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James Hughes interview, Professor Emeritus, Department of English, Wright State University

Lewis Shupe

Wright State University - Main Campus

James Hughes

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: May 22, 2008

Interviewer: Lewis Shupe
Professor Emeritus, Department of Communication

Interviewee: James Hughes
Professor Emeritus, Department of English

Lew Shupe: This is Lew Shupe, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Communication at Wright State University. Today is May 22, 2008, and I am interviewing Dr. James Hughes, Professor Emeritus from the Department of English, as part of the Wright State University Retirees Association's oral history project. Dr. Hughes, thank you for joining us today. To begin, would you please tell us how you came to Wright State and some of your background?

James Hughes: Okay. Well, let me start with some of my original background because it's really related to why I'm here. I was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1938 and my family were all Ohio- at Columbus, Toledo, Barnesville, Ohio- and the only reason I ended up on the East Coast was that my father enlisted in the Navy in World War II and we moved to Washington D.C. where he was working for the Navy Department. So, except for first grade, my schooling was all in Washington D.C. My high school was a Quaker day school, Sidwell Friends, and my main interest in returning to Ohio was, number one, that my grandfather still had his hotel in Columbus, and every summer during high school I came back to Columbus to work in the hotel.

LS: Which hotel was it?

JH: It was the Seneca Hotel in downtown Columbus. It is now going to be converted into apartments for the Columbus College of Art and Design. So my family connections were primarily Ohio. We also spent Julys up at Lake Erie at a beach colony up there, so even though I was raised in Washington D.C., my Ohio roots were very strong. So when I left Harvard University and went to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, all of my preparation was for teaching English at college; I had been an undergraduate major in British and American lit at Harvard, and then my PhD. Program was in American Civilization. When I was in graduate school, I began, obviously, to think about where I wanted to teach and I had somewhat of an interest in returning to Ohio and certainly returning to the Midwest. Part of that was that even though I had been to a very good private school in Washington and been to Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, I had enough of an Ohio background to be very aware of how tradition bound, and even

snobbish, easterners can be. Particularly at Harvard, I found that when people asked me where I was born and from, I would either say Washington D.C., which was okay, but sometimes I would mention Ohio, and then I would get these strange looks, you know, do they have airports in Ohio, and this kind of thing. This feeling of being somewhat displaced from the Midwest increased when I met the woman who would be my wife. She was a Baltimore girl whose parents were then living in Philadelphia, which is why we met while I was at the University of Pennsylvania. One of the things we had in common initially, frankly, was dysfunctional families, and in each case our families exerted pressures on us to stay close to home and help out with the dysfunction. My wife had no understanding; the woman who was to be my wife had never been to the Midwest and when we would jokingly say to her parents that we might move to the Midwest, there were, in fact, outbursts of outrage, and even one public one in a restaurant, which only made the Midwest seem more attractive. So when I was actually married in Philadelphia and we were both applying for teaching jobs, it occurred to us to limit our applications to Ohio, Michigan and Indiana, and the two positions that were open for me- and it was sexist enough in those days that we clearly were planning to go where I got a job first, then she would get a job second- there was an opening for me at Michigan State and one at Miami University. I had a terrible time at Michigan State; it seemed very impersonal, huge, overwhelming, and the dean of Arts and Sciences, when he interviewed me he said, "Oh, you Harvard man, you'll like it here because we have a higher suicide rate than even Harvard does", you know, "We're really rigorous!" And frankly, that was what I wanted to get away from, that sense of snobbery, you know, "we're better, we're rigorous, we're traditional, and we're cold and unfeeling". Then the job came open at Miami University, and the person who interviewed me was Philip Bordinat, and I was hired. Almost immediately we were struck with the fact that my wife would probably end up having to teach in the public schools, even though her background was private school, simply because of where Miami is. Then one night we got a phone call from Philip Bordinat from Oxford, Ohio, saying, "Jim, I know you have been hired to come to Miami University in Oxford, but I just wanted to let you know we have openings as well at our new Dayton campus in Dayton, Ohio"-

LS: When was this, what year?

JH: This was 1964, the summer of 1964. So I said, "Gee that sounds really interesting. It's brand new?" and he said, "Yes, brand new. We have just one building". Of all the places in Ohio I had been to growing up and spending summers there, I had never been to Dayton. So it had the advantage of being bigger than Oxford. It also turned out to have the advantage of having a new day school, a private day school, starting, namely the Miami Valley School. My wife called the Miami Valley School, which was just forming, and to make a long story short, I became a member of the first faculty at the Dayton Campus of what would become Wright State, and my wife became a member of the first faculty hired by Miami Valley School.

LS: Now your first interview, though, was in Oxford on the Miami campus?

JH: It was all on the phone.

LS: Oh, all on the phone?

JH: I never actually went to Oxford until after we had moved to Dayton, and I had been here for about a year. And the only reason I went to Oxford at all was that our English Department here at the Dayton Campus was obviously still part of the English Department at Miami, and the English Department at Miami were pretty worried about what we were doing, so they would invite us over.

LS: Who were the people in the department here when you started, in English?

JH: Well, gosh, you're asking me all these names. There was Barbara- I'm sorry, Pat Olds-

LS: Okay-

JH: Pat Olds, O- L- D- S, Don Wells, Peter Bracher- [pause]

LS: That's okay. We can come back to this.

JH: Okay. Several people who didn't stay long. There was a man named Higby, John Higby, who went on to the University of North Carolina-

LS: Tell me, coming from Harvard and Pennsylvania, and then coming out to the one building, what was your impression?

JH: Well, it's funny. When they had the party to celebrate the founders' wall, [Wall of Academic Pioneers in the Student Union], and the list of all the names of the people who were here those first three years, several of the speakers noted that we were risk takers, because we had come to this one building in a field with no idea of what the school would become other than a branch. But it's funny, when I heard the word "risk taker", it bothered me. And the friend of mine who came back for that event, James Dean, whose name is the same as the actor, agreed with me; he said, "I never thought of it as taking a risk". What I saw when I saw that building, that single, solitary building, Allyn Hall, was, "Wow, this is brand new. This is a wonderful opportunity. This is exciting". Partly because there wasn't a lot of tradition; there certainly wasn't much snobbery, except when we went to Oxford for English department meetings when they looked down their noses at us. That feeling of opportunity, rather than risk, was certainly underlined by the people in the Dayton community. We all know that the campus was built primarily because the people of Dayton raised a lot of money, and generously gave half of the money to UD so that UD would not feel left out at the idea that the community wanted a brand new state university in Dayton. To me, that idea that the people who were raising money for what would become Wright State were already worried about the University of Dayton and respecting it is part of that amazing atmosphere. Because everywhere Betsy and I went- to open a bank account, to start taking clothes to a dry cleaner- everywhere people would say, "Oh, you're new in town, what are you doing?", and I

would say, “I’m working at the Dayton Campus”, and they’d say, “Oh, wonderful!” There was such excitement about this possible new university here.

LS: You mentioned going to meetings at Oxford; what was the perception of the faculty there about the Dayton Campus?

JH: Well, they saw it only as a branch, and I imagine they treated it the way they would treat their people- year’s ago, at least- at Middletown [Miami University-Middletown]. Initially, there was a definite structure that the English Department at Oxford imposed on us because, after all, we were part of Miami University, and anyone who took English courses at Dayton Campus was clearly perceived to be taking them at a place controlled by Miami University. I can understand their attitude; they didn’t want a lot of people they didn’t know doing strange things with their program. Let me give you an example: we had from Miami something called the “Q test”, which was used at the end of freshman comp to flunk people out, and we used the books from Miami in the freshman English program, but they wanted to make sure that no matter what grades we gave along the way, that when they took this test- which was sentences, and students had to identify the mistake in the sentence if there was one, or put correct if it was correct, and if there was a mistake the Miami University gave us a code to teach, like dangling modifier. So, if there was a dangling modifier in the sentence, the students’ had to write “dm” for dangling modifier. So we had to teach the students not only what these grammatical errors were, but we had to teach them what Miami called them, which by the way is not what some of them are called today because these labels have changed. –Those tests were graded, as far as I know, at Miami, so we were very aware that if we didn’t teach that to the test and teach those symbols and the recognition of those errors, and there was a discrepancy between the result of this Q test and the grade we were recommending, based on compositions, that we might be in trouble. We had more control, but not much more, over the literature courses we were teaching, which for the first two years were pretty elementary.

LS: Let me take you back to you went to these meetings-

JH: Not many; two, maybe.

LS: Okay, who was the person in charge here on this campus?

JH: That was Phil Bordinat {Director, Dayton Campus General College}.

LS: Bordinat. Okay.

JH: And I’m not sure when we had an actual chair of the English Department; that came later. The chair, technically, was somebody at Miami. Leslie Bradshaw? I can’t remember.

LS: And maintained that role over the Dayton campus?

JH: Mm-hmm. So we really had to be independent. Once it was clear that Wright State was going to be formed and we were independent, then there was I think about a year to make a transition to formulate our own English Department, with a chair and rules for governance.

LS: Okay, during that year, what were some of the landmark experiences you had in developing your department here at the campus?

JH: In the first year in this one building, what was exciting, incredibly exciting for me, was that here we were on one floor of one building- chemists, business people, people with an allegiance to Ohio State, people with an allegiance to Miami, all ages- and we were all amazingly equal, physically equal. The offices were uniform; nobody had a bigger, better office than anyone else; we had one faculty lounge where everybody mixed. So it was really the kind of feeling I think one would get at an incredibly small liberal arts college in the traditional sense, where the point of an education was to be well rounded, and the building, the geography of the building underlined that; there was no separation. Even though there were Ohio State faculty at the campus, the Dayton Campus of Ohio State, physically we were all together, and what our primary function was to make students coming here... they were the ones in effect that were taking the risk, more than the faculty. Because this place didn't have the reputation that either Miami or Ohio State had.

LS: You mentioned students. What were some of your impressions of your very first students?

JH: Well, first of all, they were not preppies, for the most part. They were not traditional college age students, for the most part. They were all ages, many of them [the] first college people in their families. So it is hard to explain today the atmosphere of that first year or two, because the students wanted to learn; they were committed to this place. It's sort of the feeling that I hear from people who teach at Sinclair; the nontraditional college student who is highly motivated, and is very proud to be the first in a family getting this opportunity. Now I need to back up just a bit, because I did not have my dissertation finished and when my advisor at the University of Pennsylvania heard that I was going to the Dayton campus of Miami and Ohio State, he said, "That is very good for you, because you won't have to worry about your students", and I said, "Why not?", and he said, "Because in such a place, the students don't matter. What matters is you finishing that dissertation. So do the least you can get away with for your students". I was horrified, and that advice was for me the landmark of why I wanted to leave the East, this terrible snobbery. And I don't know that if I hadn't gotten that advice things might have been different, but I rebelled against it. Those first years, I was actually the- Delores Carmichael in Communications, what would become Communications, directed the first play at Wright State, what would become Wright State. It was "Marty", m-a-r-t-y. On the same evening, I had directed a one act play by Edward Albee called "The Sandbox". So here, I who had never taught drama or never directed a play actually got the chance to direct a play, and an experimental play at that. I sometimes joke with people in the Theatre Department today, you know, "Who directed the first play at what is now Wright

State?”, and they have no idea, and I remind them that I and Delores Carmichael did. The plays were given in the hallway where the admissions office-

LS: That long hallway?

JH: -that long hallway at Allyn [Hall]. We lined up chairs, and they were back pretty far but there was a narrow line of chairs, and then we had a stage put just in the front of that long line. And I started a group of volunteer students called the Eleanor Brown Corps, and why was it called the Eleanor Brown Corps? Because one of my responsibilities when I came here was to find out about Dayton, and I found out that Eleanor Brown was an African-American woman who had taught at- what was the name of the school?- Steele High School, on Main Street, and she was blind. I was so taken with her story which she wrote about in a book I think called, Corridors of Light, where she wrote about her life, that I got this idea- well, actually I had been active in the Phillips Brooks House at Harvard, which was a volunteer student organization- and I said, “Well, you know, we can do this at the Dayton Campus”, and I had maybe thirty or forty students who signed up to do volunteer work in the Eleanor Brown Corps. So these were just examples of the things that as a new, non-PhD English teacher I could do, and was free to do and encouraged to do.

LS: What were some of the specific things you did in the Eleanor Brown?

JH: Well, we actually got students into public schools, to volunteer, to help teachers; we tried to get into the prison system in Ohio, and that failed; but anywhere there was a need for volunteers. It’s sort of the kind of thing that now is being done more formally in service education.

LS: The Eleanor Brown. That’s the first time I’ve heard this name in the oral histories. That’s why I think the oral histories are so important.

JH: Oh, I agree.

LS: Did the professor’s statement about ignoring the students give you even more motivation to do a good job here at the campus.

JH: Yes. I mean, remember the timing; this was 1964, and one of the reasons why many of us found it so exciting to be here, in one building in the middle of fields, was that many of us were at least on the edge of being rebels; and you have to remember that the student rebellions of the later ‘60’s were almost always in prestigious colleges and universities, at least initially. The movement has been identified with Berkeley, and of all the schools in California, Berkeley I think was the one, with the possible exception of Stanford, Berkeley and Stanford at least, were the most prestigious, big universities, so it’s not a surprise to me that you would find rebellion there; and not a surprise that there would be rebellion in Chicago, Harvard, Columbia. But there wasn’t a need for that kind of rebellion here, because we were, or thought we were, freer to experiment with new

ways of teaching and we became, much to Miami's dismay, more and more free of their attempt to control us, at least in the English Department.

LS: What other exciting things other than Eleanor Brown did you do?

JH: Well, we started an art film series. That was certainly before Dayton had the Neon Movies, [an independent film theatre in downtown Dayton], and it was, well, the University of Dayton did have Tony Macklin, who was a teacher of film, but the idea of having a film society that would show foreign films, underground films, art films, on a campus like this, in one building in the middle of a field- We had, of course, a member of the English Department, named Don Wills, who saw himself not only as a teacher of English but as an artist, and he felt free in an art show, and I'm not sure if this was the first year or the second year, but he incorporated the carcass of a dead cat in an oil painting that he did, and this created excitement.

LS: Tell us more about that painting.

JH: I can really still see it. It was really quite grotesque. The carcass seemed to be arranged so that the jaws were wide open and you could see the teeth, so it was almost as if the cat were howling in pain. What was left of the body, mostly bone and some fur, was actually sort of melted into thick, oil paint; red, purple, black. I still communicate with Don Wills. He has restored an old farmhouse in upstate New York.

LS: Now that created some questions here on campus, didn't it?

JH: Definitely.

LS: Who were the administrators on campus at that time?

JH: Phil Bordinat was more or less, well, he was the humanities director, and then there was a man from Miami who directed the education program, and I can't remember his name. I would recognize it if you told me, but I just can't remember.

LS: Was it Abraham?

JH: Abraham? Phil? No, not Phil. I'm not sure if he was there that first year or not, but he was certainly there in those early years. And then Ohio State, see the education and the humanities were under Miami, and then business and the sciences were under Ohio State, and you mentioned the name from Ohio State and I've forgotten already-

LS: I've forgotten, too.

JH: -when we were talking just before this began.

LS: Okay, who was the actual administrator all over, over all of you at that time?

JH: Well, it is significant, I think, given the way that it was not organized, that I don't remember.

LS: Oh, okay.

JH: If you were to ask me to name the first-

LS: Fred White?

JH: Fred White was the name, if somebody said, "Who was the first president of Wright State?" I would say, "Fred White".

LS: When did he enter the picture here?

JH: He was here when we arrived. He had been part of the task force that raised the money for the Dayton campus. He was on the ground; he was certainly a presence.

LS: I think the person we were thinking about from Ohio State was Ned Moulton, and then Earl Theskin was the person from Miami, I think.

JH: Yeah, okay.

LS: But anyway, what were some of your biggest hurdles of that time, if any?

JH: I don't really think of hurdles in those days. The hurdles really began with independence, when we had a president and were a separate university with its own board of trustees.

LS: How did that change?

JH: Well, it changed dramatically, because our first president I think came here with an understanding, if not a directive, to make what we were into a "real" state university. His mandate was to make us more like other Ohio state universities. Some of who had been here were thinking along the lines of places like Evergreen State in the state of Washington and Santa Cruz in California, which while they were independent state campuses, had nevertheless remained experimental, very interdisciplinary.

LS: From whom was that initial directive or mandate? Who was the person?

JH: Golding, President Golding. Brage Golding. Obviously, I am biased because not only did his mandate- which I think is understandable when I look at what Wright State is today, you can see that he was certainly envisioning what Wright State would really end up becoming- but at the time his mandate included getting a lot of us upstarts to either, what is the expression, "shape up or ship out". The "shape up" included, of course, getting the PhD. Many of us had ignored the advice of our thesis advisors, and our theses were not near completion, so issues of tenure, issues of promotion, issues of having to

have the PhD not only to be promoted, but to remain here. Some of us, and this is a familiar lament in those days, some of us had spent years here doing a variety of things for what we thought was the best of what we were, only to be told, “You should have been working on that dissertation, and if you don’t have it you are going to be fired”. One of our faculty members was fired: Pete Staub in the English Department. And Don Wills-

LS: What year was that?

JH: I have no idea; I can’t even guess. It was when Golding was here, right after Golding came. It was called the Staub-Wills Affair.

Chris Wydman¹: So Don Wills was let go as well?

JH: Don Wills, yeah. So those two were singled out, but many of us in the English Department were in the same boat, so the handwriting was on the wall. I mean, if two of us without a PhD were going to be dismissed, it won’t be long before the rest of us would be.

LS: When did you finish your PhD?

JH: 1969.

LS: Okay, so you were here five years.

JH: That’s right. And believe me it was pretty frenzied to finish it before the five years was up. Because it has to do with- I don’t even know what the policy is- but six years, if you’re in the sixth year, it’s hard to fire you?

LS: I don’t know that.

JH: But there are all of these rules about tenure, and if you’re not fired at a certain point in this five or six year process, you automatically get tenure, according to the ACLU, [AAUP?], so it’s very hard to get rid of you. So we had not only the Staub-Wills affair, but later on, years later, the English Department had another case that actually went to court involving instructors who had been here too long to fire.

LS: What were some of the other exciting innovations that you did while you were here in those early years?

JH: Well, I think I’ve mentioned the more public ones, but what I did in the classroom and I think what others did in the classroom- it’s funny, people talk about feminism and women’s studies, gay and lesbian studies- frankly, as an undergraduate and a graduate student, I was hardly aware of these movements on the horizon, because I was in 19th century American literature. But when I found myself at a brand new “quote, unquote” university and we had no African-American in the English Department to teach African-

¹ Chris Wydman, WSU archivist, was present during the interview.

American literature, and I decided to volunteer, knowing nothing about it and spending a whole summer preparing to teach it when I should have been working on my dissertation; and when I in fact taught those beginning survey courses in African-American literature, it had lecture halls divided, and I mean divided with white students on one side and black students on the other; and I had white students challenging my right to teach black literature because I wasn't black, and I had black students saying, "Oh be quiet, he's doing the best he can"; that was exciting, because I not only learned a great literature which I knew nothing about, but I learned that in the classroom, changes could be made, revolutions could be encouraged and understood. It changed the way I taught American literature.

LS: What were some of the literature you taught for the African American course, do you remember?

JH: Oh, yeah. Richard Wright and James Baldwin, those were my favorites.

LS: Tell me about Emily Dickinson.

JH: Alright, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Emily Dickinson had been my favorite American writer, and I had wanted at the University of Pennsylvania to do my dissertation on Emily Dickinson, but because I was in American Civilization, my advisor said you can't do a traditional English kind of study of one writer; you've got to do a group of writers and how they relate to a social movement. So I ended up doing my dissertation on Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Emerson and Poe, which meant that I was really having to read all of four writers instead of just one. What teaching at Wright State made me understand was that the reason we need that kind of social context and social approach is because many of our students, coming from the background they came from, had as their primary question, "Why do we need to read fiction or poetry? What is it going to do for us? It's not going to get us a job". So basically I had to try to convince them that Emily Dickinson was a rebel; when she went to church one Sunday, she was so horrified at the sermon that she ran out and never returned, and the rest of her life was spent examining why she felt that way; and that Walt Whitman had a vision of America that included all the occupations, all the people- not just poets, not just writers, not just an elite; that this was the Walt Whitman that was thrown out of church by a usher because he wouldn't remove his hat. And he never went back, and on his way out, with his hat still on his head and the usher leading him out of the church, when he finally got outside Whitman took his hat off and hit the usher with it. So basically, you don't teach literature as poetics, you don't teach it as structure alone; you try to ground it in the experience of your students, which is after all what all the big student revolutions were about.

LS: In retrospect, were you allowed to really teach freely here at Wright State?

JH: Yes, it is something I am eternally grateful for. Even though once we became the kind of university that we had to become, a place where tenure and promotion was largely based on publication, what I'm eternally grateful for is that I slipped through, based on teaching and getting teaching awards. Now I certainly published, but I didn't

publish enough to become a full professor. But I had been here so long and I had taught so much, and I was teaching these new subjects, like when they needed someone to do gay and lesbian literature and we didn't have anyone, I volunteered to do it. I'm very grateful for that, and I certainly would not have had that freedom at University of Pennsylvania or Harvard.

LS: When you left Allyn Hall, where did you go?

JH: To Millett.

LS: Millett.

JH: Yes. Millett Hall was the second building, I believe, to be built. It was the place where our library was, I believe on the first floor, and the English Department then began to have its cluster of offices. Other buildings were built around the Quad, and we had different colleges, different departments, and we weren't mixing with each other in faculty meetings or lounges. We were mixing at Academic Council- which had problems of its own- we were mixing in committees; not freely, not to work out interdisciplinary programs.

LS: Did you miss the environment of that first year?

JH: Yes. Most of us who were there then saw it as something rare and really exciting.

LS: So in one word, with one word, how would you describe that first year?

JH: Opportunity.

LS: What one word would you use to describe Wright State today?

JH: Great. You know, we have very near to us a good example of what the best intentions can lead to. The fall of Antioch [College] is a tragedy. But the Board of Trustees and the Brage Golding's were partly right: you have to worry about finances; you have to worry about political support; you have to worry about the bottom line; you have to worry about the practical needs of students in an increasingly technical world.

LS: Okay, anything else that you would like to share? Because these revelations you are doing are marvelous.

JH: Well, I just think that the older I get, the more difficult it is to remember. For example, Tom Whissen, who was an early member of the English Department, a leader; I remember variety shows- do you remember them?- when the faculty put on variety shows, and Tom Whissen wrote music and played it. He wrote musical comedy about the Wright Brothers. There was so much talent in those early years that was allowed to express itself, even if it wasn't within the confines of one department.

LS: You mention Tom, and I remember him writing scripts and music for the Rolling Stock Company, which was highly creative.

JH: Exactly. And even Don Wills; he is remembered.

LS: If you could go back and change one thing in that first year, what would it be? Something you may have done differently?

JH: That is really a hard question. Because on the one hand, I think what was exciting about what we were doing was that we were all free to have a certain restlessness about new ways to do things. A lot of it was directed at Miami. I think, frankly, the Miami faculty in that first year were certainly more rebellious than the Ohio State faculty were.

LS: Why?

JH: I think it's because, frankly, the humanities generally is the source- and history, you know- traditionally, it's not the faculty and students in business and science that stir things up. That's why I think the English Department has been seen as a trouble maker, until recently. But my answer to your question is yes, if we were able to go back there, there'd be a lot of talk about change- "what we need is more of this"; "what we need is this, not that"- but the amazing thing was that it was a creative and exciting ferment rather than a frustrated one, or angry. So, to say "what would I change that first year", if I were back there I could think of many things that I probably wanted to change, but they had to do with what Miami was doing then [and] what was looming over the future. But I'm not sure there was much actually happening that I would want to change.

LS: Others have mentioned about coming out here and seeing only one building, farm land, and they may have been a little bit discouraged. That didn't intimidate you at all.

JH: Not at all. Our first apartment was in Dayton View, it was the Commodore. The way to come to Wright State or the Dayton Campus was then to take Route 4. As you know, there are those ponds and quarries that you pass, and I'll never forget the first day of school, on a hot September day driving up Route 4, and there were some bathers diving into one of these pretty scary looking ponds, the color of the water was really scary. Here I was going through that kind of semi-industrial wasteland but going into farmland, and I thought, "Wow, this is amazing".

LS: Jim, this has been a wonderful reminiscence. Any final comments?

JH: No. I was so proud when I showed James Dean around the campus as it is today because he hadn't seen it in thirty-five years, and he was amazed. I was proud.

LS: Well that's great. Thank you so much.