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Emma Paine
Wesleyan University

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Interview Two with William Firshein by Emma Paine, Wasch Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, April 12, 2012.

EMMA PAINE: Okay, so it’s noon on Thursday, April 12th, and I’m here again with the Daniel Ayres Professor of Biology Emeritus, Dr. William Firshein, and we’re picking up where we left off on Tuesday.  

WILLIAM FIRSHEIN: Okay. I wanted to just bring up one little personal thing—it was important for my really getting—not the job here, but as you know, I said I earned my Ph.D. in 1958. That has—that was really a seminal, or a wonderful event for my family and me, because no one had ever gotten a Ph.D.; some others did go on later to become M.D.s, but no one received a Ph.D., and it was quite an occasion. My mother and father, and my brothers and sister all went down to Rutgers to listen to a famous general, Westmoreland, who was the commander in Vietnam. It was a wonderful time, and I never forgot it.  

Because I came here in the late fifties, it was really fortunate, because Wesleyan started to really expand in the sixties, as I said. I don’t remember exactly when women were admitted; when I came, Wesleyan was a school that had 600 men, young men. No women then. But, we had a master’s program in biology, so there were some women in that. I didn’t really think much of it, because usually all the young men were gone by Friday, going up to Mount Holyoke and Smith, [laughs] and all of those places, and Vassar. So it was quite a decision for Wesleyan to expand in this sector. I’m not sure I remember why, but it had to do with selling, getting, selling—did you ever use the Weekly Reader when you were growing up?  

Paine: Mm-hm.
Firshein: Well, that used to be owned by Wesleyan. They sold it, and Xerox, the big corporation bought it, and Wesleyan got lots of money from that. They put that money into the endowment but they had a lot of extra, and so in the sixties, they started to expand. Now, as my horizons grew, so did theirs. I started to publish; in the sixties, for example, I published 24 papers, and I received grants for about $350,000 from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. And I gave about ten or fifteen seminars. So, even before the expansion, because of the master’s program, we were able to use these graduate students, and we also had some marvelous undergraduates.

Now, a very important part that I always have emphasized is that if you’re going to be a good teacher, you just can’t teach. You have got to engage in research so that you can explain how you’re doing things, and what you are doing, and almost as important—getting criticism. In other words, you can’t just be like a high person who does things and no one can criticize them because being criticized is important. It puts you into context, and you get criticized when you submit a paper, when you submit grant proposals, and when talking to your colleagues, as well as when working with the students—in other words, in your laboratories. For science, it’s a group effort, much more than humanities or social sciences. When you have this mindset, or this attitude that you are engaging in research, basic research, with the knowledge of all the pitfalls, you take three steps forward and two steps back, and you can encourage the students who work for you, too, the same way. So, a very important reason, one of the reasons I came here to Wesleyan, was because they had a program, like a master’s program, and I was told that they would expand into a Ph.D. program.
Also, I was very favorably disposed to accept the job because Wesleyan had two really wonderful aspects to it that other schools, even Amherst and Williams, didn’t have. One was they had sabbaticals, not every seven years, but you could take one in your fourth year, like a half a year, and you could couple that with a half-year leave if you could get a fellowship, so you could take a whole year away after four years. So, even though I came in 1958, I was able to take a fellowship that I won, called a special fellowship from the National Institutes of Health, and I went with my family in 1961-62, to Israel, to the Department of Microbiology at the Hebrew University. I spent a whole year in Israel. If you work at a university you’re not going to be a billionaire, but you’re going to be able to travel and do wonderful things. I’ve had about five or six sabbaticals in my fifty years. Even though, I could have taken some early as I got older, I didn’t take them as frequently.

Another important reason why I came to Wesleyan has to do, and I think that a lot of faculty appreciated it at the time, Wesleyan contributed to your pension, the Teachers Insurance Annuity Association and College Retirement Equity Funds, TIAA and CREF. My salary, when I came in 1958, was $5,600 a year. It was all right, but it was not a lot, but Wesleyan gave fifteen percent more to the pension fund. All the years that they contributed fifteen percent added up with the accumulated interest and things, so I began to get it. I felt secure, which was very important in enabling me to do my work and teach, and not worry about what happened to my family and me when I retired. Now that has changed; in the seventies and eighties they lowered it. I don’t know what it is now. Now it may be seven and a half percent that they give, and you contribute what you want.
But for me, for a long time, fifteen percent was just put right into it, and it was just a marvelous thing.

So that, plus the sabbaticals, and the relatively small student body, were all very important to allow me to continue my basic research and become a good teacher. When I first came, as I think I told you, I taught microbiology, but then they threw me into the introductory laboratory with the fetal pig, and I didn’t know anything about it. [Laughs] I had to learn. So for four years, I taught that. Eventually I began to broaden my course offerings because we also expanded and developed the graduate program. In the sixties, the expansion was very important. The Center for Humanities was built on Pearl Street behind the big house on the corner there. History and sociology had the Public Affairs Center. But we just had the master’s program, which then turned out to be not enough, so we all—all the “hard” sciences—physics, math, chemistry and biology—got together, and we proposed to have a Ph.D. program.

This was very difficult because a lot of faculty in the non-sciences were—first of all, they didn’t think that a small university should have a Ph.D. program. But then why were we called a university? Amherst is called a college, Amherst College, and Williams is called a college. Those were the same type, but Wesleyan has always been known as the university. We argued that with more faculty we could broaden our course offerings and we could have joint programs with chemistry, like biochemistry, or even with physics, like biophysics. So, with all of this, plus the admittance of women, that gave a lot of spirit to the people—to the faculty. You know, this is a huge family, and you not only have activities in your own profession as well as teaching, but you also become—you interact with other faculty, and at faculty meetings, and you form groups. There was a junior faculty that we
were all part of—the young assistant professors. And then there were other committees. You could go and express your opinions at the faculty meetings. However, for me—and you can see, I’m not afraid to express my opinion, but when I first came in 1958 and went to my first faculty meeting, which by the way, even today all the faculty meetings still involve the entire faculty, but they don’t all come. At that time, with a small faculty, they did. I was just astounded—it knocked my socks off. You had such brilliant people, like Rosenbaum and others, who would get up and make huge, you know, tremendous speeches about something. So I was just awed, and I didn’t say anything at a meeting for a couple of years.

But then I began to...see, that’s it, everything works together. It’s like your whole circulatory system. I gained confidence in writing papers and getting grants. I got my first research grant in 1959. In the early sixties, as I said, I published twenty-four papers, with some students and myself. I won $350,000 in research grants, and I gave about fifteen to twenty seminars. So, as I got confidence in my professional work, I gained confidence to speak out about issues—all kinds of issues. About education. What did I know, I was a scientist? There’s huge differences in the way an English professor would teach English, the way we would teach science, because we have laboratories. You know, when you teach introductory biology and you want to get away from fetal pigs, you want to do experiments. It’s not easy, because you have 160 or 200 students in a class, and you have to divide them up into laboratory sections every day of the week, in the afternoon, and sometimes even in the evening.

So with all of that, you know, you’re constantly using your mind, and then you broaden yourself in faculty meetings. It’s a wonderful social milieu that I just reveled in; I loved it! Of course, one of the big issues was salary;
we always fought about salaries. [Laughs] I was on many committees, and involved in financial problems, our salary levels, and so on. Meanwhile, the president, Butterfield, was still here. One of the biggest expansions, or changes, that occurred for us in biology was the construction of Hall-Atwater Labs. We were all of six people in biology at the time. It’s a very old building, but it’s beautiful; it has Georgian lines and big thick floors. I remember I would have a lot of trouble with the people who take care of the whole campus—whatever they’re called.

I remember that when I got my first grant from the National Science Foundation, I had to order a centrifuge—not just a centrifuge, but a refrigerated one, because you had to centrifuge your little bugs in the cold. The engineers were afraid that they would break the floors. I said, “What do you think? The floors are two feet thick in Shanklin!” So I had troubles with them. Also, I had to have an air conditioner—no one had ever had this in the fifties or before. I said, “I’m going to have to buy an air conditioner, because we work with Bunsen burners, you know, the flame, and in the summer you sweat, and you could have an accident.” So I had to fight to get an air conditioner—you know, things like that.

You’re always busy doing something, whether it’s teaching, doing research, giving lectures, [Laughs] arguing with the engineers. In fact, I was called in by the Dean of the Faculty, who said that I was making too many waves because I needed an air conditioner. I said, “Well, I can’t do my research. The students could be hurt if they get contaminated.” All of these things fed into a sort of a profession—your lifestyle. Of course, I was married, and I had a couple of kids at the time. But the decision, I think, to build Hall-Atwater was a very, very important one.
Now, what they had to do was to destroy the Hall Laboratory, which was a separate chemistry building, and that space was where they built Hall-Atwater, which is connected to Shanklin. We shared the Hall-Atwater Lab with the Chemistry Department. Now, it’s interesting; just in the past five, six, seven years, they wanted to build a new Life Science building. They got money, although not enough, but then because of the economic downtown, they cancelled it. So they did a lot of renovations in there, but I was almost retired. Anyway, everything was always moving forward. We were never going backward. This what has kept the life very exciting at Wesleyan. As I said, I also took my first sabbatical in Israel in 1961. Hall-Atwater, the building, was built in 1967-’69, or ’66 to ’68. I went on another sabbatical in ’69 to ’70 to California, to La Jolla, the University of California, La Jolla. Have you ever been to La Jolla? Oh, it is so beautiful! Southern California, man! I mean, they have earthquakes, but so what? I had two sabbaticals during those ten years.

All right, so in the sixties, women were admitted, Hall-Atwater was constructed, I published papers, I earned research grants. And so, advanced learning for us meant a Ph.D. program. As I said, for the humanities, it was the Humanities Center, and the PAC. So it was created in 1969. We did hire new people. I said, oh, in the middle sixties, I gave you those two names: Barry Keiffer and Spence Berry, who had published and had also gotten their Ph.D.s. They went and did post-doctorals with eminent faculty—but they came in the sixties, so those two were our first expansion. Then we hired another one, an evolutionist, who worked on butterflies—John Burns. He—Burns—had the most magnificent collection of butterflies I have ever seen! I don’t know anything about butterflies, but I knew genetics, of course.
I was a good evolutionist. But he—eventually he didn’t get tenure; he would always fight.

You know, that’s another thing. You’re interacting with faculty, you know. We’re all not saints, I’ll tell you. [Laughs] So there are conflicts that emerge, and I had them with the faculty in the Chemistry Department, hardly any in our own department. But, this fellow John Burns had a conflict with this professor, Vince Cochran. He didn’t publish that much, and he didn’t get tenure, although he got a great job down at the Smithsonian. He was a very nice guy.

So, that was sixties, okay? All right, so we moved in; I moved from Shanklin into Hall-Atwater. In 1965, I was promoted to associate professor; I think I said that. With tenure. But my colleague, John Morrill, who was working on snails, didn’t make it. That’s why we hired two others with the expansion. Really, the sixties were an exhausting, awesome kind of ten years for me. I went from age 30 to 40, all right? [Laughs] Okay. Now, another life altering event occurred in 1966, because one of the—another good aspect of Wesleyan’s support of faculty was that we were given travel funds to go to meetings or things. I had gone to meetings every year of my national organization, which was called the American Society for Microbiology, or ASM. But there were other international meetings that I went to, and one of them, in 1966, was the first International Congress of Microbiology. And where was it held? In Moscow!

Now, 1966 was still the height of the Cold War, but in a way, it was a chance to break the ice a little bit. It was very, very difficult to do. We all got hung up in England. We flew from New York to London, and we waited there for almost a day, because no one could fly to Moscow in a commercial plane. You had to get navigators from Moscow, Russia, USSR, at that time,
to come and fly you there. There were over 5,000 people at that international—I mean, it was so exciting to go to Moscow! The incredible thing was that I gave my paper—you only speak for 20 or 30 minutes, and the rest of it is sightseeing, talking to colleagues, and going to restaurants. I mean, it is science; it’s all interwoven. I gave my talk on the first day. I think it was in July 1966. Then I was sort of free, and I walked around, and so on. So, it was quite an exciting time.

And again, this comes with a wonderful program, or the wonderful initiatives of Wesleyan, to give travel money. Now, you could also get travel money from your research grant. You could also put in your research proposal stipends for graduate students, so that also helped. In 1966 I applied for what turned out to be another first for Wesleyan, something that really helped my career and Wesleyan at the same time. This was a grant from the National Institutes of Health called a Career Development Award. It was the most prestigious fellowship that I got in my 50 years. It was a five-year award, which allows you to teach less. Wesleyan, on the money they saved on me for those five years, was able to hire yet another assistant professor. So, it was quite prestigious that I was the first one to ever get anything like that at Wesleyan. The two people I mentioned, Barry Keiffer and Spencer Berry, eventually got Career Development Awards. This is an amazing thing for a small university like Wesleyan. That’s why, I say, we far outweigh Amherst and Williams, which are excellent schools, but can’t hold a candle to us in the sciences. They can’t because of our research potential. So I got that from 1966 to 1971, the Career Development Award.

You can see how much the sixties did for me. As I said, when I went to Moscow I had been married for 14 years and things weren’t working out, so we eventually got a divorce. It sounds crazy, but I met a Russian woman
in Moscow, and when I came back, we corresponded and I went back for other visits. Eventually I got divorced and eventually we got married in Moscow in 1971. It’s some epic, let me tell you. All of that was going on—my teaching, my research, my other meetings, a sabbatical in La Jolla, another at the University of California in 1969-70. In 1962-63 I went to the Hebrew University in Israel. In 1968-69 I went to the University of Copenhagen, Institute of Microbiology, where I was much closer to Moscow.

So I went and visited my girlfriend—who could even think of any kind of relationship coming to fruition, but we kept at it. We finally did get married in Moscow, and she was able to get out about four months later. The reason she was able to get out was because one of the most reviled presidents—I didn’t ever like him—was Nixon, but he started détente with the Soviets, with Brezhnev, and things loosened up for a number of years, so she was able to come to the United States after we were married. I had three children by my first marriage, and they were growing up. One went to Wesleyan, one went to Berkeley, and another went to Alfred in New York.

My next sabbatical was in the seventies. That was another milestone because it was a very famous place. We went to Paris, to the Institute Pasteur, in 1974-75. So, I had three sabbaticals in about 15 years. I became a better teacher; I really did, because I learned so much information, and there was so much new knowledge coming out in immunology, and virology, and in microbiology, that I was able to put that together and organize a new course. I taught microbiology for many years beginning in the sixties to the eighties. And then I developed a new course in the sixties, immunology, which talks about how the immune system works. I taught it for many years, so that was the second course.
And then I combined that with a course in viruses. Now, viruses are much smaller, and imagine students coming into a laboratory and working with diverse life forms like tobacco plants, eggs, mice. This was mostly a laboratory course, where we would take viruses—which were very difficult to get unless you ordered them or knew somebody. We used tobacco plants as the hosts to one of the most—the first and most famous virus that was ever purified, and it was called Tobacco Mosaic Virus. You could rub that on a leaf, and they would be able to grow on the leaf, and you could see the pockmarks on the leaves as they grew up. As I say, a virus is about a hundredth—a thousand times smaller than a bacterium cell. We were able to use the plants to study how they grew with the infected viruses.

With eggs, we worked with chicken influenza. We don’t get chicken influenza, but you grow them in eggs. You know, an egg has an air pocket on the heavy—one side, and you make a hole in that, and you inject a virus into the egg, and then the virus infects the membrane and the embryo. Then you break open the egg, which didn’t smell so good, and you tease out the membrane, and on the membrane were these pockmarks that represented the viruses. That’s how we studied them. Then they inoculated mice with viruses as well. Also, they worked with rabbits. We would inject bacterial extracts, or viral extracts, into a rabbit, and they would make antibodies. An antibody is formed by the blood system; those antibodies would then react with the antigen, which was the infecting bacterial cell or virus. So, I had to teach them how to take blood from a rabbit. Imagine the incredible, tremendous diversity of learning that they went through, by doing, not me just telling them. They did it! And that’s what I loved about that course. So, viruses and immune mechanism.
Then, as biology grew, we began to hire a lot of people in the seventies, in biophysics for example, and more biochemistry. Neurobiology was a very strong new program, or field, to get into, so we hired neurobiologists, but it became clear that we were going to run out of room. Even with Hall-Atwater, we were hiring people—not running out of room so much, but having a lot of different programs in the Biology Department. And so there was some conflict that arose. Actually I didn’t—one of the few times I didn’t initiate it. This came from my colleagues.

Another person who had been hired in the late sixties, who was a biochemist, is Anthony, or Tony, Infante. He’s proven to be a wonderful colleague, and we’ve been friends for many, many years. Because of the expansion of fields, and the sort of general coming together of knowledge, it was possible to collaborate. That’s another important aspect of small university. I was able to collaborate with two: Spencer Berry, who was a developmental embryologist, and Tony Infante, who was a biochemist. So, we wrote grants together, grant proposals, and we were funded. That was another expansion of my own responsibility, or interest.

Now, Spencer Berry worked with these moths; they’re called Cecropia. They’re beautiful. They’re furry, fuzzy, but they have beautiful wings. He was studying how they develop, so we wrote a grant proposal to study how genes or DNA is synthesized in bacteria, and actually he was doing that in the pupae stage of his moths; that’s what he used to study. We were studying enzymes of how—making DNA precursors, which are the building blocks of DNA, and we had a graduate student who worked with us, too. It was just a wonderful type of relationship! We also had undergraduates working.
Now, that’s another thing. I think in my 50 years, I worked with about 65 undergraduates, total. And of those 65 undergraduates, about 25 of them were able to publish papers with me from the work that they did, which is not bad. To them, it was a learning experience—a wonderful experience.

I think being a teacher is one of the greatest professions in the world. But you can’t just teach; you have to do something else with it. For me, that was my basic research. It was very important for students to see my enthusiasm. They all wrote about how enthusiastic I was. By that time—in the seventies or eighties they had started student evaluations. That is still a sort of a thorn in some people’s side. I think that the evaluations by seniors or juniors are fine; in your own field, you can evaluate. But what about freshmen? You can’t expect them to evaluate someone who is teaching 200 students in a freshman lecture or a lab. It’s very difficult. So they initiated student evaluations at that time, which was another problem for all of us. But, you know, I’ve had mostly good evaluations, and sometimes excellent. And, they all come in—and they do help, because you get a theme. Enthusiastic, or not. Some of them question that I talk too fast, so, that kind of stuff. But that’s okay. It’s part of the criticism; you learn. And especially with young people like you, I just—I love you all. I mean, I really did find a niche.

Oh, by the way, when I was in Copenhagen I had an automobile accident. I broke my nose, and I got a scar, so I started to grow a beard, or a goatee, and ever since then, I’ve always had a beard. The students look at me as a patriarch, you know, real professor, with a pipe. I haven’t smoked in years, so that’s [Laughs] another part of the growing up.

So, the late sixties. The collaboration with my colleagues was very good, as with Dr. Infante. Then there were the seventies, ten years of
research, teaching, developing new courses. Then I taught one of the best successes I had: teaching a course for non-science majors. I called it Molecules, Microbes and Man. Taught it for years and years, and really hundreds of students who would take the course. It was a lecture course, but I talked about everything starting with atoms and molecules, so they got everything in there. But then, I really concentrated on microbes and excited them; really tried to show them about plagues or about emerging diseases, or how we—how it was found that the gene was made of DNA, and so on and so forth. I taught it for really almost 20 years.

In 1968, as I said, we did get permission to start a Ph.D. program. It was difficult. The students—the graduate students even today, there are some brilliant ones—I don’t think they’re as good as the undergraduates. But, they work hard. For most of them, like the 15 that I’ve had—you know, it takes four to five to six years to get a Ph.D., and when you collaborating with somebody, it can even take longer. Most of the students, the graduate students, have gotten good jobs and good professions. And so I developed graduate courses called Advanced Microbiology, Topics in DNA Replication, Molecular Basis of Pathogenicity—all very, very detailed and restricted to those aspects.

We allowed undergraduates who wanted to take it, seniors and juniors, so that was another part. The mixture between undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, maybe a post-doctoral or a technician, was just a huge, creative, chaotic mix. It’s like fermentation—you know, you throw them all in and out comes a wonderful bisque, or something. I think that also is very different in science than in other fields, because in another field, you have your computer, the library, and a pencil and a piece of paper, or the
computer. But, we have lab meetings and experiments that you discuss with your students.

About the size of the group—if you go to MIT or Harvard, some of those groups maybe have 20, 25 people. None of us ever had more than about three, maybe six together. Me, my technician, a couple of graduate students, and three undergraduates. We would work and do experiments, and then they would write—oh, that’s the other part. You have to learn how to write. I was a lousy writer for a long time, but I learned. It’s the same with the students; they had to write honors theses.

So anyway, yeah, so honors theses, mostly for the undergrads. Some graduate students wrote their master’s theses, but most wrote Ph.D. theses. I had about 15 graduate students, and I always got a copy of the thesis, so I could look at them occasionally. It was a wonderful time for them. They really learned what it means to do research. Some of them went on; half of my students went on to get an M.D. They had an M.D./Ph.D. Others went on, just to different universities, or some even went on to administration. I have one student who was working at the University of Maryland, and then he got a job administering all the research grants of one division. That’s what he does now. It doesn’t matter, as long as they learn something and are satisfied. I don’t think I have one student who ever dropped out. They’ve gone on. Hey, they write me sometimes, you know. In fact, one of my post-docs—he just retired.

So we started the PhD program in 1968, right? They broke ground for the new life science building, Hall-Atwater, in 1967. And the president who was still president during the sixties, Butterfield—he was a wonderful man! [Laughs] He liked to also be a farmer, or to drive bulldozers. We had a ground-breaking ceremony, right over there, right where the greenhouse was
going to be. They had a big bulldozer there, and we all came out of the building, and Butterfield got up on the bulldozer. You know, he was going to dig a ceremonial first load. So he started the gear, and it went backwards. [Laughs] He just didn’t go forward, he went backwards. It was funny. Anyway, he was a wonderful man, and I really liked him a lot.

The new building was built in the late sixties. I got married again in ’71. [Laughs] We had women who came in who had research grants. I had gotten fellowships. The seventies were a big period for expansion, with new programs in the Biology Department. The hard sciences were Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Physics. Then there was geology—they called it geology then; it became environmental sciences later. And psychology.

Through social activities, I got to meet a physiological psychologist, who I didn’t write a grant with, but we published some papers about what happens when mice learn something. What happens to their RNA or the DNA? So we published a couple of papers with my psychologist friend, I mean physiology. They used to be in Judd Hall.

In 1970, we published a paper together with the mice research psychologist and two of his students about the changes when you learn something in the molecular—molecules in the brain. What they meant then, I don’t know. We tried to find what was called the memory molecule, but we didn’t find it, really. That was the whole thrust of stuff: publishing, going to meetings, then I got married again in the early seventies, and then I went to the Pasteur Institute in the middle seventies, and developed new courses. I was an active scientist. I never won a Nobel Prize, and I never was elected to the National Academy, but I was asked to give seminars. I have a list of 40 that I remember.
You see, there are a lot of conferences on the bacterial chromosome: European Molecular Biology Organization, Conference on Plasma and Molecular Biology [Laughs], Institute of the University of California at Irvine, Massachusetts Institute, Stony Brook, Yale, University of Rochester. This is great. You know, you’re active. I really have to say that it was Wesleyan that gave me this opportunity. Would I have gotten it at another place? Probably, but somehow, you know, for me being close to New York— you know, I’m a New Yorker, Brooklyn boy. The East Coast is still— was still better. And you could travel on sabbatical.

So I really have had a wonderful life. I mean, there are some sad things. My brother died when he was only in his 40s, before we went to California. But my sister and mother stayed alive a long time. And I said my three other children—they all live out in California now. My oldest boy is 52. [Laughs] I have another son who’s 49; he’s going to be fifty in October. And a daughter who went to Wesleyan, she’s a ’65. She’s 47 already. They’re not married, so that’s another thing, but I couldn’t do anything about that.

So, in the seventies, we kept our courses going, and our programs, and we—you always agitate for more new faculty, and we did get more new faculty. Oh also, I became the chairman of the Biology Department for three years, from 1972 to 1975, and so, you know, you handle that, too. Plus, you did get teaching relief, one course, and that helped a lot. I was the chief radiation safety officer. Every university has to have a safety officer that works to make sure there is no contamination, that you use the right procedures. I had a wonderful helper, who’s over there, he was—he used to be in the Chemistry Department, then he moved to Hall-Atwater. His name is Don Albert. So he helped me, the two of us. We would have inspections,
and you really have to be—yeah, you don’t want to spill radioactivity. But we didn’t; you didn’t use very much of it. There were isotopes of tritium, which is hydrogen three, carbon fourteen. Some of them, like phosphorus thirty-two was a little—decay had to work—but they decayed. So I did that, too.

So you see, I took a lot of responsibilities. Chairman, developed a computer program, safety manual we wrote, with my helper Don. And at the same time, I became—I was elected to faculty committees. Here’s one: University Faculty Planning Committee. Oh, that was in the 1980s. There was something very important that happened in the late seventies that also was a life-changing, game-changing event. We began to discuss the possibility of splitting off from the Biology Department, because, like I said, we had about 12 people, or ten people, in neurobiology, and evolution, and genetics, and microbiology, and cell biology, and embryology. But there were a number of us, maybe six of us, who were very sort of molecularly-oriented, with microbes.

Molecular biology was a very big development in biology, starting really in the fifties, and just, you know, taking off. So molecular biology, and then biochemistry—those two fields were very linked together. Then, because we had hired a person in biophysics, which is another two words—biology and physics—they were not like the physics in the physics department. But we had a biophysicist who was working with the changes in electrons in DNA, or in RNA, part of that protein.

So five of us in our department, and one member of the chemistry department—his name was Paul Haake (he was retired and he died about two months ago) got together to discuss the possibility of forming a new department, and the department would be called Molecular Biology and
Biochemistry—MBB. There was much more opposition to that than there was to even establishing the PhD program.

At the time, in the seventies, there was a huge shake-up, or a criticism, that the Board of Trustees, who were supposedly taking care of the investments, were spending money and not making enough in the investments because we’d started to build and expand. You know, Wesleyan was a once the wealthiest school in the country per student, richer than Amherst and Williams. There were big faculty meetings in the seventies, where it was said that these board members were just having fun. It was called churning: churning the portfolio. It means buying and selling stocks back and forth, and they weren’t really making any money. So we were losing money. It eventually stabilized. They got a whole new bunch of board members—a number who worked on Wall Street. You know, they needed them! But they had to start making money, and as a result we did lose our ranking to Amherst and Williams, in the end. But still—still our departments were functioning and very good. Then, things gradually became stabilized, and they started to earn money.

And so in the late ’seventies, as I said, the five of us in our department, and one member of the Chemistry Department, got together to discuss this possibility. After lots of aggravation and angst—oh, I forgot to say, too, of course, Butterfield retired at the end of the sixties, after Hall-Atwater was built. There was a new president, who we thought who would be a terrific one forever. He was the president of the American Stock Exchange. His name was Etherington, Edwin Etherington. We thought that he would be just the best, and as a matter of fact, he really was. He gave the faculty really generous raises. You know, we were all for that—but again, it was part of losing the money. He brought an assistant with him, whose name
was Colin Campbell. And though Etherington resigned after three years—he got sick, and Campbell was chosen for the president.

He was the one who really stabilized the university, and he was president for 20 years. So, it was he who we had to discuss our plans with. He was very sympathetic. He was, and is still, a very nice guy. He’s retired now of course. But we had to convince the faculty. I remember, I and my colleagues, we divided it up—the regular Biology Department was okay with it, because then they could expand neurobiology and evolution. And even Chemistry was. But a lot of the non-science departments, even Physics—they didn’t like it, because it meant you had to have some kind of an endowment. And Campbell pledged a million dollars to help us grow and form our own department. I remember going to a lot of different departments—English was one, and History, and Economics, to discuss why we thought it was important for basic knowledge. And sure, true, the knowledge was just exploding about what a gene was on a molecular level, and how protein—how it worked, how they made the cells work. I mean, just a marvelous time! The Nobel Prize winners at that time all were in—were in what was called Medicine—but they all were microbiologists, or biochemists, or molecular biologists.

So indeed, we did; we were able to form our own department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry—and there are still—to this day, there are murmurs sometimes, even from outside: “Why do we need two departments at a small university?” We did have outside evaluators, who, after we told them about the program, where we wanted to go, were very enthusiastic. So, Biology was able to get new appointees. And in Molecular Biology, we got two or three new appointees. In fact, that’s when the first dean of science was picked, or appointed by, Campbell, and he was Barry
Keifer. He was the first dean of science, in fact, of any—they didn’t have dean of humanities then, but Barry Keifer became the first dean of science, and we were very good friends.

And you know what? Another life coincidence. We, Barry and I, were in the same army company in basic training in the fifties. In 1953, when I was drafted after I got my master’s degree, they wanted to make a military policeman out of me. They sent me to Augusta, Georgia. In that same company was Barry! Now, when he came for an interview, it was so funny. We recognized each other and I couldn’t understand, how did we know each other? I’m older than he is, or at least I thought I was. I said, “Where do we know each other?” He was born and brought up in Bayonne, New Jersey. But we finally got that we were in the army together, in the same company. He had never gone to college. He went into the army and then after he got out, he went and got his bachelor’s, master’s and Ph.D. So that was out in California, and then he came here. He was appointed by Campbell to be the first dean of science. Is that incredible, how you know somebody—meet somebody from the ends of the world, and here they are?

Paine: [Laughs]

Firshein: All right, so, we formed our department in 1982, right. The department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, and it was the only new department formed since 1914. They did form an Astronomy Department, I know that, in the late—after the First World War or something. But we were the only new department—well, second new department. There was a graduate Department of Ethnomusicology; I guess they have that. So that was another graduate program that was a Ph.D. program. In fact, that’s the only one they have in the non-sciences, I think, a Ph.D. program in ethnomusicology.

Okay, so I have—again, this career development award, as I said that I got in
1966. Five years were really wonderful for me, because I could do more research, and yet I was able to still teach, even though it was one less course. They were able to hire new people to take my place, and to augment our offerings.

There were, I think, about twenty, twenty-two people in the Life Sciences and Molecular Biology at Wesleyan, so it really turned out to be very good. I kept getting grants, and I was on sabbatical. I earned—see it all here? It’s over three million dollars in grants in my career. Today, that’s not considered to be the greatest thing, but then, because of inflation, it’s pretty good. Scientists really have to do research, right? But in order to do the research, you have to get funded to do the research. Now the university can’t give you the amount of money you need to do your research for three years—you get some, $600—so you have to write for grants, but in order to write for grants you have to have publications.

So it’s like a vicious circle, almost. So we got to publish, to write—and in order to publish, we’ve got to get grants, and in order to get grants, you’ve got to publish, so you’re constantly working. As I said, in the non-sciences, great as you are, you just need the computer and the library. I mean, you have to write a book. That’s pretty good. I told you, I’m just trying, first time. I wrote a book. I never wrote one. I wrote lots of articles, research articles, even reviews, almost eighty of them, so I know what it is. But it is not a constant—if you have any initiative. You can’t just sit—in other words, after you get tenure, this has always been one of the complaints of some people. After someone gets tenure, they don’t have to do anything. They may not get raises, except automatic raises for inflation. But most of us, I mean 98 percent of us, will continue to push forward, because we love
it. I mean, we love research. I stopped in 2005, when I was 75 years old—the last paper I ever published.

Okay, so the eighties found us with a new Department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry. And we interacted with the Biology Department, and they expanded in neurobiology and evolution, and we expanded in biophysics and biochemistry. And let’s see... Tony and protein chemistry, all kinds of things like that. Another exciting thing—although I didn’t participate—was that our department, together with chemistry, applied for and got a training grant. Now a training grant is a grant given to a number of people who will work together to train, in a way, researchers in the field. They have to take a certain number of courses.

There’s a guy in Chemistry named David Beveridge. He’s a biophysicist, and in our department, we have two people, Ishita Mukerji and Manju Hingorani, who have this training grant in biophysics. So, and there’s three of them. That’s very prestigious to have. And again, it’s all because of vision. I think that presidents Campbell and Butterfield knew that they may not have understood science so much, but they knew that in order to go forward, you have to expand; you have to allow time to do research, even though you have to teach. I mean, not you have to; I don’t want to make it seem as though it was a chore. It’s not. Sometimes it’s a chore. Like, if I taught the introductory course, I eventually graduated from the laboratory to the lecture side. [Laughs] And I taught it with Tony Infante for about eight years. That huge lecture hall would be full with students, and we would lecture, and they would have laboratories. We had to be able to hire a laboratory teacher actually, to help teach—to do the labs. They do all kinds of intricate technological things—all the techniques that they learn. Even though it’s freshman, they start to learn these things, so it’s really good.
And then we worked out a special program. See, in sciences, again, it’s not easy just to take what you want. The sequence of courses—you have to take your introductory course, and then you take an advanced sort of cell course for two years. It’s only after two years that you can then branch out into the elective courses, whether they can be graduate courses, or upper level courses. So the last two years is when you have the freedom.

But of course, you also have to take courses in the humanities and in history. You know, so it’s again an old mishmash of chaos and creation. As I say, I loved it.

Okay, so that was the eighties, early eighties, we formed our department, Molecular Biology. And you know, even though I was still called the Daniel Ayres Professor of Biology, and—oh, and in 1990, I guess, or the late eighties, Campbell retired. He was president for eighteen years. The next president was a guy named Chace, Bill Chace. Not that I didn’t like him, but it was difficult to interact with him. I was on faculty committees with him. It wasn’t such a fun time, but he didn’t last that long. The next president in the nineties was Douglas Bennet, and he lasted for about ten years, and now you’ve got Roth, right? So I actually went through how many presidents? Butterfield, Etherington, Campbell, Chace, Bennett, and now, the first year that Roth came I was still on the faculty—so six presidents [laughs] passed through.

After my sabbatical in Paris, I went, in the eighties, in 1982, or ’81, went to the University of Geneva in Switzerland for half a year. That was very nice. Switzerland is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Have you been to Switzerland? Oh, you’ve got to go. Oh, you will, darling.

Paine: [Laughs]
Firshein: Anyway, it was Geneva; it was a wonderful time. Now by that time, I had two other children, with my new wife, Anna, who I married in Moscow. Forty years, we’ve been married. It’s worked out, even though she came from God knows where, and I came from here. We had two children; one works in New York, and the other works in Cambridge. The one in Cambridge went to MIT, very smart kid. I think because of my wife, not me. [Laughs]

Paine: What does she do? Is she interested in science, too, or—?

Firshein: No, she worked in Russia. She was a personal secretary to some official in the Agriculture Department. And actually, we met in Moscow, in that first international congress. So I knew her for five years, and I would go back to see each other, and it was a real love affair. But you know, I had gotten divorced, and so being in Copenhagen on sabbatical was also a help to be able to visit her. We did get married in 1971, and she came to the U.S. in ’72, March. And we’ve been together ever since. We had two children. She’s just great. She took care of our two children; she was a good mother, and she still is a great mother, and a good wife. We travel a lot; she’s about fifteen years younger than I, but well, I’ll show you. Here we are. This was taken in Las Vegas.

Paine: Oh, wow!

Firshein: Yeah, the boy is Kyrill, like with a K, and the other is Alexander, and that’s Adam, [Laughs] and me.

Paine: When did you go to Las Vegas?

Firshein: Oh, this was in, oh, I don’t even remember anymore. It was sometime in the nineties. We’ve been there a few times. I’m not a gambler or anything, but we go to a lot of the meetings. There was a wonderful meeting I used to go to every year in the Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park, in a little
town. And there was a wonderful place called the Wind River Ranch, and I would go with my wife. By that time, the kids were older, and either I went by myself or I went with my wife—even with my first wife, I went there. It’s a beautiful place, and you could climb the Rockies, and so I always had a wonderful time there. You gave papers. It was much more informal—maybe fifty people, you know, big ranch inside, warm fireplace. Even though it was in June, it snowed! [Laughs]

The thing is that all of this is possible because of Wesleyan, really. I mean, I don’t know how good a citizen I was, but I was on lots of committees, and I taught a lot, and had lots of students. I think I figured out the two big courses I taught for many years, like the introductory biology and the molecules and—I think I must have interacted with seven, eight thousand students. That’s a hell of a lot of students for 1958 until 2005. That’s you know, forty-eight, almost fifty years. So. And now, I’ve been retired for eight, no seven years, right, 2012, January in the middle, is when I retired.

We formed the department, and we’ve hired people and some people didn’t make it and they had to leave. You know, that’s always a terrible time, when someone doesn’t get tenure. In our department it’s been two people who didn’t get tenure who had to leave, but the others were all promoted. Right now, I go over there to get my mail. They have two young people who just came to Wesleyan from Yale and from Southern California, so it’s been working out. The thing about Wesleyan, and trying to pull yourself away—you don’t ever! As soon as I retired, we went to Hawaii. Somehow I am a New Yorker. My two children with Anna—they’re here, so we didn’t want to leave. We have a nice house in Portland, Connecticut, right across the river. We decided to stay here, so I’m still connected with
Wesleyan, and I like it. I go to the concerts sometimes, over in the Concert Hall. And now there are a lot of retirements and some deaths. Well, here I am—82, and I’m still here. [Laughs] God bless it.

So, let’s see. With Bennet in the eighties, we expanded, kept on publishing, and I—oh, in 1986, I went to Australia, the University of Sydney, and was able to work there for six months, then flew back and stopped in Tahiti, [Laughs] Hawaii. So again, that’s the benefits of a university and academic position. You’re your own boss, basically. I mean, you teach, and it has to come from within. Most of the people I met here are that way, although, I didn’t have that much contact with them when I was in the department, because you’re always with the department meeting. It’s only when I came here, the last eight years, I began to interact with the people in other departments that I had known, but I never really became friends. Although, there are some friends I’ve had. One particular friend from the College of Letters, named Paul Schwaber, is a marvelous person—he’s going to retire.

You know, that’s really all I can tell you, the sabbaticals, the pensions, I told you about, the fellowships, the career development award, the papers, the courses, the new department. Yeah, it was sixty-five undergraduates in forty-eight years, and twenty-four have been co-authors on papers, and twenty-five of them have received honors, or high honors for their senior theses. I remember that. [Laughs] Oh, I’ve had three post-doctoral fellows—two from Japan, and one from the United States, and the one from the United States just retired. [Laughs] He worked in San Francisco. The other two are back in Japan, and I haven’t really had contact with them anymore. So, I think that’s it.
Paine: I guess I have a few more specific questions, or I could ask them another time.

Firshein: Yes, yes, please ask them. No, no, ask them now.

Paine: Oh, okay. I guess one thing that struck me sort of reading the departmental reports—I think one that you wrote, you talked about how Biology is sort of a whole different department that the rest of the university doesn’t understand. Like you said, too, with the labs, you have needs that an English professor [unclear]—

Firshein: It’s that, as I said, we need to have research labs when we work with groups of students and post-docs. The English professor doesn’t need that.

Paine: Right.

Firshein: That person can work by himself or herself with computers and library; you need a library. We need a library, too. We have a science library, which has been very, very helpful. But now, I mean, I sort of retired, just when all this—most of the journals are put online now. I mean, I still get all these journals—Science? I’m eventually going to throw them out, but, no, lots from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, so that it’s not that—our needs are different because we need a laboratory.

Paine: Right.

Firshein: And we need the equipment, and we need to get grants, which is—now in English, say, a person doesn’t get a grant; he gets a fellowship. He can get a Fulbright, or something like that. But they don’t have to work with anybody.

Paine: Right.

Firshein: Well, they could collaborate, but we do, you see. That’s—that’s what I meant by the difference.

Paine: Mm-hm. I was just wondering if you ever felt, or you and the department ever felt, isolated from the rest of the university? And if that affected you?
Firshein: Well, yeah, I did. I’m a gregarious guy. There are lots of opportunities to meet—although, it is true, with the teaching, the labs, the research, and the meetings, you’re all more involved. But the opportunities to interact with other people come informally, from—well, not like the Christmas parties, but like in the morning, there used to be Downey House, you know where that is?

Paine: Mm-hm.

Firshein: That used to be the place where we ate. And in the mornings you go there, have coffee, you interact. There are a lot of people I didn’t know well, but most people knew me. And I can’t think of one person I didn’t really like—not even like, I mean, didn’t really interact well with. So I never really felt isolated. It’s just that I felt that—that because of time, I couldn’t meet everybody. But, at faculty meetings and personally, I was able to meet people who have remained friends—Paul Schwaber, in the College of Letters, for example. Now, here [at the Wasch Center], the last eight years. But I didn’t feel isolated. Not at all.

Paine: A lot of things that I read about you, talk about you being the conscience of the university, sort of being the person who’s unafraid to stand up and say the way things are. I was just wondering—did you feel appreciated in that role?

Firshein: Most of the time. There were people who, you know, didn’t like me—“What is he, opening his mouth?” No, I did. I really—I really felt I was appreciated, or liked. I never felt unliked here, and what I spoke out about was a lot of things. It was mostly about salaries. But it was about student evaluations, too, and the general faculty meetings, about who you should accept as a good student, because students are your product. You’re the ones—they’re receiving your information. As I said, I don’t think a
freshman can do the same—be as good as a senior, who’s gone through a department; then I would have no compulsion at all. And the salaries—we would argue about salaries, and never get enough. [Laughs] But you know, again, I’m not a millionaire, but I have a decent pension, and God willing, I hope it’ll stay around for another fifteen years.

Paine: I guess another question is sort of just about the spirit of the university, and the spirit of the student body. How have you seen that change from 1958 to 2005?

Firshein: Oh, boy. Well, it was much more reserved when I first came. In fact, students would wear coats and ties, you know, jackets and ties. And there were no women. Now, you know even with expansion of the student body Wesleyan still has bright students. I mean, I’m sure there are some that are not so, but I think the Admission Department does very well in accepting exceptional and smart kids like yourself, and I think the student body is still very good. I have had never any idea that there was a slippage, or something like that. As a group, the students here are delicious. I think they are a wonderful bunch of young people, and I could, you know, associate with them for forever. [Laughs]

Paine: What makes them so special, do you think?

Firshein: Individuality, definitely. You decide yourself what you want to do. I mean, I dealt with double majors, and triple majors, and yeah, they’re more individualistic than other places, but I’m not sure. All I know, I can say that with respect to science, there’s no comparison; the students here outweigh Amherst and Williams by a large degree. Not that they aren’t as bright; they don’t have the opportunity to engage in research like they do here. They don’t see what’s going on.
I think that’s the most important thing, because you see, you also see the mistakes. You know, science doesn’t go one, two, three, four. I told you, it goes: one, four, seven, two, four. I mean, you have insight, and chance, and luck, but you have to have insight. That’s what the students learn when they do experiments—very, very important. In a way, I’m sorry they didn’t raise enough money to really tear down Hall-Atwater, and build a new facility—maybe someday they will. I mean, they built one at Holyoke and Smith! I don’t know why they can’t do it at Wesleyan, but I think the times made it very difficult. You have to have so many things—autoclaves to sterilize things, and big equipment to centrifuge, to separate, extract and purify things. It’s a whole different world, whether it’s a bacterium, or an embryo, or a mouse, or even a human being. Or the environment—they have a wonderful environmental science program, together now with what used to be called geology. There are people in biology, like Barry Chernoff, who are involved with that. I think neurobiology is also a very exciting program we have here.

Paine: Where do you see the sciences at Wesleyan moving in the future? Do you think that the fact that we haven’t built that new building is going to pose a problem? Or—?

Firshein: Well, I—I don’t think it’s going to pose a problem as much as maintaining the facilities. The people who have been hired are all good! And they can work—in Shanklin, one of the persons who was closest to my field as a colleague was Don Oliver. He’s also a microbial geneticist, and he has a lab in Shanklin. I was the one who recruited him to come to Wesleyan. It’s a wonderful lab. He has turned out to be one of the best—I think that the two top scientists that I know in biology or chemistry are Don Oliver and David
Beveridge, who is the biophysicist. Don got many millions of dollars of grants, and he has many graduate students and undergraduates.

And he teaches—he’s not as good a teacher as me, though. [Laughs] But at least, he could teach the advanced courses. You really have to have a knack; you really have to be a showman. I don’t mind. I became that. And you know, it’s worked. So many people—kids, students, have written back to me, about how wonderful an experience their introduction was. You’re a kid, you’re only 18 when you come here. By the time you go into your junior year, you’re 20, so at least you’re much more mature.

So, I think Wesleyan will keep on going. It’s going to be a prestigious institution, I think, long after I’m gone, and I think that’s great. I think that someday they’re going to have to make a new science, life science building. But I don’t think they’ll ever get to that level, where they’ll have dozens of students. We’re a small university. But, small means intimate, and intensive. We don’t have a medical school, or anything like that, but I think that we’ve done quite well. I mean, that’s fifty years that I’ve—we’re better now than we were when I first came. I mean, I’m pretty sure of that. I learned. I’ve learned a tremendous amount of new techniques. And all the sabbaticals, in Geneva, and California, at the Pasteur Institute. My last sabbatical was in 2000. Also in Paris, at the Institute of Marie and Pierre Curie. You know, they’re the ones that discovered x-rays. We lived in Paris in 2000. Besides New York, to me, that’s the second greatest city in the world! And someday you’ll go there. [Laughs]

Paine: [Laughs]

Firshein: Okay, what else? Anything else?

Paine: I guess, also on the topic of your travels: just going through your CV, you’ve gone to so many places. And I guess there’s also been a movement in
recent years towards global scholarship, and connections across countries. How did you see that playing out in your career?

Firshein: Well, it was hard; I mean, we tried. I was able to attend many international meetings in my field, and I met a lot of very brilliant scientists. Thank God they all spoke English, because still that’s the language—no one will have a meeting in Japanese or something. But I was able to only once get together with scientists from other countries, in Sweden, to try to write an international grant. The global science grants we didn’t get. We went through one or two rounds, but we were dropped in a third round. There were four or five different levels. But these other scientists were very, very good. And the thing is that with e-mail, and with papers and journals, you—you get to know all the advances. I still read *Science* and the *Journal of Bacteriology*. And you know, not that I keep up that much, but you read a lot, and you’re able to know who’s doing what, and so there are collaborations, but I don’t know. I mean, the people at Harvard, they don’t collaborate—you mostly collaborate with people nearby. It’s rare that you’re going to collaborate with somebody from Sweden.

But in terms of global, they’re doing great research in Japan, and I mean, all the countries in the world. There are places—India, Russia—I mean, an incredible amount of work that’s being done. But now, because of the global communications, with e-mail, you can find out everything. In fact, I still write to some faculty overseas, a Japanese guy, who was my post-doc; he still works in Japan. I write to him, and he tells me what he’s doing. But you know, I must admit, now I don’t have an interest; I’m not going to publish anything anymore. So, but the global outreach is there, and it’s going to get bigger and bigger, I think. Okay, so what else?
Paine: What about outreach to the local Middletown community? What were community relationships like?

Firshein: Yes. No, there is. In fact, as I grew older, I was able to give lectures at local clubs—the Lion’s Club—and talk about biological warfare, or something that would be of interest. I’ve given lectures, but I don’t belong. I was on a small scholarship committee in my town, Portland, for many years, where we would get applications, and give them three hundred dollars or something. So, I’ve done things like that, and I’ve given lectures. But that’s all. What else could I do? I wasn’t going to run for local office. [Laughs] But that’s the outreach. I’ve given lectures in Middletown and in Portland, and in Glastonbury. So, that’s not bad. [Laughs] But I haven’t done that a lot anymore, yeah.

Paine: Let’s see. What were some of the best changes that you saw? Things that happened in Wesleyan history that really—?

Firshein: Yeah, well I think I pointed them out. Certainly, the admission of women. God bless them. A school without women is like a monastery. It’s absurd. [Laughs]

Paine: How did the arrival of women sort of change the campus culture?

Firshein: Well, first of all, it kept males on the campus. [Laughs] It was like—it was like the normal environment. Of course, women, females, they’re in the community, right? Why do you come to a school, just men? So the admission of women was one, the Ph.D. program was another for us. For me, the creation of the new department, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, was another. I’ve never been sorry that I did this, that I became an academic. I love people, most people, as you can see. I’m not a grouch. I get mad of course, but no, it was I think the perfect career for me, because I love young people. I love to communicate and teach. So the Ph.D.
program, teaching, research, traveling—with Wesleyan—sabbaticals, meetings all over the world. All of those have been very important in my career.

Paine: Were there any changes that you sort of didn’t want to see happen?

Firshein: Let’s see. Yes. Well, the changes—yes, the changes that happened as I aged, in terms of a more restrictive governing body of the university. I mean, the faculty meetings became scripted. You couldn’t just stand up and talk. They had agendas. I didn’t like that at all. They had topics that you discussed, which should have been free-flowing discussions, and that seemed to decrease as time went by. I’m glad that they renovated the old gyms to make the center, the new eating place. It’s very nice. And now they just finished new areas for the College of Letters, and put in more dorm space—I think they’re going to have more students.

But in terms of what I didn’t like? Basically, I think it was the changes in terms of more and more restrictions on free-flowing discussions. And now there are committees for more things than I would want; I’m glad I am not involved. See, one of the big things is getting tenure. There are three levels of—or is it two?—of advancement. Your first contract, your first appointment, is for like two years. And the third year, you’re evaluated—not as vigorously—by members of the department, to see if the person can go on. And most people go on, still assistant professors. But then the big one is the tenure one. When you become tenured—that’s in the seventh year. So in the sixth year, you’ve got to get your things all together, and it used to be relatively simple—there was one committee called the Advisory Committee, chosen from the three different divisions.

And if you wanted to bring up someone to get tenure, you prepared the individual: how to get his CV together, papers, examples, and
recommendations. Then your department looks at that, and you decide whether you’re going to bring up the person for tenure because tenure is a permanent position. That’s it. So then you take your case, you present your case to the Advisory Committee, advisory to the president. And if it goes through the Advisory Committee, usually the president would accept that, and recommend it to the Board of Trustees.

Now, I think there are three committees that you have to go through before someone gets tenure. So I think that’s like a negative thing. The faculty has always been pretty respected at Wesleyan, and it’s stayed that way, and I’m very happy about that. I just hope it stays. It’s a pretty good university. I applied for other jobs when I was being brought up for tenure, in case I didn’t get it. But I’m glad I stayed. [Laughs] Yeah. Okay? What else? Keep asking.

Paine: Why do you think that the university has moved towards having all these committees instead of—?

Firshein: I think it’s because they want more control. It’s almost like the difference between the Democrats and Republicans. You know, I think they want more control. I mean, there is a dean of sciences, a dean of humanities, and a dean of the social sciences. That’s all right. But I think the university wants more controls, because unfortunately, when someone doesn’t get tenure, they can sue. In fact, that happened to one of our people who didn’t get tenure. She was a woman, and she sued, and that case wasn’t handled well, and so on. I know in other departments it has happened, too. So I think because of that, you have to have—what do you call it? A paper trail. There has to be minutes, and there has to be different committees, and I think that—it’s the litigation problem that has cropped up that has made it more restrictive for the tenure.
But as for students, you know, they, too, can complain. There have been times students have complained about me, or somebody. I don’t remember exactly what it was; maybe I yelled, you know. Once, I remember, I threw an eraser at a student who was talking. But that’s very rare. God, forty-eight years! [Laughs] But no, that’s the reason I think—control and more of a paper trail; they’re afraid of being sued, by people who don’t get tenure. You know, I think actually in my time, more than seventy percent of the people who came up for tenure got it. So, it was thirty percent that didn’t. Some just took it and went away, but others didn’t take it so well, and they complained and sued.

Paine: What about student involvement in sort of administrative affairs? Did that sort of change as—?

Firshein: Ah! Yeah, well, there is—I mean, for some things they should be involved; I don’t mind, if it’s social. But I don’t think they should be in involved in, what, committees—there were students—for example, there were students on trustee committees. That was all right. I was on a trustee committee, too. I recall one of them. [Pause] Chairman, member, [unclear] committee. Financial Planning Committee, one of the board, trustees, where students came on, because they should have a view. I think that was fine. Institutional priorities, activities, to advise the president on institutional priorities. University Faculty Planning Committee—well, no, that was a sub. I think that the trustee committees, except for investing, all have students on them, which I think is fine. I know that when some of our faculty would come up for tenure, we would solicit advice from students, that they should write—I mean, the faculty member would say what students, because—but sometimes, we would pick students that were in the classes that they didn’t pick.
So students do have an impact, and they’re on committees, but they shouldn’t be on all of them, faculty committees, or something like that, or even salary—shouldn’t be on that, too. But the trustee committee on priorities. I remember the big thing! During apartheid—there were lots of meetings and protests, and there were students on the committee who said that they should boycott investments from South Africa. It’s fine, yeah. Some committees, not all.

Paine: Mm-hm. Let’s see. I had another question.

Firshein: Yeah, it’s great.

Paine: There’s so much I want to ask you.

Firshein: Yeah, good, good, good, that’s great.

Paine: I guess, I was reading President Chace’s—he wrote a book, sort of about his experience as a whole, but there are a couple of chapters on Wesleyan. And he was describing sort of—I guess this was the same period where there was student activity against apartheid, and divestment, and things like that. And apparently, it was a very tumultuous time on campus. Can you talk a little bit about what that was like?

Firshein: Well, it was more than just apartheid. There were students—in fact, there was a student who shot into the president’s office. A bullet went right through. Look, there were problems. There were problems recruiting minority students, mostly Afro-Americans. They had a hard time on campus—the men more than the women. You know, when I came, there was no recruitment. There were four Afro-American students—I’ll never forget this. The head of the U.N., Ralph Bunche, was going to get an honorary degree, and he was going to visit Wesleyan. He came, and to escort him around campus they had four Afro-Americans. That was the only four in the whole school. But then, it was only like 700 students, but still. It was awful!
And so by the time of apartheid, it kept on building up. It was a real cause célèbre, not only students; for faculty, too. That put Chace in a very difficult position, but it was not only him. It was Campbell, too, before him, until apartheid was destroyed. As I say, Chace wasn’t—he wasn’t the easiest guy to get along with. He eventually became president of Emory University in Georgia, and he didn’t last long there, too, but I don’t know what he’s doing now. But Chace, yeah. Those times, when he first came, and when Campbell was retiring, it was tumultuous mainly because of apartheid. But I don’t remember any other—well, maybe students wanted more say in classes or something. You know, a lot of things that some of them wanted were really not applicable, relevant, or practical. They weren’t practical.

I do remember that classes were cancelled because of a protest on apartheid. And we didn’t have classes, which I was very much against. Look, you can protest, but why take it out on classes? That was my opinion. So, I said a few things. I wrote, even wrote an article in the Argus once. Like that. [Pause] Yes, I remember, because Chace was the president when I wrote the article. Right, right.

Paine: I’ll have to see if I can find it in the archives.
Firshein: If you can find it. Maybe.
Paine: Yeah. I guess in terms also of diversity on campus, when did they—when was there a push really to start diversifying the faculty?
Firshein: You mean, in terms of color?
Paine: Color, or gender, or religious backgrounds, or—?
Firshein: Oh. I think during the—certainly when women were admitted, there was—I mean, we all felt there should be more; it was hard to find them. That was one of the problems—hard to recruit faculty of color. I mean, if they were really good, they would be swept up by Harvard, Yale, or Princeton.
But Wesleyan was strong. I mean, we were considered an excellent university, so there was a trickle, then it became a bigger stream of faculty of color, also Asian Americans, or Asians, too, and Indians. I don’t think there ever was an initiative, say, to find gay people or things, or transgender faculty; there was never anything like that. Whoever came, whatever they were, they were. [Laughs]

Paine: I guess another question would be sort of about your own background. I know that you’re Jewish.

Firshein: Yeah.

Paine: And the university has this sort of Methodist tradition to it.

Firshein: Yeah, yeah.

Paine: Even when I was reading one of Butterfield’s papers, he’s saying what the university is, and he said, “We’re in the Christian tradition.” Did you ever conflict with that? Or have problems?

Firshein: Yes, yes. Wesleyan, let’s see. Wesleyan—it was almost—how can I put it? It was really at cross-purposes. Butterfield was not bigoted, or biased in anything. But the dean of admissions at that—I think was at the time, and Jewish—Jewish—there was a rule that not more than seven percent of the student body would be Jewish. This was before even I came. In fact, this person from the College of Letters I know, Paul Schwaber, went to Wesleyan, and he was Jewish, and his brother went to Wesleyan, too. They went in the time when there were very few Jews. I think now, it is thirty percent or some huge percentage.

But the problem—the one problem—I had a problem, once, just once, and it had nothing to do with the faculty. What it had to do with was when I was making waves getting the centrifuge, and the air conditioner, and going to get—take journals out of the chemistry library, and other problems like
that; they didn’t like you to take the journals out. Anyways, I once got a call from the vice president and treasurer—not the dean of the faculty, the vice president. I went in, and he said, “You know, you’ve been having some problems.” And I said, “Yes, but I have to have these.” And he said, “Well, wouldn’t you be better off at a place like Brandeis?” Now, you know, Brandeis is a famous Jewish [unclear] endowment. But that was the only time. I don’t even remember what I said, but it wasn’t very nice, and I got up and walked out.

But that’s the only time that—there never has been some kind of bias against Jews at the university, like from faculty. Maybe he was—there was some faculty who were, I think, in the old faculty, in the English department, and in Physics, who may have been a little anti-Jewish, but it didn’t bother me—in the sciences, I never, never heard of anything. I was brought up in Brooklyn, and I never—not even in the army, where, you know, I was Jewish, nobody—I mean, you just did what you had to do. And I’m pretty big guy; I was six feet tall, and I didn’t take no bologna from anybody.

But I did feel the black problem, Afro—I still don’t know what to call them—black people, or Afro-American. So, but it’s always been a problem for students and faculty. And the only thing I have noticed now, that of the students that I have taught, the women did much better than the men—much better. Why? I don’t know. I mean, I tried; in fact, I would tutor, had special tutoring for anyone who wanted it. I never said, “You, come to see me.” Some came, but I think black women, or Afro-American women, have done far better than men here. You know, that’s a problem of society.

But there should—of course there should be no discrimination, anything like that. And I’ve done all—you know, in my own way. I’ve never been a zealot; I’ve never gone out and raised rabble, or done anything to
recruit. Whatever was given to me and say, “We’re going to do this.” I say, fine. Good. That’s what I did. Okay? So. What else?

Paine: You talked a lot about how in the sciences there would be faculty and grad students and undergrads all working together on projects. Now how did the students sort of respond to each other on projects like that?

Firshein: Well, they usually were okay. I mean, there have been problems, not with undergraduate— with graduate students. I had two graduate students, a woman and a man, who hated each other! Why? They both published, finally. They got their Ph.D.s. But they almost came to physical blows. I suggested urgently that the woman go to see Philippa Coughlan, the psychologist who died a few years ago, and she helped her. But most of the time, they get along. You know, I’m in an office; you can hear the labs right next door— so that’s why I heard them fighting.

But, the undergraduates, the sixty-five undergraduates that I worked with, or had— never; I have never— I have just never seen any, you know, anger, or— in fact, there was a— in fact, some of them got dates together. You know, they enjoyed life together; they went out together, to a bar, beers. But, it was always good. I tried to make it— I tried to make it a happy place, anyway. You could have coffee, and my office is always open; you didn’t need any appointment to come see me. [Laughs] Yeah. Okay.

Paine: Have you kept in touch with a lot of students over the years?

Firshein: No, not a lot. A few of them— I mean, now, some of them are still giving gifts in my honor. I get letters from the alumni office that so-and-so has made a gift in your honor. I say, he was a student in the eighties. So, but I haven’t really— a few, well, one or two, but now it’s getting less and less. They’re wonderful. I love them all. But I don’t keep in touch. If they write e-
mails, I’ll write an e-mail back, a few times. But we haven’t seen each other or anything like that.

Now, when they come back to the Reunions—I’m trying to think. I used to be asked—I did attend alumni dinners, Reunion dinners in tents on the front of the campus there [coughs] when Chace was the president. But after he went, under Bennet, that didn’t happen much. More in the Campbell and the Chace era, I would go see—students would invite me to come to the dinner. We went, Anna and I; we had a wonderful time! But yeah, it’s their lives; they’re all—so many of them are doctors, dentists, M.D.s. I do still keep in touch by e-mail with an allergist in Connecticut. Very nice guy, kid. So, but not many.

Paine: I guess, when you think about the sheer number of students that you’ve taught, how do you feel about that?

Firshein: Well, I think it’s a wonderful reflection of what I did for humanity, for society. I tried to convey information to young people who were bright and exciting, and hopefully to stimulate them to go on. I think in my own mind, that that’s perhaps the best thing I ever did, was to interact with so many students, not that I got to know them all. But the majors I got to know, and I’m very proud of that fact, that I did stimulate them to go on. In fact, even some of them—I got a post-doc wrote me down. I was instrumental to him getting into get a job, and now he’s just retired.

So I think it is the students, after all. I usually say, “I want to do my research!” But as time went on, it was the students, always the students. I really loved them all. No student was ever afraid of me. As I said, I always would say in my classes, you could come and speak to me at any time, whenever you have a problem. Now we did have—what do you call it? Not a forum—sessions where, before an exam that they’ll come and ask
questions. But some would just walk in if they wanted to; it depended on them. But I was very easy to talk to, very informal. And I even stopped wearing a tie and jacket. [Laughs] I did though at the beginning; I really did. That’s funny.

I look back at my life, and I have been happy, really, basically, and Wesleyan had a lot to do with that. I think my second wife has, too, and you know, my children, all of them—everything I’ve done. What bad experiences did I have? I was in the army, and went to Korea. Could have been killed, but I wasn’t. You know, the tragedies there are, you face them, or the ones where your family passes, or something like that, and you yourself get old, and your friends pass. But, I’m not vindictive, and I have my little corner here [in the Wasch Center]; my officemate never comes in, so it’s like I have a private office here. And I love it. I must admit a computer has been a lifesaver—I don’t have a Twitter account, or Facebook, but e-mail is what I use.

Paine: My last question was going to be what do you want to be remembered for on this campus?

Firshein: Teaching. Yeah. Teaching. I hope I am—I will be. In fact, you know I had two cousins who I helped get into Wesleyan, and both of them are getting married, one in May and one in August, so I’m going to go to two weddings.

Paine: Awesome.

Firshein: [Laughs] My oldest son, the one from my first marriage—he got into Wesleyan his last year—no, in his junior year, and then he wanted to go to California, so he did—but my daughter spent two years, my only daughter. I have four boys and one girl. Daughter—she spent two years at Wesleyan, in the Theater Department. She loved it. Now, she works in Hollywood on set
designing. It’s a hard profession; you have to be asked to be on a picture, but she’s got enough credits on her. All three of them live out there—she lives in Los Angeles. My older son lives in San Francisco, and my other son lives in Seattle. So, those are the three.

But I will be remembered for teaching, really teaching. I was able to give young people what they’ll take with them, most of them, for the rest of their lives. And you, too, right? You happy to meet me, too?

Paine: Yes, I am. This has been great. Thank you so much.

[End of Recording]