William Wasch Oral History Interview, Jun. 6, 2016

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Interview with William Wasch by Christine Foster

Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, June 6, 2016

Christine Foster:  This is an interview with Bill Wasch on the Wesleyan University campus on June 6, 2016. I'd like to start by hearing about your early life, where you're from, who was in your family.

William Wasch:  I was born in Scarsdale, New York in 1931. I lived there for about a year with my mother and father. Then, my father's business got very difficult during the Depression. My mother took me to Germany. We went to stay with her parents, her mother, in Eberbach, Germany. I lived there with her for five years. I grew up during the pre-Hitler period. I had my little brown suit; I was what they called a little *heine geplatzt*.

Christine Foster:  What does that mean?

William Wasch:  It's a little German kid.

Christine Foster:  Okay.

William Wasch:  I remember it distinctly because they used to get me to walk around town. I went to elementary school there. It was a beautiful part of the world. It's a little town on the Neckar River not far from Heidelberg. I was there for five years with my mother. My father would come over in the wintertime when his painting business was not doing well. We'd spend time with him and then he'd go back home, back to the U.S. In 1936, five years later, we came back to the U.S. because things got better with his business. I went to elementary school in Scarsdale at the Edgewood School. It's very interesting. My subsequent wife's brother was in my class. It was a very nice school.

I went through kindergarten there. Then, I went to the first grade. We moved to our own house then. We were living in an apartment on Brambach Road. Then, we went moved to Eastchester. I went to the Greenvale School. I was in the first grade. I don't know why, but about six of us in the class were skipped for a year. We had ended up eliminating our first year. I always wondered about it, but it turned out that all the kids that were skipped ended up at the top of their class when they graduated from high school. Something must have been going on.

I had a very happy high school experience. I went to Eastchester High School. Things I remember, we used to play punch ball in the backyard of the school. I had a very happy time. In high school, I was a little fat kid, but then as I got older, I lost some weight. I became more trim and then I went out for football, which was what young men did in those days. I was on the varsity football team; I played tackle. My senior year I was co-captain. Then, I did very well in school. I took a regular curriculum -- science, math. I had a very, very helpful principal who guided me
through the college process.

He told me that I should look at a good liberal arts school. He was very helpful to me. He’d gone to Bates himself. He knew about Wesleyan and sent me to Wesleyan for interviews. I applied to Wesleyan; I received a scholarship at Wesleyan. That was very prestigious thing to get. You know how expensive education is now? I actually ended making money in college.

Christine Foster: Amazing.

William Wasch: Which is hard to believe. Tuition was about $300 a year. This was in '48 to '52. I came to Wesleyan; I applied; I was admitted, got the scholarship. Then, I joined a fraternity, which everyone did in those days. What they used to do, the older alumni would visit these local kids who were coming into college. Two of them visited me in Scarsdale. I always get a kick out of this: A couple of Alpha Delts came to my house. My mother offered them a drink and right away their eyes lit up. She ended up giving them orange juice. They thought they were going to get a fancy drink.

It was a very interesting experience. We used to have day dates at Wesleyan. You visit each of the fraternities. I went to Alpha Delt, had my day date, went to Chi Psi. I went to a couple of other fraternities. I ended up joined Alpha Delt as a freshman. It was a good choice, great group of people in that house, all male. I ended up getting a job there washing pots. I played football at Wesleyan. I was in the glee club. I was class president. I had a great time at Wesleyan, a wonderful experience. It was very tough academically, but I did well. I ended up being Phi Beta and class president. I was a big man on campus, so to speak, but we had a good time.

I played football. We had an undefeated team. Then, when I made the varsity in my sophomore year, then we broke our streak. I felt responsible for that. Not really, but I was on the team. We had a good season, but we did not do as well as we’d done the year before. At Wesleyan, I majored in economics. My mentor was Professor Hallowell in the economics department. I did a senior thesis. Before I graduated, I decided I wanted to go to business school or law school. He advised me and I applied to Columbia graduate school. I was admitted with a Bronfman fellowship, which paid the whole thing. It's amazing when I think of how valuable these scholarships are.

I went to Columbia; I majored in marketing. I went there for two years or a year and a half. In those days, we were all worried about the military. I decided that I would stay at Columbia and see what I could do to get out, graduate, and get into the Navy. Then, I needed that extra year. I got into the Navy Supply Corps and then went to Newport. I became an ensign. I thought I’d go on a destroyer as a supply officer, but then my father died. I had to stay home with my sister and mother and support the family, which I did. I ended up being a subway sailor. I commuted to New York. I worked on mine force fitting out mine sweepers, which was a very interesting job.
I worked with a civilian group. We had to make sure all the parts were on the ship. I was a fitting out officer. That was a very good experience for me; I learned a lot and I learned a lot about business. I was in the Navy for three years. The next thing was what do I do now? I ended up going back to Columbia. When I think how difficult it is for young people to get jobs, but in those days it was much easier. I had Columbia's recommendations. I ended up going to Exxon in the treasurer's office. I worked for them for three years. It was a great job. Then, I met my wife in New York. This was while I was still in the Navy.

Our first date was taking her to a launching of a ship, which was a big deal. We started seeing a lot of each other. We met at a church in Scarsdale. I was in a choir there because I was at home and sang in the church choir. The choir director was Buffalo Bob Smith, the Howdy Doody guy. He was wonderful and he promoted our romance. Susie had this little VW bug. We used to race this big Cadillac after the choir rehearsals. We spent a lot of time with each other and then we got married in 1958. We had a wonderful wedding and went on our honeymoon in Nova Scotia. At the time I was working for Exxon; I worked for them for a couple of years.

Then, I found that I was considering going overseas with them and that didn't work out. Then, we had children and then we bought a house in Scarsdale. I became a suburban father. At the time, I was still active in Wesleyan. I went to work for another oil company, Sinclair. Then, I decided that I didn't like that. I ended up writing Wesleyan because when I was here, the dean had asked me if I'd be interested in doing admissions work. I wrote Wesleyan and the alumni director, Baxter Patrick, invited us to come for a weekend. We came up during that really inspiring time when Kennedy was president: “Do what you can for your country.” We got all taken up in that whole thing.

I came up for a weekend and I ran into my mentor, Professor Hallowell. He invited me to join the alumni office. They had someone come to run the alumni fund, but that had fallen through. They hired me and we decided that we'd leave Scarsdale and go back to Wesleyan. This is in 1964.

Christine Foster: Had you had all your children at this point?

William Wasch: We had three.

Christine Foster: Great, okay. Tell me their names.

William Wasch: Christina was the oldest and William Jr., and Heidi. They were like Irish twins; there were three of them. They were only a year apart. It was a pretty busy time. Before I came to work here, I insisted that we get them in a good nursery school. We went into Mrs. Roura’s nursery school, which she had on our street. Christina was there and then the other two went there, too. Then, we got into the alumni work. Baxter was my boss -- big job. They had raised a lot of money the year before, but the Surdna Foundation had matched the alumni fund. That was a challenge to try to do
a really good job and keep the money coming in.

Wesleyan had a reasonable amount of money, but it was unbelievable, the whole project, because all of a sudden a year later they sold *The Weekly Reader* to Xerox. All of a sudden, we had more money than we could spend, which was very difficult. It was hard to raise money when you couldn't show a need for it. When I went out and visited all the alumni class chairs, went to Washington, upper New York. Some of the young graduates, Dave Potts who just wrote the Wesleyan history, was a class chairman.

Christine Foster: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the alums you remember visiting who were interesting?

William Wasch: Two of them I liked a lot were the Ryder brothers, Frank and George. They lived in Cobleskill, New York. They were class of '00 and '01.

Christine Foster: Wow.

William Wasch: They were real old timers; both were consigns. They just are so loyal. The most fascinating alumnus I met was Red Travis, class of '20. He was a businessman, but he loved Wesleyan. We were trying to raise money and Red said, "What you got to do is you got to really work on these alumni." We decided that Bill Heisler, who was president of Citizens Bank in Providence, he said, "Let's get Red on the alumni fund committee." Red became the special gifts chair. I gave him a dictating machine. He would just foam at the mouth, write all of these letters. I still remember my secretary when those tapes came. The old IBM tapes blue things, full of letters. It turned out that he was writing his family history. He used a lot of the correspondence to write to family members for his history. She used to just cringe when all of these tapes would show up. She was a terrific secretary.

We knocked them out and Red would send the letters. He wrote in exchange for being special gifts chair. He headed up writing all these letters. He had his private secretary and we did very well. He was able to get people to contribute large sums, increase each year. I did that for three years. Baxter Patrick retired. The fellow that was the development director, Lewis Lusardi in New York. Hallowell asked me to run the development program. I hired a guy, Stan Purdee, to do planned giving. I had to get another person to run the alumni fund. I hired John Corcoran and he ran the fund.

Then after Baxter retired, he asked me to be the alumni secretary, which was a little different because you did the fund, but you also had to run the reunions, run class programs, have a great number of alumni seminars. I did all of that and then I hired Ed Geigus to be my associate. When John Corcoran left and Phil Rockwell became the alumni fund director. We had a great group. We had Phil Rockwell, Ed Geigus and myself and Bea Quinn was the secretary for the whole operations. She kept track of all the gifts. Alumni would visit her. I remember one alumnus, Walter Crowell. He was in the giftware business, very successful class chairman.
He would come up and he liked Bea Quinn, but nothing every developed there. He was a very faithful alumnus. He loved his wife and he had a girlfriend. She felt that she was going to inherit all of his money. When he died, I remember it all went to Wesleyan. She was a little upset, but these things happen. We used his money; the Crowell Concert Hall is named for him. We were able to build up quite an endowment. This was I'd say 1970. We had a very difficult time because in 1968, I guess, Vic Butterfield, who was my hero, retired. Then we got Ted Etherington, who was this dynamo on Wall Street. He became president. He was supported by Gil Clee, who was chairman of the board.

Then I remember when he became president he would interview all the staff. I had to go through and meet him, went down to his office on Wall Street, had lunch. Then, I met Colin Campbell, who was his assistant. Then he checked me out to see if I could be the alumni director and I got the job. I passed muster, so to speak. We had a fascinating time because all hell broke loose at that time, the student revolution. We had a lot of problems. We were firebombed and then finally they firebombed my office. We made it through. The building is no longer there. It turned out that our house was right next to the office. The Wesleyan security stopped in. They said, "Your building's on fire." We never knew who threw the firebomb.

I called Phil Rockwell and Ed Geiges. We were out there directing the firemen. The fire was in the building in the walls. I remember the big joke. Phil and I were still able to get into the building. We went into one of the offices. The big joke was which box do we take, the in or the out box? Not that it made any difference, but we did get out. The building was destroyed. It was a cold, bitter night. All the files were frozen; the water got in. The files were on the top floor. We had to move everything over to Scott lab and leave the files outside. We had to microfilm everything. We got through that. We continued our programs.

Christine Foster: Can you explain...someday someone will listen to this and they'll wonder what were the underlying causes of the unrest on campus at that point? Why did they manifest at Wesleyan in such an intense way?

William Wasch: I don't really know. The real problem was that we had a significant number of minority students that were recruited by Jack Hoy. These students, many of them were admitted. They thought they could do the work. A lot of them, if they'd gone to a prep school that might have made a difference, but they did come here. You'd walk down the campus and the black students would just have a grim face on. I don't know. It was throughout the country. I really wish I could understand what was going on. Ed Sanders, for example, was one of the students. We had these Wesleyan Perspective Programs. The alumni would come back and Ed would get up there. He'd stand there with his arms up. Now, he's a very prominent Methodist minister in the Midwest, but in those days he was very powerful and very angry.

They did well. Wesleyan did a great job in recruiting black minority students. They
had a good education. That was part of the problem that Ted had. He was very understanding, but he had so many problems on the campus that he had to leave. He resigned and he said he was going to run for Congress, but he didn't do very well. It's a Greek tragedy. In the long run, the minority students did very well. Now, Wesleyan has a significant number. Jack, as the dean of admissions, recruited a lot of them. We went coed the next year.

Christine Foster: What year was that?

William Wasch: 1973 or 4. They did it easily. They had a small number of women first. They took women from Smith and Wellesley. They came I slowly and then all of a sudden they admitted a whole class. The women did make a big difference to Wesleyan.

Christine Foster: What did you notice? What was different?

William Wasch: Wesleyan did it right when Colin was president. We didn't go to a separate campus like Hamilton did. We had these mixed dormitories. I remember we had this Chinese student living with us. She was the first Chinese student that came to Wesleyan, Naogan Ma. She came to us and stayed with us for a year because she needed to ground herself in English. We said she can live with us and then Wesleyan could send her to summer school. It made all the difference in the world for her because she had a better understanding of English.

She said, "Mrs. Wasch, I went to my bathroom and there was a man in there."

Here's a 28-year-old married Chinese woman living in a Wesleyan dormitory. So she lived with us the next year. We were able to bring her husband over. We took the first alumni trip to China, which was another very interesting part of my job. Every other year we take these trips. We had two faculty members go with us. We met her husband in Beijing.

Christine Foster: That was early to go to China.

William Wasch: 1970. It was very early, one of the first alumni trips to China. I remember my wife wanted to be sure that we met [Ma’s] husband. We took a taxi from the hotel we were staying in, in Beijing. Went through a lot of military, went to his dormitory, found out he was back at our hotel with his professor. We had a wonderful time with him. Then, he traveled with our alumni group. We went to the Great Wall together. It was a different country at that time. They all had their Mao jackets, a lot of bicycles. He really wanted to come to Wesleyan. Luckily, his father was the head of the Chinese National Bank. He was well connected. His wife, her father was mayor of Hohuhut, Inner Mongolia.

She was well connected. He was able to come to the US. We got him in the community college through the Rotary Club. He came and they were reunited. They've had two children and one of them went to Wesleyan. She taught Chinese at Trinity for many years and is teaching at Loomis Chaffee now. She was the first Freeman scholar. That's a wonderful program that Wesleyan has. The Freeman
family sponsored six Asian students, 60. Everything was fine until the AIG went down the tube. That was about $60 million a year that Wesleyan got. That something that my successor, John Driscoll, would go with the Freeman family to recruit students in Asia. John said when he got the job that all he had to do was go to funerals and travel. He did a lot of traveling with the Freemans.

Christine Foster: I feel like we’ve moved up through the ’70s. Want to talk more heading into the ’80s and beyond?

William Wasch: I left Wesleyan in ’85. My oldest son had graduated. I had one more child in college. That was one of the wonderful about the Wesleyan program is that you got your half of the Wesleyan tuition for each child. That was a wonderful thing. My daughter, Heidi, went to Wesleyan. She met her husband here. Billy went here and Christina went to Hampshire, the oldest child. They had a very good experience on the campus. I always kept up with the fraternity. I was treasurer of Alpha Delt for many years. I was also treasurer of the Skull and Serpents Society, which is the senior honorary society.

I enjoyed my job very much. When I left, I’d gotten interested in aging. I wrote a book called Home Planning for Your Later Years, which was published and which is just a lot of common sense ideas on what you should do when you get older, accessibility in your house. It’s got a lot of interesting ideas in it. I did that after I left Wesleyan. I was on the board of the National Council on Aging, American Society of Aging. I ran a couple of conferences for them. I spent a lot of time on that.

Christine Foster: Let’s talk more about the Wasch Center. That clearly grew out of the interest on aging. Do you know what got you interested?

William Wasch: I guess one thing that got me very interested was the accessibility issue. I realized that as you get older, as I know now, that there are so many common-sense things you can do. Railings on both sides of the stairway, I did a lot of research on products. We have a very fancy toilet called a Clos-o-Mat, which is the German word for toilet. It gives you a warm water douche and a blow dry. It’s expensive, but they make them in Switzerland. Now, the Japanese have made the Toto. That’s a product, but it’s a very simple idea. I realize that there are so many things you can do. A chair that lifts you up, railings, level entrances to houses, which is crucial. In our house we had to raise the porch so there’s no step and level entrances.

We have a ramp that goes from the driveway to the porch. Even the dog likes it. The dogs can get into the house. There are so many things you can do. Living on one floor, you can do it. We have an elevator in the house. My daughter’s an architect. She’s done a lot of work in that area.

It was the work with the National Council on Aging that got me interested in that.
realize that there's so many things you can do, common sense things. Then I wrote
the book and that was lucky. I ran into a woman through the National Council on
Aging who knew the publisher who wanted to do a book on aging. I worked with an
editor. I didn't have a big advance, but it's worked out very well. They did a
beautiful job with it. I should have brought it along. It may be in the library here,
but anyhow it was a big ego trip to have a book published like that.

Christine Foster: You stayed in Middletown?

William Wasch: I've stayed in Middletown after I retired. Because of the work I've done in aging,
that's where I got the idea. It's very interesting how we got the Wasch Center
going. Karl Scheibe and I, we played squash together. We had a party for all the
squash players at our house. One guy had left; he was retiring. We were sitting
there at the house. We had thought about the Wasch Squash. That didn't really
ring any bells. We decided that a better thing to do would be to do something like a
retirement center. Then I got in a conversation with Barbara Jan-Wilson and David;
What was his name? I can't remember his name. We negotiated an arrangement
where they would name the building for us. It would be then we would donate the
initial money for it.

We made a pledge of a million dollars, half to come from our estate and the other
half over a period of years. Then they named the building and they found this
building here. We were able to raise additional money from my class. We gave the
foyer out here and then George Creeger, this is the Creeger Room. He had bought
an old painting years ago. It was one of these primitive paintings. It had been given
to him. He had bought it. He borrowed $100 from us and he bought the painting
and then sold it for $50,000.

Christine Foster: Oh my gosh.

William Wasch: He gave Wesleyan the $50,000, which was a lovely thing to do. We also named the
Barber Room, which is next door. That was named for Bill Barber. Then, the
Butterfield Room is the other room. Bob McElvey gave $100,000 for that. Then they
also made contributions for upstairs. It's been a wonderful community, too. It's
interesting; the faculty, when they come into the Wasch Center, they leave their
discipline behind. You get science, social science, psychologists working together.
We have eight offices here. Bill Firshein wrote a book on microbes. Kay Smith wrote
a book on theater. There have been quite a few research projects done after they
retired.

People don't feel like they've been drummed out anymore, which is one of the nice
things. I've been involved also in Seabury, which is a retirement community in
Bloomfield. I was on that initial board. We built a retirement center. That's another
thing that I realized that there are many things you can do. That's an option. A lot
of people live in Essex Meadows now, which is another very successful retirement
community. I do think that you've got to keep active. That's what's made the
difference. Karl has done an amazing job here, including these research projects
that you're working on.

Christine Foster: Yeah, it's great to hear people's stories. It's amazing, and everyone has a different perspective and a different spot they see the university from.

William Wasch: Wesleyan has been a great institution. Having worked here for so many years, you really get into it. One of the things my wife and I enjoy doing a lot, we've worked with all the foreign students. We used to go to Germany in the summer to visit relatives. I visit my cousin Herman the German. Actually, I'm going to go on a trip with him this next month. We go over there a lot. We've had some very good friends. Wesleyan used to have this program where they would take 10 foreign students each year. They would come here. We've kept up with them. Willy Brenner, he's in Augsburg, Germany. Rudy Lowe is another German. He was with the Bavarian TV. We keep in touch with him in Munich.

One time we took a trip where we visited all the foreign students, alumni. Wesleyan, now what they've done is they had a program for Asian students. The Freeman Program's a good example of that. President Roth has kept that going. That's one of the things I'm very proud of Wesleyan is its international aspects.

Christine Foster: What do you think of Wesleyan now?

William Wasch: They're doing a great job. I'm a keep fan of Roth. He's done some interesting things. He's done a lot with film. They've got a lot of film graduates. Michael Bay with the Transformers and Buffy, The Vampire Slayer. I'm not crazy about all of them, but they've done very well on that. I admire his willingness to take this internet courses. He's taught a course. Our friend, Andy Szegedy-Maszak taught a Greek history course, which I took. He lectures on there and it's on the internet. It's got thousands of students.

Christine Foster: Right.

William Wasch: At least they're willing to experiment. It's not like running a regular class where you have a discussion, but it reaches out to a lot of people. He did a very good thing. His campaign, they've got $400 million now, $450 million, but they realize that they've got to build up the endowment. We used to have more money than we could spend. When I was the alumni director we had this monstrous sale of Xerox for $60 million. We had an endowment per student that was the largest in the country. Then we started increasing the size of the student body. We started spending money and we really had to back off. That's what he's done. He's stopped that. They're doing very well. They don't have the endowment that Williams and Amherst has, but they've got a very good program.

When you think of a family that has spent $60,000 for a year and back when I was a student it was $600, the tuition. I ended up I made enough money in my newspaper route and in my washing pots in the fraternity house, I ended up
making more money than that. I came out and I didn't end up with the big debts that some of these kids have. That's one of the big differences between the US and Europe. My son's in Germany and he doesn't have any tuition. It's really tough on families. I'm on the board of the Alpha Deltas Foundation. When I think of what the applications begin, what they need, it's really hard for a family to come up with that money.

Christine Foster: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

William Wasch: Thinking. I'm very happy about the Wasch Center and the way that's worked. My wife and I were also very interested in the riverfront. We made a small donation matched by my neighbor, this riverfront recapture. The Conway school up in Amherst, we went to a meeting there last week where they have a plan. Up above the Canoe Club, the whole area will become a park. That's going to be that whole area. It's very interesting. The mayor's very keen on that. That's going to make a big difference in Middletown because you're down there and it's just beautiful, the river. Middletown used to be a beautiful seaport in the 1800's. We can't reconstruct that again, but there's so much you can do down there. I'm trying to think. That's pretty much it.

Christine Foster: Thank you. It was a delight to talk to you, Bill.

William Wasch: I hope it's helpful.