I was—somehow or another I found myself in the chemistry building and here was this bunch of people walking through. Turns out they were pre-med majors and I kind of fell in with them. So I ended up being a pre-med major, and that lasted for about a semester. Then I had a friend who was in pharmacy, so I decided I'd try pharmacy. And I woke up one morning and I saw myself in a green jacket standing behind this counter of a drugstore, and I decided I really didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. So I had all these science courses, and I didn't know what to do with them. So I majored in general science, which was the nearest thing to a liberal arts back there that Oregon State had. But in the process, I took some geography classes, because I was interested in it and they turned out to be pretty easy. Then I thought, Well I'll try geography. I'm not sure why—my parents had both gone to University of Oregon and I was kind of the maverick—

AW:

And you were at Oregon State. [laughter]

MB:

Well my uncle had gone there. But anyway, I decided to go down to Eugene and talk to the people in the geography program there. I walked in, and I met with a couple of the faculty members, and I told them I wanted to come down there and do a master's degree in geography. Kind of reared back at me, and I was—I had gotten a job in this plywood mill in Springfield

which is a town adjacent to Eugene—and so I was going to work the night shift and go to school in the daytime. They said, “Well why are you going to do that?” and I said, “My sister is starting college, and my parents are going to be paying for her. They put me through.” They looked at me and said, “Well I don’t know.” I did it anyway, and it was a really formative experience because geography at the University of Oregon was totally different from Oregon State.

AW:

Yeah, and what was the difference?

GE:

Well the difference was that the Oregon Staters were somewhat more traditional, I guess, in terms of they taught a lot of regional geography classes. They were pretty rote, and they had a pretty heavy emphasis on conservation. When I went to the University of Oregon, those people were all from Berkley. In fact we used to kid about how it was University of California at Eugene. [laughter] And the California people were very much into landscape, and so they had the main person at Berkley at the time was a man named Carl Sauer, and he was a—

AW:

Is that S-a-u—

EG:

—e-r. Yeah. He was a first generation German born in the U.S., and he had gone back to Germany and gotten—I don’t think—he didn’t get his doctorate in Germany, but he studied for a few years in Germany. So he was heavily imbued with the German approach. The idea was that you looked at landscape from an evolutionary perspective. And he worked a lot in Mexico, and so he he’d go down into Mexico, and he’d try to look at how the landscapes evolved. He’d look at Teotihuacan, all right, that’s pre-Columbian stuff. And then he’d look at some of the sixteenth century seventeenth century churches, and “All right, you know, this is colonialism.” Then he’d look at the more modern stuff. He was mainly concerned with rural landscapes, and so he was trying to put it together and see what kinds of traces you could find in the land of previous occupation. They had a term for that; they called it sequent-occupance. I had never been exposed to any of that before I got to Eugene and thought, Gee this is pretty neat stuff, you know. Then I started down there. My idea was I was going to specialize in Russia, because Russia was hot. So I started out taking Russian, and that started for about three weeks. [laughter] My job in the plywood mill was what they called a grader. They run the veneer through a dryer. It starts out really wet and sappy. So they run it through the dryer, and it’s this big thing with about eight layers, and it spits the veneer out. The grader stands there with a crayon and marks the veneer according to the grade, and they’re very specific. You had to know the width of the cracks in the veneer and how big the pitch pockets and the knots are, and that kind of stuff. And you can learn that pretty fast. So I was doing that, and then I’d practice my Russian—my Cyrillic alphabet.

[laughter] But that didn't last very long, and I figured I'd better drop Russian, so that ended that. But in the meantime I got hooked up with a faculty member who was Latin Americanistic, and so that got me started on Latin America. Then I got an opportunity to spend a summer in Columbia, and do my master's research there. So that really hooked me. I didn't do Russia. I did Latin America.

AW:

Well, good for you. Except now we'd probably be listening to you as a talking head on PBS.

[laughter]

GE:

Or I'd be languishing in a Russian jail somewhere. [laughter]

AW:

That's right.

GE:

Off in Siberia.

AW:

So you did your master's at Oregon, and your doctorate at—?

GE:

At Pittsburg. And that was another—I followed a professor from the University of Oregon to Pittsburg. I wanted to go east of the Mississippi. I'd never been east of the Mississippi, and so I thought, Well you know if I'm going to do this. I had a shot at LSU, which was probably where I should have gone, but I followed this professor that I knew to Pittsburg and I got a little better deal there. They had a Latin Americanist who had just arrived there. He had been teaching at the university—the Central University in Caracas—so he had a lot of information. He spent a lot of time in the Amazon working with a group of Indians called the Yanomami. You may have heard of them.

AW:

Maybe. Spell that.

GE:

Y-a-n-o-m-a-m-o, is the singular.

AW:

Yeah. No, I think when you mentioned the Y, that's familiar. I don't know anything about them.

GE:

They were rainforest Indians, or steppe Indians depending. Very very un-acculturated. They were still pretty much in their pristine state at that time. He went in and looked at their resource use, and wrote a book about it after he went to Pitt. He was a really nice guy, and a good person to have as a dissertation advisor.

AW:

What did you do your dissertation on?

GE:

Well, I got a chance to go to Guatemala for three months, after I finished up my coursework at Pitt. I didn't get funding—I had this idea that I was going to go look at sugar cane in Argentina—and nobody wanted to pay me to go look at sugar cane in Argentina. [laughter] So I got a job at the University of Colorado in Boulder, one year visiting things. And during that year, I had a former professor—a guy who'd been my master's thesis advisor at Oregon—got a job with the USAID in Guatemala. He set up in this program; he wanted to have some American graduate students come down, and one of the things that USAID was a little bit concerned about was they didn't want him to bring down all people from the University of Oregon. So technically I was a University of Pittsburg student. [laughter] He said, "Well why don't you come down for the summer, and we'll pay you." I think the stipend was ten dollars a day, and I could live cheap enough in Guatemala so I could save enough money to stay over and work on a dissertation project. So I said, "Sure, I'll do that." In the meantime, Margaret and I had gotten engaged. She was a student at Pitt in social work. She moved into the apartment next door to mine which was—talk about fate. So anyway, I had gone off to Boulder and she'd stayed in Pittsburg to finish up her degree. I was going to come back after the three months, and we were going to get married in Reading where her family was. Then we would go back to Guatemala and drive down. I was going to get a car—a Volkswagen bugs which was a good car for that kind of thing. So anyway, it got to be about a month before the wedding or so, and people at AID came to me and said, "Well, we'd like you to stay on another nine months." And I said, "Sure, I'll do that." And then they said—and I said, "Can I go home and get married?" and They said, "Oh sure!" I decided we'd have this nice honeymoon driving through Mexico. Then a couple of weeks later they came back to me and said, "Well they're telling us in Washington that if you go back to the U.S. then we're going to have to advertise this job in Washington, and we don't want to do this so you'd better not go." So I sent a telegram back and it said, "Cancel the wedding, and I'll explain."

AW:

Yeah, telegram in the days before email.

GE:

Yeah, you could still telephone at that time, but it was radio telephone and it wasn't very good connection. Anyway, we ended up getting married in Guatemala.

AW:

Oh really?

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

Cool.

GE:

In the little town where I was living outside of Guatemala City. The village carpenter married us, and he was the mayor. [laughter]

AW:

It sounds kind of biblical.

GE:

Yeah! I hadn't thought about it that way. It was his first wedding he'd ever performed, because he had come in to substitute for somebody else. Anyway, so we got a year and a half. They renewed my contract again, so we got a year and a half in Guatemala together. I tell people it was like a paid honeymoon for a year and a half.

AW:

What were you doing in Guatemala?

GE:

Officially I was a planning advisor, and I was working with four different municipal governments to start setting priorities, essentially. What would happen in Guatemala was you'd hire a city—elect a city council. And city council people and the mayors would, when they started figuring out what the needs of the community were, they'd always look for something that they could put their name on. And so something like a bandstand in the park, and that wasn't necessarily what the highest need priority would have been for the community. So my job was first of all to get a team of kids from the community together—and these would be teenagers—and get them to go out and start collecting data, so they'd begin to understand how to go about getting information. Then we would take that information and condense it into a report and give it to the city council, and that would say, All right these are the things you need and this is what

you have. Things like they didn't know how many kids there were in the schools, and they didn't know how many kids there were in the classrooms, you know, in each class, and those kinds of things. They had a hospital—they didn't know how many beds it had.

AW:

Wow, pretty basic stuff.

GE:

Yeah, and they had—in Central American, the standard is that the national government collects the taxes. Then they dole it back out to the communities, and it's done on the basis oftentimes of whose political party you belong to and that kind of stuff. They would go—the mayor or somebody—his representative would go. They had, in this particular town where I was, they had a bunch of factories. One of them Fuller Paints, and one of them was Collins Machete Works, and Collins was the big maker of machetes. In some parts of Latin America they called them 21:44 rather than machetes. They had a Bayer Insecticide plant, and a textile plant that was locally owned, and a couple of other industries. And this was when the Central American Common Market was just coming on, so some of those were down there because they could sell them to other Central American countries. But anyway, when the city needed something they'd go to the managers of the factories, and they'd say, "Hey, we want to do X, so why don't you give us a couple hundred bucks?" So these guys would, "Oh sure. We can part with that." So they'd give them what little bit they wanted, and that was the equivalent of paying taxes locally. There wasn't any formal tax system.

AW:

Kind of like the ditch cleaners in the Midwest, where you pay your county tax by going out and cleaning.

GE:

Yeah. Same kind of thing. So anyway, I was trying to get them to think about, All right what kinds of priorities should you set? And then when you know what you want, you go to the national government and you say, "Okay this is what we want, and this is why we want it." This sounds very gringo. [laughter] They would nod their heads and say, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah," and ignore me. This idea progressed to the point where I created a Peace Corps program. I got to know the Peace Corps people down there. I said, "All right, let's bring down some people who can work with municipal governments and help them set priorities. Figure out what their needs are." I think we brought down five or six PCBs, and we went one in the town where I was living and the rest of them were scattered around. We had one of them—three of them were lawyers, recent law school graduates. I had one of guy who was an anthropologist who spent some time in Chile. We figured this guy was going to be really good because he's an anthropologist, he can deal with people, he speaks Spanish. So we brought him down. We put him in what we thought

was the toughest spot, down on the south coast in a town had a big agrarian reform colony. We drove him down—the Peace Corps director and I—took him down to the site. We left him off with the mayor and drove back to Guatemala City. He was back in Guatemala City before we were. He was on the next bus back. [laughter] We never saw him again.

AW:

Wow. So much for that anthropology training.

GE:

He took one look at it and said, “This is not for me.” Then we had another one who was in the town where I was. He was one of the law graduates. He turned twenty-six and left immediately. “Happy Birthday. I’m out of here.” Because he wasn’t eligible for the draft anymore. He wasn’t going to go to Vietnam. He left right in the middle—they’d had a big flood and they were having all kinds of problems. He could have been helpful, but he just took off. So the Peace Corps project didn’t go all that well. But anyway, that’s the kind of stuff I was doing down there.

AW:

Had you picked up Spanish by then?

GE:

Well yeah. I knew a little bit of Spanish from Columbia. You pick it up fast when you have to. I got it going pretty fast.

AW:

So Margaret is down there, too, and she is a newly minted social worker. Did she find things to do according to her—?

GE:

She found a Peace Corps volunteer who was working at—a young woman—who was working with a hospital for mentally impaired children.

AW:

Let’s stop there just one second. I see that my battery is getting low, and I don’t want to have to keep looking at it. So I’m going to stop this for just one second and we’ll start back.

GE:

I hope this what you’re—

Pause in Recording

AW:

No, this exactly.

AW:

Okay. Andy Wilkinson with Dr. Gary Elbow. Back again with a fresh set of batteries. So you were talking about Margaret connecting with a Peace Corps volunteer.

GE:

Yeah, and so Margaret started working with her in this facility for mentally impaired children. These were really serious. I mean they were very badly impaired. So she would go in a couple of times a week and work with the woman. They're still friends.

AW:

Really?

GE:

Yeah, her name was Shelda [?], and Shelda ended up marrying a Guatemalan and coming back to the U.S. with him. They had been living in the Dallas area, and they had a child who's now an adult and off on her own with her own family and stuff. But we've kept track of them for all this time—or she has. So anyway she did that, but she was a little frustrated because a lot of the time she stuck in this town. I had a house that was outside of town. It was really a weekend house. There was a lake. It was about, oh, probably a kilometer out of the town. So we were a little bit isolated. She didn't have much contact with people, and she didn't know much Spanish. I hired a kid to work with her on Spanish and help her learn Spanish, and that worked out fairly well. The agreement was I would pay for his school if he worked on her Spanish. It probably wasn't the best arrangement for her, but she made do with it. I spent as much time as I could with her at home, and we did a lot of travelling around.

AW:

What was the countryside like where you were?

GE:

The countryside in Guatemala is beautiful.

AW:

I hear that, and I didn't know whether it was true front-to-back or top-to-bottom.

GE:

Well, there are places that are nicer than others or worse than others. [laughter] It's like any place else. The highlands are high enough, so they have pine forests. The Indian communities

there they grow corn beans and squash—just what you'd expect. It's pretty mountainous, and there are volcanoes, and beautiful lakes, and all that kind of stuff. They tell a story about themselves that God and Saint Peter were up on a cloud somewhere and they were talking about creating the earth, and God zapped down some volcanoes, and so Saint Peter said, "Oh that looks pretty good." He zapped down some pines forests and some lakes. Finally Saint Peter said, "Well, aren't you overdoing it a little bit down there?" and he said, "Oh wait until you see the people I put down there." [laughter] And they tell that story of themselves. The Indians—the Maya—are just really wonderful people. Latinos—which are the non-Mayans. Most of them are Mestizos. They don't get along very well with the Indians. There's still a lot of prejudice with Indians—against the Indians. They're good people, but they just—you know, it's this hang-up. It goes back to colonialism and all that kind of stuff. The landscapes are spectacular. Still a lot of pre-Columbian ruins around—not just down in the lowlands, but up in the highlands. It's changed. They were getting in some pretty heavy deforestation even forty years ago when we were down there, or fifty years ago, I guess it is now. It's not as pretty as it was, because a lot of the hills have been denuded. They're not very good for farming, so pretty soon all the soil was gone.

AW:

Yeah, but think—yeah.

GE:

Although they were beginning to start terracing, and that was pretty effective in terms of controlling erosion.

AW:

Yeah, but even if you terraced in that country you would have less erosion, but the soil itself is still not what we're used to, for instance.

GE:

No, and you've got to fertilize it. They were used to fertilizing with natural fertilizers. They'd go out into the woods and pick up leaf litter and stuff. They raised chickens and pigs and fertilize with the excrement. One of the things—after I came to Tech I got a couple of summer grants and went back to Guatemala. The first summer I went was the summer of 1983, and that was when the first big oil crisis hit. The price of oil went through the ceiling, and the availability went way down. That was the real problem—was not so much the price as it was the—you may remember, the gas stations were running out of gas. They had been working with the Indians down there to use chemical fertilizers. When the price went up, then they decided they didn't want to do that anymore, and so they went back to using the natural fertilizer. I wrote a little paper about that, and I sent it off to some people at the National Fertilizer Center in Huntsville, Alabama. I didn't hear anything back from them, but I heard from a guy in Guatemala—an American missionary in

Guatemala—that he had been working with farmers and he had a connection with this outfit in Huntsville. They had written down to him and they'd said, "We don't believe what this guy is saying." [laughter] He wrote back and said, "Yeah, he's right."

AW:

So were they doing better with the natural?

GE:

Well, what happened was they had changed crops, and so they were growing potatoes with the chemical fertilizer because they get more money out of potatoes. They didn't necessarily like to eat them, but they could sell them. When the price of fertilizer went up, they went back to corn. They just shifted back to the subsistence crops—the traditional subsistence crops.

AW:

Well that's really—that's quite interesting. When you have this time in Guatemala, do you go back to Boulder? To Colorado? Or—?

GE:

No, I went back to Pittsburg for a year.

AW:

Oh to finish up?

GE:

Yeah. And then I came here. I was still ABD by the time I got here?

AW:

Oh really?

GE:

Yeah. This was back in the days when you could get a job as an ABD, and I had two years to finish the dissertation.

AW:

So you finished it here?

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

What made you pick Texas Tech?

GE:

A job. [laughter]

AW:

This is not like Guatemala. [laughter]

GE:

No, no. But it—

AW:

Or Pittsburg.

GE:

It was—I was looking for a school that was in profile like the schools I had gone to, which meant that it was part of a major football conference, and it was a school on the way up. Remember, this was Grover Murray times. This was 19—I came here in 1970. Tech was really on the move. The law school had just been created. The med school was starting out. They were still over in—I can't even remember the name of the dorm anymore now—but—Drane Hall, I guess, was where the med school was, and then the nursing school was over on the other side where the College of Business is now. They promised to start a geography program. They'd hired a guy named **Lauren Kennimore [35:26]** to be dean of Arts and Sciences, and he had been a geographer—he was a geographer. He'd come from the University of Texas, where he'd been the dean of the College of Education. I think he had an education doctorate in Geography Ed. So he came here and part of the deal was he would start a geography program. They had a couple of geographers here at the time, so his idea was so expand it. I was going to be the next person—there were by that time there were four, I think—and I was the fifth. We were going to be an independent department and all this stuff. We did become an independent department, but we never grew. **Kennimore** left and went back to UT, and that was kind of the end of any real interest among the administration in geography. The program has really languished here.

AW:

Was Murray gone by then?

GE:

Not quite. Murray left mid-seventies. Probably about '75, '76. Somewhere along in there. They hired a guy named Cecil Mackey to replace him. Mackey was—I can't remember—he came from South Florida. The University of South Florida. Brought a lot of new ideas in, which was

probably part of the problem. He lasted two years and became president at Michigan State. He didn't last very long up there either. He was—I thought he was a good president, but I think he ran into some of the same kinds of problems that Nellis has run into. We're not terribly friendly to outside ideas, you know. You've got to tread very lightly.

AW:

Well, you know, when you live on an island—which is kind of where we are—it's—something coming in from the outside. Although Grover Murray was certainly an outsider.

GE:

Well yeah, but he'd been at LSU. So he had some sense for it. At that time—there's another aspect to this. I think the Board of Regents at the time really wanted to shift Texas Tech from being a cow college to being a real player, and Murray promised that and came through with that. So they were willing to put up with some of this stuff. I don't know if you've heard this story, but at the time that Murray was recruited—I think it was about '64, '65—

AW:

He was here by sixty—no, it was a little later when I graduated. He signed my diploma.

GE:

I think he had been a dean at LSU, or maybe a vice president. I can't remember. He'd been in administration at LSU. They wanted him very badly, and he told them—you've probably heard the story about the three guys who got fired in the fifties—and so we were still on the AAUP blacklist for that. The deal was we had to establish a ten year policy, and we had to deal with these people who had been unfairly—

AW:

The existing problem.

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

Not just do better in the future, but go back and—yeah.

GE:

The university actually—I don't know how much they got. It's all been secret. They received some compensation, and I presume some kind of apology for what happened. Anyway, they wanted him badly enough to do that. The Board of Regents kind of sucked it up a little bit, which they're not used to doing. They don't like that. He was a tough negotiator, and I think that once

he got here, he was smart enough to put his effort into developing things and not too much into reforming in terms of—you know he did insist on a ten year policy. Then the ten year policy was essentially lifted out of what we call the Red Book—the AAUP Red Book. That policy has been changed now, but that's another story. Anyway, Grover was probably overall the most effective president we've had—certainly since I've been here.

AW:

I think you could say ever. I think he's—you know there may be something to be said for the first couple of presidents, because it was such a new thing. But in terms of achievements, I don't think anybody has compared yet.

GE:

There was a certain synergy there, because he came in at a time when the governor was from Lubbock—Preston Smith. We had George Mahon, who was chair of the House Appropriations Committee. We had strong representation in the senate. It was Lyndon Johnson. I guess Bentsen was probably the junior senator at the time. Oh no, who was the guy before—who preceded Johnson? Another strong well-placed democrat. We had very strong representation also in state legislature. We had pretty good people at the time. And there was a lot of money. Texas had money to burn, literally, in those days. So doing things like creating the law school or creating the school of medicine were—you couldn't do that today.

AW:

No.

GE:

Look at the problems they're having with the vet school. But it was the ideal time for somebody like Grover to be here. Everything sort of fell together.

AW:

How did geography get lost in the mix?

GE:

Well, I think it was partly our own problem, and partly not. I don't think we ever really got people to understand what geography is about, and what it does. Getting students to come in and take geography classes that weren't required or didn't satisfy a core curriculum requirement was pretty tough. We struggled to get very many majors. We didn't have a graduate program. We didn't have a graduate program until five years ago.

AW:

Does not having—this is just a general question—does not having a graduate program make it that much more difficult to get undergraduate majors?

GE:

Not necessarily. It's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. If you've got a whole bunch of undergraduate majors a few of them will hang around and do graduate work. So you've got an ability to recruit. If you're limited in the number of undergraduate majors, then it's harder to get a graduate program off the ground. Part of our problem was just that nobody really understood what geographers do. Now with GIS, everybody, "Oh yeah!" But that's a technique.

AW:

Yeah and it's only a tiny sliver of what geography is about.

GE:

Except that the cart is the one driving the horse these days.

AW:

Oh no, I understand. But I mean in terms of the scholarly discipline it's, as you say, a tool and not a way of thinking.

GE:

Yeah, but if you can graduate from here with a GIS certificate you've got a job out there somewhere. You graduate with a geography—something like me—nobody wants you.

AW:

So were you—at the beginning of the Honor's College—were you faculty at the start?

GE:

Pretty close to the start. I missed out on Pete Christiansen.

AW:

I never knew—I only knew Gary Bell. That was as far back as—

GE:

Okay the honor's program started out—and you really ought to talk to Brink about this, because he's just recently done—we're celebrating our twentieth anniversary next year, and Brink has done a little history of the honors college, which includes the preceding programs. Oh there was a guy in philosophy who was the first—and it wasn't Pete—it was somebody else, and I don't remember who now. Before my time. But Pete Christiansen ran the program for a while—it was

an ANS program—and then Otto Nelson stepped in and ran it for about ten years. Then there were a couple of people from history. Then the decision was made in the late nineties—I think it was about '97—that we needed to upgrade the honors program to a college. Haragan was the one who did that. Creating a college would spread it out into the other colleges, make it available to students who weren't just arts and sciences students. We needed to do that in order to recruit high-end students. So again this is the idea that if we're going to advance the reputation of the university, we've got to find a way to recruit students with higher SAT scores and all that kind of stuff, so Bell was brought in to be the first director of the program. Well, not director, but to be the director of the program, and then to create the college, which he did.

AW:

When I was at Tech in the late sixties, and I think I took an honors course. That would have been under the program?

GE:

Yeah, and that would have been the very early period, because it was probably—I'm guessing—it would have been, say '62, '63?

AW:

'66 was when I started.

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

I'm just curious. I to this day don't remember why I took it or what difference it made at the time, but I know when I started teaching in the honors college—it would have been 2001—there was a lot of tension on campus about who got what students and all that. Has that changed since those days?

GE:

Yeah, I think it has. There's still—there are certain colleges that really haven't bought into the honors idea. Engineering is one of them. They will tell—and I don't think everybody in engineering does this, but there are a few people over there—who will tell students they shouldn't be in the honors college because it detracts from their engineering courses. I don't know that anybody else is doing that quite so openly, but I don't think it's as bad as it was. I think there's an understanding—even with engineering—that the honors college helps them to recruit high-end students. They like that idea.

AW:

Does it help now that we have a scientist as dean?

GE:

It probably does. Michael is so widely respected I don't think it makes any difference whether he's a scientist or does clay pots or whatever. Certainly Michael is a great person to have in that position.

AW:

Yeah, sure seems like that to me. What do you see the role of—other than recruiting—what do you see the role of an honors college, or for that matter, an honors program?

GE:

Well okay, this is a pitch that I make every time I get a chance, and that is the idea that it doesn't make any difference what your major is, a background in the liberal arts is really important. Let's say you've got an engineer, and that engineer takes the standard core curriculum. So he or she sits in a classroom with two hundred kids taking U.S. history, and another classroom taking some kind of humanities class in Fine Arts with Chris Smith, and so on. They're going to come out of that not really knowing very much, but if you can put them into small relatively-intensive courses and open their eyes—and give them in particular a lot of writing practice and some speaking practice, and get them to the point where they understand some things from outside of their major and outside of technology—then they have a chance to move up. If you look at the pattern of kids who are in technology fields, the ones who manage to move up into management tend to be the ones who've got a broader background.

AW:

Just of when I was in the police profession in the sixties and seventies. I worked for a department in the seventies. It was very progressive, and one of the only ones in America that required a degree. We found that the people who made the best cops were not the ones who had police science and criminology degrees. They were the people who had education, history, English lit. They made the best police officers, and it was an eye-opening thing for me to think about that. One thing that always troubles me a little bit teaching in both the unwashed—and then my songwriting class—and then these honors kids and the other, is how can we take all this good stuff and the honors approach, and apply it across the board?

GE:

That's the real problem. If you want to think about how we ended up with Donald Trump. It's people who are not critical thinkers. I heard somebody interviewed on NPR yesterday, and he and his daughter, who's getting an engineering degree somewhere in Pennsylvania, were arguing back and forth. She's big on climate change and he's not understanding of climate change, and

she's finally explaining to him how the greenhouse effect works—all this being talked about on NPR. In the end it comes down to well, "Who'd you vote for?" She of course voted for Hillary, and his comment was, "I couldn't vote for Hillary, because I didn't trust her. She's not trustworthy, so I voted for Trump." And I thought, Who's not trustworthy? If we can get people to think critically a little bit more, then I think it opens up the whole spectrum of things. I don't know how you do that breakthrough. I don't know how you get to them. You can't under our current model. You can't have 150 student classes, and core curriculum stuff that's aimed at the great unwashed, and develop real critical thinking among your students. The bottom line is if you're going to do that and get beyond some level of technical competence, then it takes more money. You've got to have more faculty and smaller classes. Maybe allow students to take more than 120 hours, and all these kinds of things that limit our ability to do what we're talking about.

AW:

And also to get public schools to bring us a better student.

GE:

Yeah. Well that's the other part of it. The honors college in some ways is a self-fulfilling prophecy, because who do we recruit? We recruit the students who are going to be successful at what we do. The real test would be what you suggest. All right if we could get a whole bunch of kids who aren't honors college material, bring them in, and get them on track. Then we'd really being doing something.

AW:

You see a solution? A way to do that?

GE:

Not without more money. The other thing about it is that you've got to train the parents, because a lot of the kids who come in, if they want to take something—it applies both to what kind of a major you pick, because parents want their kids, for some strange reason, to major in something where they can get a job. You asked about geography and me. When I went home and told my father I was going to work on a master's degree in geography. My father very very rarely ever questioned what I did, but he said, "What are you going to do with that?" I said, "Well, I think I might be able to go work for the government." The idea of being a college teacher had never really occurred to me. He said, "Oh feeding from the public trough." [laughter] And he was a pretty liberal guy, and that wasn't typical of the kind of thing that he would normally say. But it represents a certain attitude. The idea that you major in what you're interested in and it'll all work out doesn't appeal very much to parents.

AW:

Right. No, and I don't think it ever has. When we were doing that in the sixties, our parents certainly weren't happy about that either then. [laughter] So training parents—how many generations will that take? Very interesting. I would like to talk some about Margaret and her work, but maybe that would be best done with her. I don't know.

GE:

I think you're right, but I'm willing to talk about it a little bit.

AW:

Well the part I had on my notes that I wanted to talk to you about is that I only know the two of you casually through Texas Tech. We see each other at events and things from time to time. It strikes me that the two of you are peas from a pod, that you're very connected; the sixties term we'd have used was soulmates or something. Is that my rosy perspective as an outsider?

GE:

Oh no, we're—next year is going to be our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

AW:

Oh really?

GE:

Yeah. I can't believe it.

AW:

Mine too. What time of the year?

GE:

December the second.

AW:

We're ahead of you. August. Mid-August. I was two, though, when we married. [laughter]

GE:

Well she was a teenage bride. [laughter] Well I told you met in Pittsburg.

AW:

Right.

GE:

She was from Yakima, Washington, so it was this strange deal where she had gotten her undergraduate degree at Willamette University in Salem. That was forty miles from Corvallis where Oregon State is. She turned out moving into the apartment next door to mine in Pittsburg. I walked out one day and here she was putting a sign up—her name on her door.

AW:

Well that's—

GE:

But yeah, we have a lot of things in common. Things haven't always worked out the way we had thought they might. When I took my job here—you asked why I came to Tech—one of the things that influenced me—I might have gotten an offer, I don't know, at a little college up in Wisconsin. Trying but I can't remember the name of it now. It'll come to me pretty soon. But anyway, it was a small liberal arts college. Part of the reason for coming to Tech instead of following up on that was because she would have had trouble finding a job, I think, in the small the community, even though Wisconsin probably, in terms of its politics, would have been more appealing. So we came to Lubbock, and I thought, Well this was a city of 150,000 people at that time, so yeah she out to be able to find a social work job. It took her quite a while to find a job, because they didn't know what a social worker was here in the seventies, early seventies. She finally got a job with Family Service. She eventually become the director of the Family Service Agency here.

AW:

Well, that'll be interesting. When you think about it just see if she'd be interested in a time to visit.

GE:

Yeah, it's going to be hard to get here break loose, I think, but I'll talk to her about it. She's kind of resistant.

AW:

Reticent? Yeah. Especially, I'll bet—bragging I bet. She doesn't walk to talk about herself. As you know, it's just a conversation. The other thing that I had down on my notes is I've given current circumstances—not just Donald Trump—but Donald Trump is only one in a whole series of things going on around the whole planet that are similar. The rise of the strong men again, the despots, the nationalists, the whole—you can make that list as long as you want. How do you see those of us in education—particularly odds things like writing songs and poems and teaching geography—how do we rise to the challenges?

GE:

Well I—we have a conference on engagement coming up on Tuesday. You probably know that. I'm giving a talk on—I do a service learning course. It's human geography except it's not human geography the way it's supposed to be taught. I focus it on issues of human well-being, and I've got a bunch of quotes that I'm going to put up on the Power Point on Tuesday afternoon. They're all from students who have gone through this course. I've been doing it as a service learning course since about 2006, so it's over ten years now. The quotes are all from this year's students. They're saying things like, "Service learning in your course helped me to understand that people who are poor aren't lazy," or that "Children. I now begin to understand the problems of children who are born into poverty," or "Now I begin to see that where you're born and where you're raised has a big impact on whether you're going to be in poverty for the rest of your life or not." I don't preach that stuff openly in the class, but what I do is I keep bringing up examples. Then they go down to Hope Community of Shalom, which where they're all doing their service. They go do Fiesta Domingo and they see these people coming in and they realize. I had one student who was—the program changes down there. They're constantly adapting and trying new things. Their latest thing is playing games with the people who come in. They want to get them engaged in card games and that kind of stuff. Part of it so that the volunteers engage with the clients. So I've got a student who comes in and he says, "Playing card with so-and-so was really interesting was really interesting because she can't count. So how do you play a card game if you can't count?" Sitting there and trying to figure out how to deal with this kind of stuff. I think that if we can find a way to let students kind of discover things on their own. Now, of course, back to where we were before. These are honors kids, so they're a little sharper than the average. I think any student who comes into college is capable of picking up on stuff. They wouldn't be here if they weren't. So if we can find ways—and there's a term for this, and it's called active learning. Kind of let them discover for themselves with a little bit of direction.

AW:

I've found in going back to this creative process last semester and doing this now. Fifteen years ago when I started it we would discuss things, and today no one will discuss. They want to take a test. They want to prove to you—and the honors students are the same—that I can memorize, I can read, I can do that sort of thing. So we're back to doing, "Get out your glue and your blunted scissors. We're going to make something in class." [laughter] I mean it's not quite that bad, but you know what I'm getting at. The action—the active side of it.

GE:

Well, I'm doing my Latin American film class I've been doing for years.

AW:

Oh I wish I could take that class. I'd love that.

GE:

It's a fun class to teach, but the problem is I showed a Brazilian film called *House of Sand*—I don't know if you've seen it.

AW:

No, I've not seen it.

GE:

It's a beautiful film.

AW:

House of Sand?

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

How old of a film is it?

GE:

2006.

AW:

Oh so not that old.

GE:

It'll blow your mind. It's all set in a national park in Brazil—they don't tell you it is—that's sand dunes.

AW:

Wow.

GE:

People don't think—that why the first thing I ask is, "Is this what you think of when you think of Brazil?" "No." It's a really interesting story. It goes through three generations of women who are living by themselves out in these sand dunes. It's a grandmother, and a mother, and a daughter. It starts out with the mother and the pregnant daughter. Then the third generation is born. The daughter is born. As the thing progresses over a period of about sixty years, and in that time period of course they all age. It's when the grandmother dies, then the woman who played the

grandmother starts to play the role of the mother, and the one who played the part of the daughter begins to play the role of the granddaughter. The two women are mother and daughter in reality.

AW:

Ah. So there's a resemblance.

GE:

Yeah.

AW:

That's—what a great idea. Just as filmography; forget the story.

GE:

Oh yeah, it's really interesting. It makes it a little hard until you realize what's going on.

AW:

That's one I'll have to look up. That got me all excited.

GE:

Anyway, the point I was going to make with that is that it's hard to get the students to talk about the films. I've gone through four of them now. I had them watch *El Topo*. I don't know—you've seen that one probably. These are the senior level students, so I figured, Okay, they can take *El Topo*. I never tried it before, and it went over pretty well. But even getting them to discuss that one was a little bit hard. What I told them after *House of Sand* was, "All right next week after the film I'm going to break you up into groups, and you're going to talk to each other." Because they're not responding to me, you know. I'll ask a question. I'll throw something out. Or I'll get the same three students who respond every time, and the rest of them are just—they're not there.

AW:

And all the while they're trying to assess what it is you want them to say.

GE:

Yeah. So I figure if I put them in groups, and then I'll ask them, "Okay,"—I'll give them an assignment and I'll say, "Okay these are the questions you need to answer," or "This is what I want you to report on from your group when you're done," and see if that works better.

AW:

Interesting. Well, we'll have to have another conversation about these techniques, because I'm finding it's different today. Plus I'm teaching a lot more freshmen, and—

GE:

That's—

AW:

—I've never had them before in honors.

GE:

Freshmen are hard. That's one of the reasons why the FYE course with the study on—a lot of these kids don't even know it's a work—I mean service learning class—when they take it. I keep telling the advisors, “Tell them it's service learning.” “Oh do we have to do twenty hours of serving?” “Yes, you do.”

AW:

I've banned electronic devices—computers, phones, tablets—in both my songwriter and honors class this semester. I expected to have a great pushback, and not a peep. Isn't that interesting?

GE:

Well, they may have had it elsewhere, but they—it's like an appendage. It's like it's attached to their hand.

AW:

It was almost like—and the reason it came to my mind was thinking about the service learning. I think when you say you can't use things it's like, “Oh thank goodness” you know? “I didn't need to use it, but I can't stop myself if you don't preclude it.” Well let me—this all bring up one—I hope I'm not taking up too much time. One other question—or one other topic that sort of fits into this—getting back to your filmography and geography itself is the intersection of art and science. We have the College of Arts and Sciences. It seems like never the twain shall meet.

GE:

Well and of course it's not really the College of Arts and Sciences anymore. They ought to change the name of the college, but nobody has had the guts to do that.

AW:

Right.

GE:

Yeah, when they spun the arts off, it quit being. The arts always were kind of marginal anyway. I serviced—this was when Jane Weiner was a relatively new dean—and I serviced on her tenure and promotion committee. I'd watch what happened when you'd get the people from music or

the people from art coming up for tenure and promotion. Most of us had no real sense for how you evaluate those people. It was kind of an alien process.

AW:

That makes sense.

GE:

Because, "All right I gave sixteen concerts." "Well okay?" [laughter]

AW:

I gave sixteen lectures, so how does that fit? Interesting. Well what have we not covered today that you wish we would?

GE:

Oh I don't know. Probably a whole lot of stuff. [laughter]

AW:

Then let's do this: If you think of a couple of other things or ten, jot them down on a list. We'll get back together and do this another time.

GE:

Okay.

AW:

I think there are a lot of other topics that—

GE:

I mean it would be kind of fun to talk about some of the stuff that—I've been engaged in university politics since I got here, practically. Jack Collins got me started.

AW:

Will you be comfortable talking about that?

GE:

Sure.

AW:

Good.

GE:

What are they going to me, Andy? They going to fire me? Great! [laughter]

AW:

"I need the time." [laughter] Well good. Let's—what time is it, speaking of it?

GE:

Oh it's 5—oh 3:15.

AW:

3:15? Well we have plenty of time if you want to talk a little bit about that.

GE:

Okay. I'm supposed to run over to meet Dorothy at 3:45. Dorothy Chansky. But—

AW:

Well then let's—I think it might take longer than a half hour—let's make that topic number one for the next visit because I think it's quite interesting. As you know, we're trying to look at this creative process commons idea to go horizontally instead of vertically. There is such an enormous resistance to anything that's horizontal that's not vertical within an existing tower, that I wonder how much of that is university politics, and just the way universities have been structured for so long?

GE:

I think there's so much gatekeeping and so much—we don't want—

AW:

Turf?

GE:

Yeah. If we give something up then that costs us. Everybody has turf. Let me give you something that you might find interesting.

AW:

Sure. I'm going to go ahead. Since we're in silence—I'm going to go ahead and say thank you, and stop this recording. We'll get back—

GE:

We kind of got off—

AW:

No, that's fine. This will be good. We'll take up next time.

End of Recording

