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Oral History of

Philip Billings

Professor *Emeritus* of English

Date: December 30, 2013

Interviewed by Art Ford

Professor *Emeritus* of English and Alumnus, Class of 1959

Transcribed by Stacie Allison

Vernon and Doris Bishop Library Technician

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Dr. Philip Billings, Professor *Emeritus* of English—Billings taught at Lebanon Valley from 1970 until his retirement in 2015. He is a poet with several published volumes. Billings also received the Hot Dog Frank Award for support of LVC athletics and the Vickroy Distinguished Teaching Award.

A: Ok, I am here with Phil Billings, soon-to-be retiree, I suppose, might be accurate to say. From the English Department of Lebanon Valley College. It's now December—what is it today, the 28th?

P: 30th.

A: 30th, ok. The 30th, 2013. We're in my home—I'm Art Ford—here in Annville. So Phil, first of all, where are you from? What's your hometown?

P: I'm from Canton, Ohio in Northeast Ohio. When I was there, it was a city of about 125,000, steel mill oriented, booming, four high schools—one of them was huge. Now it's a rust belt city—I guess you'd still call it a city—of about 75,000, but when I was there it was booming, and I was from the southwest end of it, which was a pretty blue collar area.

A: What did your dad do?

P: My dad was blue collar as could be, he was a plasterer. First he plastered for his father, and then he took the business over, and so he was a plastering contractor. And then in the late fifties, early sixties, plastering almost totally died because of paneling coming in, and then drywall. So he told me later when I went off to college—he had one son in college at Miami of Ohio, one son going off to private college, Heidelberg, and another daughter who would go off in two more years to another private college, and he had 800 dollars in the bank. That was it (laughing). So Mom went to work as a school secretary, and Dad became a—he had hundreds of contacts in Canton through his sports life and social life. He was a very sociable, sporty man. So, one of those people who owned a car dealership gave him a job as a used car salesman for a year. He didn't like that. But then another old friend gave him a chance to be assistant recreation department director, and he loved that. He scheduled all the leagues—180 softball

teams (laughing). Dozens of basketball and baseball teams. And that's what he did for the rest of his life till he retired in the early '80s.

A: So you had what? One brother, one sister?

P: One brother two years older and one sister two years younger. And my mom retired from the school secretary business maybe 15 years afterwards.

A: And your parents didn't have college degrees?

P: No, no—they were classic Depression kids who—there like these days would go to college for sure, but not in 1932.

A: What was the name of the high school you went to? You said there were four or...

P: Lincoln. I went to Canton Lincoln. It was about 12–1,300 students, grades 9 to 12. There was a vocational school called Timken, about the same size. There was a smaller high school up in the richer, more affluent and educated part of the city, about 800, called Lehman. And then there was this high school called McKinley, since President McKinley had lived in Canton. McKinley had about 2,500 students. They were the big athletic power, of course. My parents had both gone to McKinley.

A: Ok. When you were in high school, what interested you? What were your extracurricular activities?

P: I was mostly an athlete. I was a three-year varsity letter winner in football and basketball and four years in baseball. That was basically it. I had the smallest possible role in one senior class play and I screwed it up (laughing).

A: You don't remember the play, do you?

P: No, but it was one of these courtroom dramas where the audience finally acts as jury, and makes the decision on guilt or innocence. There are two endings to the play depending on what the audience finally votes.

A: What was your role?

P: I was the court policeman. Unfortunately there were two doors to go in and out of the courtroom, and I stood between them. I didn't go to any rehearsals—they told me I didn't need to—just to one so that I could get fitted for the uniform for the Canton police force, that's all I needed. So at one key point, a witness, under extreme cross-examining pressure on the stand, broke down and needed to be helped out of the courtroom. So I opened the door for her and the bailiff to leave, and they went out the other one (laughing). That was my dramatic career.

A: What about other interests besides sports? Academically or...

P: Oh, I was very interested, of course, in literature. Anything literary.

A: Favorite teachers there?

P: My favorite teacher...the teachers were all women back then, of course, all older single women with curled gray hair with a bluish tint. The best and most original one was Miss Grimes. Her nickname was Goldie. She was a small lady, I don't know, 60, 65 probably. Spunky and smart as hell, and she seemed to have read everything. A fast, avid reader, and she would give us lists of things we should read, too, that seemed impossibly long—pages and pages. But she taught literature and—they didn't call it AP back then—but with some of the better students, she'd let you read other, more modern things. That's when I started reading Hemingway, for example. And she just had this searing wit that would easily just keep all the roughest of football players or whatever in line. I remember her arguing once with a boy named

Jerry Lyke. He just wouldn't be quiet, just wouldn't stop disagreeing with her. She tried to sort of compromise so we could go on with class, but no, he wouldn't accept the compromise.

Finally she said, "Well, Jerry, that's your opinion, and you're stuck with it." And the whole class was silent; then we moved right on (laughing). Anyway, the rumors were that somebody had an uncle who had a big picture, a painting of her, or a photograph, in the attic, and she had once been a burlesque dancer. She claimed to have been in all 50 states in the United States—or was it 48 then? Anyway, this was so suspicious, that we figured there must be some reason behind it, and being a burlesque dancer was the best reason ever. We liked that reason a lot!

A: (laughing) More creative that way.

P: So we always saw Miss Grimes as our teacher who had earned this sexy name "Goldie" (laughing). You could almost sort of see it—she still had a cute little upturned nose (laughing). But no one had the courage to actually ask her, of course (laughing), how she'd happened to travel so much.

A: So then you went off to college.

P: Yep. Heidelberg College, in Tiffin, Ohio. Back then, it was always football coaches contacting me from various colleges. One was from Yale—a man who had just gone from Indiana to Yale. One was Army and one was Colgate, and one was a little school in Western Pennsylvania named Thiel that I had never heard of. And then Otterbein in Ohio, Ohio Northern, and then Heidelberg...

A: And why Heidelberg?

P: I did two overnights—one to Otterbein, and one to Heidelberg, and I simply liked Heidelberg better. The players and other people I met there, I don't know, it just felt comfortable. And they

had a great football winning tradition. At that point, the coach who had recently retired had the best win-loss record in NCAA history, and I was so tired of losing football games in high school, I thought this is a sure thing, to go to Heidelberg and be a winner. It didn't turn out quite that way (laughing). Because when that winning coach retired, a new coach came in, and it turned out that he wasn't very good. The old great coach had been keeping the program together with shoestrings and bubblegum connections. So when he left, it all fell apart.

A: So your major at Heidelberg was?

P: I went there as a would-be religion major. I was going to be a minister. And I was a member of the Christian Club for the first two years. Once in a while, I delivered sermons and led services and so forth around Canton and on campus. But I just got...the more I read great literature and then the more I started learning about other cultures, especially far Eastern cultures, from Dr. Noss and Dr. Putnam—both of whom were ministers—the more I started learning about Japan and China and India, their cultures and histories and religions and philosophies, the more I just suddenly couldn't be a Christian anymore; so I...literature suddenly seemed plenty religious to me. It was all the religion I seemed to need, so I became an English major at the last possible minute. I loved philosophy too. I thought about double majoring, but it just didn't happen.

A: Other activities besides the athletic activities?

P: Well, I was on the track team for two years and started on the football team for four years. I was voted sort of unofficially the best intramural basketball player for four years. I won the award for best senior athlete. I was in the English club. We had a magazine—I wasn't active in publishing it, but I published in the magazine a few times. What was it called?

A: I think it was called *Morpheus*.

P: *Morpheus*, right. *Morpheus*. So I was active in that. And I was in student government for a few years, and on the board that oversaw the Towers, the college center. I was on the faculty—student judicial board for a year or two. So, I was active in student politics. In my fraternity, I was a vice president.

A: Where did you go to graduate school? Did you go straight from undergraduate to graduate?

P: I went straight from Heidelberg to Michigan State University. I got accepted at five or six grad schools, but it had the best package. They were pushing a new program there to try to get better students, and I seemed to be a person they were after. Russell Nye, their most famous English Department person, came down and spoke to our English honors group one evening and recruited me and one other, Rick Gephardt, to go to Michigan State and get this special kind of teaching assistantship where the Ph.D. program was somewhat streamlined so you could actually get a masters in two years and a Ph.D. in five. And so it was the best deal I was offered compared to U. Mass, Bowling Green, Michigan, and Columbia. That's why I went to Michigan State, and I went there for five years.

A: And then at some point you came to Lebanon Valley College. What year was that?

P: 1970. I came here and interviewed with Dr. [Art] Ford and the rest of the English Department—also Dean [Carl] Ehrhart and President [Fred] Sample. My initial interview had been with Dr. Ford in late December at the annual M.L.A. convention in Denver. I took this job in February, and we moved here in August. Sue and I were repainting our apartment on Main Street, and I was too busy to look at all the College mail that had piled up over the summer; so I don't remember my first faculty meeting because I didn't go to it (laughing). I didn't see the

announcement of it in the mail. Not many people can say they missed their first faculty meeting. I think Dr. Ford was waiting to introduce me to the group, and it might have been a little bit of a disappointment to him (laughing).

A: Well, let's move on to the more conversational part of your stay here at Lebanon Valley College. You came in 1970. Was it 70?

P: 70. August of 70. Late summer of 70.

A: So that means if you are planning to retire at the end of this year...

P: I've been half-time for the last three semesters, and I'll do one more semester like that.

A: Ok. So that's...how long is that? That's a long...

P: 44 years.

A: Is that right? So you must have some memories...

P: I do.

A: ...of Lebanon Valley. Let me ask you, when you first arrived on campus, can you remember your thoughts about the campus itself—the physical plant? What did you think about it when you arrived on campus, either for the interview or later when you arrived to teach?

P: It seemed very small. Still, though, it was very reminiscent of Heidelberg. So I didn't feel as if I was coming to a college that was totally different from anything I had ever seen before. It felt comfortable being around 1,000 or so students. And I guess I'm not a huge person on things like architecture or technology or the up-to-dateness of things. So it seemed fine to me. The town seemed really different. I'd never been in such a little...you know, I was a city boy...so I'd never been in a little, old town like this, let alone a little Pennsylvania Dutch town with all these short stocky people and all the Pennsylvania Dutchisms in their speech. Mennonites driving in solid black cars (Corvairs mostly), big carriage houses in the alleys, old homes with wide porches with rounded pillars pressing right up against the sidewalks.

A: Let's start thinking about the department itself, when you first arrived. Any thoughts about that?

P: It was in a house like I just described—112 College Avenue—which now has just been renovated and is owned by Dan Massad and Scott Eggert. I guess the English Department had just recently moved into this or at least taken over the whole house when foreign languages moved two doors down. So it was all exciting to me to be in a new place. Chairman Ford put me upstairs in a kitchen. As I've since learned, that house and most of them in the neighborhood either had put additions on the back or they'd put in outside stairways so they could take second-story boarders. Or renters. There used to be a big shoe factory nearby and a lot of other clothing factories in town, and this was probably a way that hundreds of families made a little extra money. So at some point, the upstairs had been turned into another apartment. There was a toilet in the room right next to my office, and my office was an ex-kitchen. The kitchen cupboards were my bookshelves (laughing), and the sink was my sink (laughing). There was a rumor that this had at one point been a president's house. That's all. Nothing specific about who or when.

A: What did you teach when you first arrived?

P: Everybody taught—except maybe the Chair—taught four courses, and two of them were freshman English. That was always a given—English 111 and English 112. Then I would teach a General Education kind of survey course. The first one I remember is World Literature. It would be team-taught. There would be a lot of students in that course, maybe one or two lectures a week, and then break up into smaller discussion sections for the other one or two times. Having to do some research and prepare lectures on Greek theatre or humanism or any number of other subjects about which I knew almost nothing proved to be a great education for me. I don't think I taught Creative Writing then. Dr. Ford did that, I believe. But I usually got at least one more upper-level literature course during the year, one more in my specialty area of modern American lit. I'd written my dissertation on John Barth.

A: What was your opinion or impression of the students at that time? How did they stack up against Heidelberg or Michigan State students?

P: They were very similar to Heidelberg's. The thing that shocked me—that probably would have shocked me at Heidelberg if I had seen it from a teacher's perspective—was just how badly many freshmen wrote. They got almost no instruction, let alone really good instruction, on writing in high school back then. So that was a shock to me, to have to start at such an elementary level. The writing teaching I'd done at Michigan State was a low-level course, but it was mostly taken by upper-classmen in other majors like marketing or business. So these were people with some real verbal skills and maturity. That's what I was basically used to dealing with people in a writing class, and now to just get your basic freshman out of a little high school in this part of Pennsylvania that had never required one essay was quite shocking. Otherwise, they seemed very familiar. They were more socially conservative, maybe religiously, too, than Michigan State students had been, but, like MSU, there were a bunch of semi-hippies too. They were more open and friendly because of their smaller number. They knew each other better, and I liked getting to know them better. When I first came, I was closer to them in age than to almost any of my colleagues, so I actually identified with them and was friends with a lot of them. At Michigan State, where everything's so big and anonymous (there are 40,000 undergrads), there's so many tens of thousands of people, like when you walk across campus you don't make eye contact, you don't talk. I almost never saw two or three girls or guys walking across campus laughing about something, poking each other... Everything is straight, you know, you just...nobody knows anybody, you're just getting there, possibly on one of the 38 buses, so it was a change for me just to walk across campus and see a more friendly, animated kind of student. One who might even say, "Hi Dr. Billings." Might even want to play with my dog. Even know his name.

A: Let's stay with the English Department for a bit. What are your memories of high points, low points, with the department over the years you've been there?

P: Oh boy, that's a lot (laughing). Let me think. High points. You mean in the department's politics and working themselves or in my career as a member of it, or...?

A: Yeah, both, or just your impressions of the people who are there, people you worked with, courses you taught, changes in the department.

P: I thought I was in with a lot of people, with very few exceptions, who were very good teachers and cared passionately for their students. That was very inspiring and very much of a challenge, to try to be up to their level. It was a department that cared a lot about its students both inside and outside class. And that's something I always tried to carry with me through my whole time, including when I was chairman later. We had these meetings almost every week where you, Dr. Ford, would have ideas of what you needed us to do or what direction we needed to go in with the major, but it was never just "here's my way or the highway." It was always a discussion. You were always getting us democratically onboard with things. It was handled very democratically and yet efficiently. And important things did get done. All those meetings meant that you got to talk to each other a lot about teaching. Some meetings would just be spent on discussing how to grade essays—how would you grade this essay and why, how would you talk to the writer about it as compared to how someone else would. Things like that were just enormously helpful and enlightening to me, for sure.

A: You always brought a friend along to the department meetings.

P: Not always.

A: Tell us a little bit about your friend.

P: Once in a while, my dog, Brownie, a standard poodle, would get out (laughing). I lived on the other side of town, about ten minutes walk from the department; and once in a while when I would come back from an 11:00 class, there would be my dog sitting on the porch at the door, barking to get in. Apparently, I brought him there in the car so many times in evenings or on weekends or during the summer that he knew the way. Who knew? He didn't seem to be that bright a dog, but he knew how to navigate the south side of Annville and get across Main Street with all its traffic and find 112 College Avenue, so when that was the case I would just take him up to the department meeting. We'd all sit at these tables that made an oval, and he'd sit right in the middle of the oval, then flop down and go to sleep. Once in a while if somebody said something interesting, he'd sit up and look around (laughing).

A: Did he perk up very often?

P: (laughing) No, not too often, no.

A: Again, back to the department itself. Over the years, did you notice changes?

P: Well, as the College dwindled in enrollment in the '70s and early '80s, the department got smaller, and that was a big change. A few of the people like Richard Kirby left, and there was pressure to even have a few more people leave—maybe even me, especially with the new dean, Dean [Richard] Reed. So, it wasn't as happy a department that way. I think maybe we had 50 majors when I came, and we were down to like 15. That was not a happy situation. And then, one way the College tried to save money, since they were struggling financially, was of course, like every college, to cut back on maintenance. So it wasn't maintaining the department, house, and the lawns, as well as it used to, and it got to be a little embarrassing to take prospective students and their parents there for interviews. These were negatives, but the declining-number-of-majors thing turned around significantly in the early '80s when Dr. Ford proposed the idea of adding communications to literature and secondary Ed. in our major. Suddenly with communications aboard, and all of us teaching at least one course in communications as well as literature, we boomed. Soon we had 70, 80, 90 majors. I think we were the third biggest major on campus for quite a while. So that was good. And then the more we could keep those numbers, the more we could hire people. The market was in our favor, so I thought we hired some really good people in the early '90s, especially. One of the things I feel best about is being instrumental either as a chairman or as a confidant of the chairman in hiring several of the best people that were in the department for the next 20 years. One or two still are.

A: Who are they?

P: Dr. Gary Grieve-Carlson, for one. Ms. Marie Bongiovanni for another. Dr. Mary Pettice for another. Dr. Kevin Pry for another. Those four were stalwarts of the department for 20 years. The whole College owes a lot to them.

A: So you feel the department at this point is in pretty good shape?

P: Not as good as it was, because...well, a lot of reasons. Without getting too complicated about this, digital communications has become a major that has drawn a lot of students away who otherwise, in the last 30 years, would have been communications concentrators in English.

A: Now that's a separate department.

P: Now it's a separate department. First, it was just a program, then it became a department. So we have only about 50 majors now. So it's a little different situation. All the prognosticators used to say that eventually college English teaching would open up as a profession because of all the World War II vets who would retire, and that high school teaching would open up for the same reason, but it has not worked out that way. In those two areas chances are very slim to get good jobs. So that hasn't helped.

A: What do your majors do, eventually, now?

P: Almost half of them are still in the communications concentration. They go into newspaper work or journalism or online journalism or online marketing—whether they work for a company that has a website or they write blog for this or that. Some of them are just old-fashioned reporters. Some English majors still go into high school teaching. One or two have it in their minds to try to be a full-time tenured college professor. We try to be very realistic with them about the chances. Three years ago when we hired someone, for example, there were 87 tenure-track positions in the United States (laughing). In English. So you have to be honest with the students. You can't tell them that's a real promising professional goal. A number of them that I've worked with, especially when I've had them in creative writing, they get their MFA in Creative Writing somewhere. Other majors go into all kinds of interesting things—from law school to high school teaching—where they never imagined they would be, or they go into business. It's fascinating to see what they've done with their major. It seems to be a very portable, very useful kind of major in all kinds of unpredictable ways. Anything that involves language, use of language skills—verbal or written, thinking skills...I'm just giving our long-time sales pitch here (laughing) for the department.

A: Let's go back to the early days again. You mentioned some of the faculty who impress you these days. Within the English Department itself, for those early years, were there some faculty that stand out in your mind who were particularly good with the students?

P: Well, I thought you were great, Dr. Ford I mean. Dr. Agnes O'Donnell, of course. Her specialty, her baby, was world literature. We had three different courses in it then. I remember her being very leery when I wanted to start an Introduction to Literature course, because to that point each of those world lit. courses functioned as a kind of introduction to literature. She was afraid that my new version of an introduction of just, you know, how to read a book, how to read a story, how to read a poem, how to read a play—she was afraid that would take away from enrollment in her world literature classes. See, that's the kind of thing we would discuss at these noon meetings. We'd have very fruitful, useful discussions, I thought, and we'd work things out. Agnes was really good. There weren't many women on the faculty when I first came, so she and Dr. Jean Love in psychology had a lot of young women sort of studying at their knees, as it were, or just coming in for advice and conversation—academic, personal, whatever. Those two women meant a lot to a lot of the best, brightest female English majors and others, that I knew. They were fine role models. But I'm sure Agnes O'Donnell was just as good a teacher for the men in her classes too.

A: Let me ask you, interrupt there for a moment and pause there. When you first arrived, that was the high point of the Vietnam War, and all the controversy going on. Do you remember any things going on at the College, or did you have a lot of discussions with students? The male students especially didn't want to go off to fight and didn't support the war.

P: I didn't find as much of that at this College as I had at Michigan State. At Michigan State there were many demonstrations. My wife and I were a part of a few of them. I remember having to cross a picket line once to teach my class after we had bombed North Vietnam. That was a tough choice for me—should I cross that line or not. I didn't approve of the bombing, but I didn't see how cancelling classes would stop it. So I did cross the picket line, but then I spent the class discussing what our President Nixon had just done, I guess. And students came in, knocked on the door, you know, more liberal students who were organizing this one-day strike

came and knocked and asked if they could come in and address my class and try to talk them into walking out, and I said sure. That kind of thing wasn't happening here. By the way, no students walked out. M.S.U. students weren't really that radical either.

A: Was there anything happening?

P: I heard rumors. Stories, about the year or two before I got here when there was a small cohort of liberal students who clashed with the administration or with the College in general about things like the Vietnam War. Of course, when they were editors or prominent writers in the student newspaper—that was the vehicle for expressing disappointment and anger. After I'd come, I'd heard the story about something that had happened the year before. Some students had planted four mock gravesites in the middle of the academic quad to mark the four students who were killed during a demonstration at Kent State. The Ohio National Guard had killed four students, by firing into a mob—or not a mob—into a crowd of students. One of the people in the LVC Admissions Department complained to the administration that one of the four grave markers was a Star of David, and since this is a Christian school, and there shouldn't be a Jewish symbol like that. That's the story I was told. And I heard more about, you know, people like Agnes, and maybe you too, Art, calming the few student firebrands down. They would write screaming editorials in the student paper, and maybe they wanted to do more? I didn't see it that much when I came. It generally seemed more conservative than Michigan State or Columbia or Berkeley, as I said, which in its turn was much more conservative than the University of Michigan was. It's a real misunderstanding to think most students back in that day were liberal at all, let alone real hippies. Most were conservative children of working-class parents. Maybe their fathers had even been World War II vets, and so they had no sympathy whatsoever with war protesters. It was "love it or leave it." We had a lot of students like that when I came, and we still do.

A: Let's broaden this a bit, now, and still dealing with faculty, but not just English Department faculty. Were there other faculty or departments that made an impression on you, in your early years particularly?

P: I knew or at least heard the basic things about which departments were supposedly stronger than others. So we had the sciences. Biology and especially chemistry had a great reputation, and music. Other than that, you know, I didn't look at the College that much from a purely departmental standpoint. I often thought to myself or heard others say that maybe departments were too entrenched here, too important. It was hard, hard for a lot of people to see the bigger college picture because of the department interests that would be affected positively or negatively by any particular change. It was harder to change anything if bio, chemistry, and/or music didn't want it. And education too, since they had so many majors. But instead of thinking in terms of strong or weak or whatever, which I didn't feel all that qualified to judge, I thought about individual people in departments that I knew were really good.

A: And who were they?

P: Dr. Byrne—Donald Byrne—in religion would be an obvious one. He was a highly popular professor for all the right reasons. He won some of the first teaching awards that were given, and he also played the guitar and sang folk songs. He was just very talented, and he had a fascinating area of research. He got his degree from Duke University in popular religion. I think that was how he described it, and his work was just fascinating. He studied, for example, religious parades up in coal country towns, where there were primarily Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches. Anyway, he was a fascinating, charismatic, brilliant teacher of religion. Dr. Hearsey—Bryan Hearsey—was an excellent math professor. He was not just a math teacher but also a certified actuary. There was a fledgling actuarial science program in the Math Department when he came in '71. After just a few years the founder of it was leaving, so either it had to die or somebody had to pick it up, and no one else at the time knew anything about actuarial science, so Bryan Hearsey tagged himself to be the actuary guy, and he studied it on his own, and ended up passing five national exams. After that, basically he ran, and he was, the actuarial science program within the Math Department until about four years ago. The College just can't overstate how important he was to it. There have been so many good people in music—Scott Eggert, for sure, in composition as well as theory. There have been a lot of good people in English, too. Four or five of us have won the Teacher of the Year award in the last 20

or so years that it's been given. I'm proud of that. We're all proud of that—we should be, anyway. Kevin Pry is an outstanding member of the English Department. I don't think he's won that award. I'm not sure why. When I hired him 20 years ago, the main thing I had in mind, we all had in mind, was to improve and stabilize the theater program, the student-run Wig and Buckle Society. The students choose the plays, direct the plays, cast the plays, act the plays, build the set, do the lighting and tech—everything; but they have to have a strong, knowledgeable advisor or it just comes out very badly, embarrassingly amateurish. And had become, I'm afraid, not a very good club in all kinds of ways. The plays they performed before Kevin weren't good in any way, from the ambitiousness of the choice to the quality of the acting to, well, anything. Dr. Pry has really turned that around, and you're happy and even proud to go see those student plays now.

A: Let me ask you about a particular point in the history of the College. You mentioned the fact that at one point the English Department was way down. About that time, the College itself was pretty far down; enrollment was bad. What were your feelings at that point? Were you worried about the College? Did you think it would survive anyway?

P: I can be really stupid about things like that (laughing). I worried about it in the back of my mind, but I was just too busy teaching and doing my other activities—writing and running and playing basketball, and raising two little boys, to spend a lot of my time worrying about it. I just had sort of, I guess, blind faith that the College was not going to die, as long as I have four courses to teach every semester. When you were chairman you worked hard to make that happen. Often that meant the fourth course was taught in Harrisburg, at the University Center. But I was happy to do that—you had a whole different, adult kind of student at Harrisburg University Center. It was fascinating. It added a huge amount of variety to my teaching life, to teach John Updike novels, for example, to people who actually know what he's talking about (laughing), who've lived what he's describing, instead of students for whom it's all hypothetical. Maybe someday when I get married and have kids.... So to even supposed negatives like that, you can say, "Well, it's too bad you had to drive once a week all the way to Harrisburg at night." But I liked it. I liked those people. I liked teaching serious literature to grown-ups. I liked

teaching weekend college classes for the same reason. I mean, it was a stretch for our chairman to find courses for all of us, but as long as he could, I didn't spend a lot of time worrying about it. I thought, "Where else could I apply that would be more secure and more prosperous and have a little, maybe, higher class student?" I thought, "Albright!" (laughing). But I was too busy to apply, and then Albright just about died, and so I was very happy I didn't do that.

A: What committees did you serve on over the years, at least the ones you remember?

P: I was on a lot, but that was not as big a part of my professional life as it was for some of my colleagues. I wasn't seemingly on every important committee, sometimes more than one at a time. I can't remember what the titles of the four major faculty committees were back then; they've changed titles so often over the years. I was never on the Executive Committee or the Curriculum Committee. I was on just about every other committee, though.

A: What favorites did you have, if any?

P: I didn't have favorites. I didn't enjoy committee work a lot. The thing I felt that was my biggest accomplishment was, I helped devise a new tenure and promotion system for LVC. This was when the pressure got greater to have the faculty involved in tenure decisions, not just let it be a decision between the chair and the dean. We needed a system, like most other colleges: and I was on the committee that did that. Finally, Dr. [John] Kearney and I devised what we thought was a great system. It's a very subtle thing to do, a very complicated thing. So we thought we'd worked out all the complications, and we put it into play, and it seemed to be working. But then a new dean came in and found it too subtle, too complicated.

A: Which dean was that?

P: Toll. Dean [Ron] Toll.

A: Oh. Fairly recently.

P: Right, right. So he proposed another, simplified version, which we didn't think was as good as ours, but anyway, because he wanted it and he was the new dean, and it was kind of a grace period for him, his system "won." And who knows, he could be right. The dean has to explain

promotion and tenure system to every potential job candidate, and if he's not behind it, if he doesn't feel confident in explaining it, then even if it's theoretically good, it won't work. So anyway, apart from what happened to it a few years later, that was the faculty committee that I think I did my hardest and most sustained work on. I helped to change a faculty/college culture that badly needed it. I guess the committee work I did most and am most proud of was on non-faculty ones. One was the Spring Arts Festival Steering Committee. The festival started in '71 or '72 and soon became a very big deal in this whole area. It was aimed at entertaining the community first and foremost, not the student body. For the first 10 years or so we were one of the first such arts festivals in this part of the state. Many years we had 12-13,000 people attending. It was a student-run effort, but they needed a lot of guidance and help from faculty like me. Professionals and amateurs alike, scores of artists and craftsmen at tables all over the academic quad, a juried art show, dance groups, bands, orchestras, individual musicians and singers, theater groups, poetry readings, professional clowns, film showings, children's chalk art on campus walks, stands featuring foods from many different countries—from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, there were often four or five different activities going on at any one time. The hardest part was that you could only attend one at a time. It was a huge enterprise to organize, as you can imagine. The various student-subcommittees of course did most of the work; but several of us faculty members—particularly Rick Iskowitz in the Art Department (he *was* the Art Department)—met almost weekly all year long with the heads of the various subcommittees and helped them solve their many problems. Besides helping them write the grant application to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, I contacted most of the poets, arranged most of the readings, and helped choose many of the films. As our festival got more and more competition from others in eastern Pennsylvania and as the Arts Council grants shrank, it got harder and harder to pull off. It lasted for at least 20 years, though, and made thousands of people feel grateful to Lebanon Valley College. Another kind of committee I was sometimes on was a hiring committee. I'm especially proud that I was on and had a prominent voice in the committees that hired our two present basketball coaches [Brad McAlester and Todd Goclowski]. Both of those men have run winning, high-class programs for many years now. Speaking of sports, I think I was the first Faculty Athletic Representative: F.A.R. Definitely I

held the job the longest, 10–15 years. Verbally supporting players and coaches, being kept in the loop by A.D.s, helping to keep the lines of communication open between the Athletic Department and the faculty, especially when it came to conflicts between games or meets and classes or exams—these things were always a big deal to me. I hope I did it well.

A: Did you have any memories, one way or the other, of administrators over the years? We've had so many deans and presidents and whatever else they have in administration. Or was that just something that you didn't bother with because you were teaching?

P: I wouldn't say I didn't bother with it, but I didn't spend a lot of time like some of my colleagues just talking endlessly about, you know, the pros and cons of the latest decision, the latest policy, the latest hire, etc. I kind of knew what they were talking about, and I had my opinions about it, but some of my colleagues, they would talk every lunch, every party, every day of the week about things like that, and I just didn't. I don't have that kind of need for it. The different presidents all had strengths and weaknesses. The one that everyone agrees gets the most credit for this College still being here, literally, and being a good college too, is John Synodinos, of course. He came in '89, I think. Dr. [Fred] Sample—I thought he was a good man. He didn't seem to have a good grasp of fundraising, though. I'm told he came from a position of a high school superintendent, and of course fundraising wouldn't be part of that. But, he was a good man, nice man, honest man. When I see him and his wife at the occasional college functions even now, I'm happy to say hello to him. All of the presidents, no matter what their strengths or weaknesses may have been, always have treated me well. I've never had a personal complaint about any of them not treating me fairly, and sometimes more than fairly.

A: Let me broaden things out a bit here, as we sort of move towards an ending. As you think back over those times, were there any particular times when you were proudest to be at the College?

P: Boy, that's a tough one. It's just a general pride I always have, so to pick times that are even more so is tough. I guess, you might say a minor thing, but it didn't feel minor at the time, was in 1994 when we won the national championship in basketball. For our little school to be playing with real students—I mean, I don't know exactly what their grade point averages and

majors and so forth were, but they were all real students and graduated in four years in real majors. Of the four teams up at Buffalo for that national final, we were probably judged the third or fourth best just by sheer ability. But we played so hard and we were coached so well, and we won two games in overtime in the most thrilling imaginable ways. That was sheer...that was certainly my proudest time being an athletic fan at the College. I feel very proud of the College when I look around at the students and their families on graduation days. I don't know as many students now, since I'm only teaching half-time. But when you teach freshman English, along with two other courses within the four-year period, you know hundreds of students, and I just look out at those kids from the platform, like the time I was up there receiving the Teacher of the Year Award, or just look behind me when I'm in the faculty section, and I think, "Those are good kids, smart kids." They're not kids—I shouldn't say kids. People. I'm proud of what they've done here, and I hope I've done something for them that they'll remember as a positive. I hope at least a few of them will stay in touch. And in fact it has worked out that way. On those graduation days I feel proud. I feel like we've done something really genuine here with our students—moved them along a few steps, at least as well and maybe a little better than a lot of colleges could have.

A: The flipside of that is depressing times. Were there times when, it's not a matter of not being proud of the school, but when you just felt things weren't going right for the College?

P: Again, it can be hard sometimes for me to say "for the College," because that means having a grasp of what's going on on the administrative side or in other departments that I don't have, or I don't have very much of. But there was an interesting time when I felt both proud and not proud. When the U.S. invaded Iraq on March 17 or something, 2003. I thought declaring war was a horrible decision based on false information, which turned out to be exactly right. I mean, it was exactly right that it was wrong (laughing). But any of us who had followed the build-up to war more or less knew that. But Bush, Cheney, and the chicken hawk gang were going to do it. There were a couple dozen students who, by way of protesting, put up tents in the quad. The idea was to sleep in those tents until the war was over, I guess, but that of course didn't happen for a long time, so it was at least to sleep in those tents until final exam week. And that's what

they did. You can't study for final exams in the tent, I guess. I was proud of those students. Day after day they would sit outside their tents when they weren't in class and would be eager to engage anybody who passed by in conversation about the war, to debate it in a friendly way. They were being very professional and adult about it, I thought, and brave. And some part of me said I should be out there with them, get in a tent of my own at night to show my solidarity. The other part of me said, "No you have bad lungs" (laughing). It was a cold, snowy, sleety March and April that year. But the part I was not proud of was that, occasionally around 2 o'clock, 2:15 in the morning, after the bars in Annville had closed, some of the students going back to their dorms would bombard those tents with beer bottles—not always, I'm told, empty beer bottles. So, I was ashamed of that. That was their idea of debate. That's one place where both pride and shame came together. Our students aren't perfect like the professors—you can't expect that from them. But I don't mean to make light of it. There's sometimes a negative side to some of the conservative, small-town kind of students we often get, and sometimes it shows in ugly ways. But that's no way to end a conversation about my time here. My time dealing with LVC students has been so overwhelmingly positive. There has never been a year when many of my students weren't nicer than me and at least a few of them weren't smarter.

A: Yeah, well let me move toward a positive conclusion then.

P: Right.

A: Again, a broad question, and you've touched on a number of things here, but over the years, now that you are where you are and who you are, what part did Lebanon Valley College play in that? What has it meant to you, over all those years?

P: You mean just being in this College, this particular College?

A: Right.

P: Oh, for one thing, it's been my entire into getting to know this whole Pennsylvania Dutch area of the world, of the state, this little town called Annville and its surroundings, that I knew absolutely nothing about before. I ended up writing a few books based on interviews with the local people that taught me a lot more than I can ever express or repay.

A: These are your Porches books?

P: Yeah, Porches, Volume One and Porches, Volume Two—1985 and 1990. And then my 2004 book, When We Talk About War, based on interviews with Lebanon County combat veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam—and one young woman who was still in Iraq. So, being at this college has been my invitation to learn about the community, beyond the campus, too. This college has allowed me to get to know, be affected by, and hopefully affect positively thousands of people who were my students. I've always had such good relations with so many administrators, colleagues, maintenance staff, secretaries. I was just thinking the other day how many great English Department secretaries I've had since I've been here, beginning with Betty Michielson. Oh my gosh, I'm so lucky. When I retire, one thing I'll miss as much as anything is just going to be the social part of the job, you know. I'm surrounded by people who are often smarter than me, often work harder than me, often are just nicer than me - who have so often been so helpful and fun—that's a huge plus to come to work to every day. I think—I know—I can say that there has not been one day in 44 years that I didn't want to get out of bed and come to work. Not one day. Of course, a lot of it has to do with who your direct superior is. Your direct superior can make your life hell or heaven—or if not heaven, at least pretty damned good (laughing). If they don't support you and treat you fairly, you can't enjoy your work. If they actually seem to like you, that's even better. And of course, you were my direct superior for a long time as chairman of the English Department, but the other chairs have been good too. So have most of the deans. You put that together with the college and students that I just mentioned, and it's a no-brainer why I look forward to coming to work every day. I just never felt that all that work—all those 50–60 hour weeks year after year—was in vain or unappreciated or too much to ask, or anything like that. I was always treated as a respected professional. And on top of all that, I got to read and teach great literature year after year. Sometimes I even tried to write my own. How can you not love a job like that?

A: And finally, not that you're about to leave the college in one sense—of course in many other senses, you'll still be part of the college—how would you like to be remembered at Lebanon

Valley College? What do you want people to think of you after all these years, all these students?

P: Oh boy, these are the questions I haven't tried to face yet (laughing) as retirement's coming. I thought that's what you do after you retire—you think about these things. I've been too busy getting the next class prepared and the next set of exams or essays graded. But I guess I'd like to have old students think that our classes taught them important things and they respect and thank me for that. Some of them might even like me. I think the key to class morale and good faculty-student relationships like that is that they have to see that you respect them too, by working just as hard as you are making them work. So, I've always tried to show them, and once in a while even tell them, I know this is a lot of essays I'm requiring. A lot of quizzes, or a lot of rewrites, or a lot of conferences before and after the essays. But they soon realize that every rewrite that they turn in is another paper I wouldn't otherwise have to grade. Every quiz is something I wouldn't otherwise have to grade. Every conference takes time I could use in some other way. In surveys, I could just do the same things out of the anthology every time around, but I'm always trying something new. In world lit II, I'm trying literature from Japan this year (laughing). Things like that help to keep the course fresh for both the students and myself. I hope the students will remember me as someone who worked hard, not just in some mindless, punch the literature clock, punch or the writing clock factory way, but actually working hard on their behalf in a way that was often fun, too. Working hard to make them better writers, better readers, better thinkers, and to open up certain worlds of literature or travel to them, too. I hope they saw me as someone who was working so hard on their behalf and that they felt inspired to return the favor. It's not a favor exactly—after all I was getting paid for it (laughing).

A: Ok, any further thoughts for posterity?

P: One other thing. I hope my students saw me as someone who cared about their lives outside my class, too, someone who went to their plays and their concerts and their games and knew about their families sometimes, and about their weekend jobs. I hope that I've done a few things that helped them to see that I know that they don't just exist in my classes and then somehow get tucked away in a closet reading and writing for me until the next class (laughing).

I've tried to make that clear to students over the years, by attending events or simply knowing their names when I saw them on campus or wherever. I hope that made a lasting impression. There's no doubt they made one on me.

A: Good. Well, thank you Phil. Good conversation.

P: Thank you.