

Interview of Mel Weisburd

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (June 26, 2013)

ANDERSON

Please state your name and please tell me when and where you were born.

WEISBURD

Okay. My full name is Melvin Irving Weisburd. I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, November 28, 1927.

ANDERSON

And how would you describe the circumstances you were born into, your family, where they lived?

WEISBURD

My family were immigrants. On my father's side, they came from Russia (Ukraine), Zhytomyr near Kiev. On my mother's side, she came from Bendin or Będzin, Poland. It was during the Depression my father met my mother, and they got married around 1926, I guess, and then they had me. Then before I was somewhere around two and a half years old, my father left her. There was a lawsuit, divorce suit, and the court awarded me custody to my mother.

ANDERSON

Now, let me ask you. Both of your parents in arrived in St. Paul? They met in St. Paul?

WEISBURD

Yes, they met in St. Paul.

ANDERSON

So when you were two?

WEISBURD

Two and a half, they divorced. Well, they started divorcing, and I became a ward of the state for a while. My mother was apparently hospitalized for feeble-mindedness, and the court then allowed my paternal grandparents to raise me.

ANDERSON

What kind of work was your father doing, and was your mother working before she was hospitalized?

WEISBURD

That's not been clear to me. I know that at some point not too far after the separation, she was working for Goodwill Industries. Now, I got a lot of information I tell you, even like her birthplace, I didn't find out until I was seventy, when I did a genealogy study. So I'm backfilling information retrospectively to the background of my mother. I knew very little about my mother.

So I was raised by my paternal grandparents on the west side of St. Paul, and suddenly at the age of about five or six or so, they said, "Your mother is coming."

And I said, "What?"

"She has the right to visit you."

So I went out. They took me outside. They didn't even invite her in, and she was standing on the sidewalk. And I didn't want her to be my mother. I didn't recognize her. She had her arms outstretched. So she brought me a little doll, and I remember running around and throwing the doll on the ground, "I'm a boy, not a girl." [laughs]

Then she took me by the hand and, like she did several times later, downtown St. Paul usually to go to a movie or something, but she couldn't speak English very well, so there was hardly any communication between us, and she had strange behavior. For example, in the movie audience, if the audience was very serious about what was happening, she'd suddenly start laughing out loud.

Once she took me on a steamer, capital steamer, down the Mississippi, and I had a quarter in my pocket, and I put it in a machine and I won. She took all the money away, and I ran away from her. Then when the ship docked, I ran back to my grandparents.

ANDERSON

So you were living with your grandparents, and there would be these intermittent visits from your mother.

WEISBURD

Yes. But I had mixed feelings about her because I missed having, like I could see the other kids had, the exclusivity of a mother. And my grandmother couldn't speak English either, so the sensation of living with my

grandparents was they cared for me fine, but I felt like I was in a silent movie, and I was an unhappy kid.

ANDERSON

They spoke Russian?

WEISBURD

They spoke Russian, Yiddish. My grandfather, whom I liked, spoke English, and he read the newspaper every day, and I could kid around with him, so he was nice. Once he brought me a dog. He was a salesman. He went out in the fields and sold linen and sheets to Swedish farmers, if you can imagine. [laughs] He brought me home a dog, and my grandmother said, "No, no, no, no, no. No [Russian word]." So that was the end of the dog, and my heart was broken.

My father wasn't around very much. Sometimes he came, and sometimes we slept together. I was a very restless sleeper, and I used to kick him. He didn't like it, and sometimes he spanked me. He was a miserable person. He kept losing jobs. He did work for a long time at the American Hoist and Derrick Company on the foundry floor, very dirty work.

ANDERSON

I read a poem of yours where you describe your father, I think, coming home from work.

WEISBURD

Yes, right. That's it.

ANDERSON

So would you describe him as a workingman?

WEISBURD

A workingman, a workingman, who had a terrible inferiority complex. He was one of six children. He was the middle of the males, and the oldest one was the favored one, and he became successful. And the youngest son became reasonably successful, but my father was always losing jobs. When he worked for the steel mills, he got silicosis.

Then he married a second time, so the second time he married—again, I am feeding back what I learned later—was a woman who used to be his childhood sweetheart before he married my mother, and it turned out that she turned him down, and he married my mother on the rebound. Then he went into the army and he served in the Hawaiian Islands, and then when he came back he met my mother. So that was not a good marriage from the start, but then her husband—everyone was going crazy during the Depression. To be clear, her name was Minnie, his childhood girlfriend. Her husband had schizophrenia, was a postman, and was institutionalized, and she had two daughters. So eventually, after the age of thirteen, I went to live with them.

ANDERSON

Oh. Now, was the family—

WEISBURD

Now, I didn't realize, you see—I should say this woman he married I liked very much, and she was very good to me. I really liked her and I felt very comfortable with her. I had a little trouble with the stepsisters, but the irony that I didn't see until later was that the divorce was about my father seeing his first sweetheart, Minnie, when he was married to my mother. My mother made a row about it (at a family picnic) which caused the police to come. I got this in legal papers that I later acquired. [laughs] So that's the background of things I didn't know when I was young. So I felt very comfortable with Minnie, but there's an irony for me to discover later in my life.

ANDERSON

Right. I was going to ask you, was your family religious at all?

WEISBURD

My grandfather, yes. My grandfather, not my father.

ANDERSON

Can you talk a little bit about his observances?

WEISBURD

Well, he was Orthodox. He went to the synagogue frequently. He held Passovers. He also had three daughters. So I had the benefit, you might say, of an extended family.

ANDERSON

So those were your aunts?

WEISBURD

Yes, those were my aunts. One aunt particularly took care—she bought me all my clothes, Aunt Eve, and she took me to a movie once in a while, so that was nice.

Now I don't know where I'm at. [laughs]

ANDERSON

We were talking about religious observances.

WEISBURD

Oh, yes. My grandfather was very Orthodox, and he took me to the synagogue and he had me bar mitzvahed. I was a very poor student in the Hebrew School, because the kids my age who were Jewish were speaking Yiddish and Hebrew and everything, but I wasn't. So I had to memorize Yiddish and Hebrew by rote and translate it back and forth. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Now, you were surrounded by people that spoke Yiddish. How do you account for not having—

WEISBURD

I know a lot of Yiddish terms, but I can't make a sentence. I can understand somebody speaking Yiddish.

ANDERSON

Back then as a kid, you just weren't speaking it really?

WEISBURD

No, nobody spoke Yiddish to me. My grandmother didn't speak to me. My grandfather did, and my aunt always spoke English to me.

ANDERSON

Was there a larger community, a larger Jewish community, or what was it like in St. Paul at that time for a Jewish family?

WEISBURD

Not very good. There again, reading about that period from other sources, Minneapolis, which is right next door, was known as the anti-Semitic capital of the United States at that time. And I was always being chased and beat up.

The major companies, there was Buzzo Cardoza [phonetic] and Great Northern and 3M. All those big companies did not hire Jews, so it was almost impossible for my father to get a job. You had to go into your own business. That was the only way a Jewish male could really survive then. So that hurt him for the rest of his life. He was a bright guy. I guess a lot of black people have the same kinds of experiences, so it can just kill you. So that's the way it was.

ANDERSON

What else did you think, as a child, of St. Paul? I mean, were you aware of Minnesota has kind of a socialist history?

WEISBURD

No. You mean the populism there? No, but everybody we seemed to know seemed to lean in that direction. Stassen—who was the governor? There was someone else. I wasn't really too aware of Minnesota's history at that time.

ANDERSON

Well, you were a child.

WEISBURD

Yes. I do remember, though, President Roosevelt crossing a bridge on the Mississippi, and I remember seeing a Life magazine with Roosevelt on one side and Hoover on the other, and Hoover was the bad guy.

ANDERSON

That must have been during the election.

WEISBURD

Yes, 1932, I think. Yes, that was 1932. Now, when I think about St. Paul and I think about all that, I'm always thinking about it. I'm always going back to being the little kid, because I used to wander and hike all over the place. If I went in the wrong neighborhood, I got chased, so I was pretty much alone.

ANDERSON

You don't have brothers or sisters?

WEISBURD

No, no. But, again, back in the seventies I discovered I had a half brother. That's a whole other story. That was way not so long ago.

ANDERSON

Interesting. That is interesting. Yes, St. Paul, it's full of more hills than I expected when I visited there. Bridges and hills.

WEISBURD

Yes, bridges. There was High Bridge. I used to walk over those bridges, and there were woods and Indian mounds. Also I had a girlfriend.

ANDERSON

What grade was that?

WEISBURD

The girlfriend was not—more my fantasy. I met her in Hebrew School. She was the only girl in the Hebrew School, and she felt uncomfortable as I did, but she felt uncomfortable for a different reason. She was a girl, and they didn't want girls in the Hebrew School. But I had a thing for her, and I couldn't figure out how to meet her. I was too shy. You know that story. And it wasn't until the last day of Hebrew School that I finally got enough courage to ask her if I could walk with her home. She lived close to the Hebrew School and I lived some distance. And she told that she wanted to learn about Hebrew and Yiddish, and she was interested in everything, and she always carried books. Then when we stopped by her house, suddenly I said, "Can I kiss you?" And she closed her eyes, I closed my eyes, but I kissed her on the nose. I missed. I kissed her on the nose. She ran in the house, and I ran the other way. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Now, what age was that?

WEISBURD

It had to be about when I was thirteen. But before that, I used to watch her. I used to walk into her neighborhood hoping I would run into her, or go to the public library, hoping, because she always went to the library. In fact, I saw her at the library once, but I didn't know how to say anything to her.

ANDERSON

What's her name?

WEISBURD

Rita. Now, again, seventy-five years later, we had a big correspondence about it.

ANDERSON

That's interesting.

WEISBURD

I have a whole file of correspondence.

ANDERSON

We'll have to talk about that later.

WEISBURD

Yes. I have a lot of little offshoots of things.

ANDERSON

Yes. Well, around that time as you were growing up, what was your sense of the arts and culture? I mean, were you interested in writing? Were you aware of cultural life at all?

WEISBURD

Not too. I was into the movies, matinee, kiddie matinees, and I loved the Lone Ranger because in those days they wore full-face masks, more mysterious. There used to be a quarry right near the theater, and I used to gallop my horse, my imagined horse. [laughs] I did see some pictures. What is it? Oh, I saw some pictures that did make an impression on me. Stella Dallas, I cried through the whole thing. Pictures about people breaking apart.

ANDERSON

Joan Crawford.

WEISBURD

No, it was Barbara Stanwyck.

ANDERSON

Barbara Stanwyck.

WEISBURD

Kids—oh, Heidi, where Heidi's grandfather—I always got very emotional about that. What else?

ANDERSON

You were saying when people break up.

WEISBURD

Yes, anything about isolation, like Man in the Iron Mask, I wrote poems about all these things, and The Count of Monte Cristo, those were things I liked. And I also read the comics. I read the first Superman magazine and the Batman. Then we had something called Big Little books. The one I remember was one about Joe Palooka, another one about Captain—god, I forgot it—somebody in the navy. I didn't do much reading.

ANDERSON

So there weren't a lot of books and that sort of thing in the home?

WEISBURD

No. We listened to the radio certain nights, and we'd all gather around the radio, and I'd lie on the floor, Jack Armstrong and the All-American Boy and Captain Midnight and Terry and the Pirates or whatever. So, yes, I put myself into that kind of a fantasy life, and once I wrote something, I started writing, tried to write adventure ship stories, mostly about sailing ships. But I never finished anything as a story. I remember my aunt read it and said, "What is stone juice?"

I said, "That's where the water is muddy." [laughter]

ANDERSON

You were already being poetic.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

Now, were you aware as a child and going into your teen years that you and your family and your neighbors were living through a Great Depression?

WEISBURD

Yes. I write about the atmosphere of the city. Hardly ever saw a police car, there were drunks everywhere, some men exhibiting themselves. But it was very silent, and you could hear coal going down the chutes in the basement and things like that.

I wasn't aware that we were in an economic depression, and nobody told me. I had no perspective for it. I thought you had to be careful with money, but I had no comparison to know what a nickel was worth. I mean, now it's worth \$1.25. [laughs]

ANDERSON

But as a kid, you were just thinking this is how it is.

WEISBURD

Yes. I did feel deprived in the area of toys, and I felt very bad around Christmas. I didn't get any toys, and I don't remember getting much for my birthday, either. I never had a birthday party. I never had the celebrations that other families had, and I noticed the difference. So I really longed for a maternal figure to whom I was exclusive, and I didn't have that.

ANDERSON

When you moved in with your father and your stepsisters and your new stepmother, what was that transition like?

WEISBURD

It was a little more fun because I had company from the stepsisters, and the stepmother was—she made me comfortable, you know. The stepsisters nagged me, and I didn't like that. They were all both older than me. We went and did things. We took drives mostly. My father was mostly unemployed.

ANDERSON

But he had a car?

WEISBURD

I don't think he had a car. He had a car once after he married. He bought, I think, a 16-cylinder Lincoln—or was it 12 cylinders—from a former rich guy, and it used about a gallon of oil every mile. [laughs] So that was bad. But now, we moved to L.A. because—

ANDERSON

Tell me when and how you moved to Los Angeles.

WEISBURD

When was December 7th? 1940?

ANDERSON

1941.

WEISBURD

We moved in 1942, somewhere around March and April.

ANDERSON

Why?

WEISBURD

Well, for one thing, my father contracted silicosis from the American Hoist and Derrick Company, and my stepmother made him sue. He sued, and they settled for \$6,000. Then with that money, they all decided we would go to California, because my father could work in the aircraft industries during World War—was that anticipation? Yes, World War II.

ANDERSON

Was that a lot of money for your family?

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

How were you aware of the money?

WEISBURD

Seemed like a lot of money to me then. I was only interested in pennies and nickels. [laughs] I did sell papers once, so it was hard to get a few pennies for a paper. My father worked in a parking lot as a parking lot attendant for—was it \$12 a week?

ANDERSON

That was once you moved to Los Angeles?

WEISBURD

That's St. Paul. I always felt sorry for him. But he didn't take any great pride in me.

When we moved to L.A.—oh, with the money they bought a brand-new Studebaker—which broke down in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. So then we came to L.A., and L.A. was very depressing because we came in a rainstorm, and we came through the East Side of the city through Boyle Heights. I looked out, I just remember remarking, "Gee, the curbs are high here. They weren't that high in St. Paul, and there's so much water running everywhere." [laughs]

ANDERSON

You mean the flooding from rain or the—

WEISBURD

Yes, flooding from the rain.

Then we stayed downtown in a hotel. I think it was called the Hotel Baltimore, and the walls sweated, and I never saw a wall sweat in Minnesota because everything's insulated. Then finally we moved several places, and we ended in the West Adams area. I can't remember the name of the street. It was near Crenshaw and Adams.

ANDERSON

You were fifteen, about fifteen years old?

WEISBURD

Yes, and I went to Mount Vernon Junior High School.

ANDERSON

Sure. Still there.

WEISBURD

Hated it. It was like a penitentiary there.

ANDERSON

Well, talk a little bit about it.

WEISBURD

But I only went there six months and then I went to Dorsey High, which was a totally different story then.

ANDERSON

Well, let's talk about what it was like to go to Dorsey High School. I mean, by the time you started high school, did you feel more acclimatized to being in Los Angeles?

WEISBURD

Yes. Better than that. I felt that the school systems in Minnesota were very regimented at that time, and here it was very liberal. I mean, the teachers were warm and they tried to elicit your participation. They helped you whenever you had a question. It was a difference between day and night. I don't know if it's like that now, but it was then. [laughs]

ANDERSON

So you enjoyed it. It sounds as if you enjoyed going to high school.

WEISBURD

I enjoyed high school. Yes, I did enjoy going to high school, and I had a friend there, a young man. His name was Victor Marine [phonetic]. We used to sit on the lawn and talk about science and science fiction and look at girls and all that stuff. [laughs] We became very good friends.

ANDERSON

What was the racial composition of your neighborhood and also Dorsey High School at that time, you would say? How would you describe it?

WEISBURD

I would say it was practically all white, Jewish, heavily. It was heavily Jewish. They had a synagogue there on West Adams, and delicatessens. I remember a bakery there called the Delight [phonetic] Bakery I liked to go, and there was a soda fountain that served cherry phosphates. Yes, it was very liberated. But the big thing about Dorsey was the woman who got me interested in writing, a woman by the name of Blanche Garrison.

ANDERSON

She was a teacher?

WEISBURD

Teacher. I took her for creative writing, and I wonder if you ever heard of her. She's apparently famous among her alumni. I doubt whether she's still alive. But she was a highly regarded teacher, and she got me interested in writing poetry.

ANDERSON

Now, how did she get you interested in writing poetry?

WEISBURD

That it was okay to express what you feel, what's really on your mind, what's in your feeling, that it was okay to do that here, and there were ways she could help us do that, make it interesting with metaphors and figures of speech. She was good. They published a magazine called Trial Flights, and I had a poem in it. I wish I still had it. I think I threw it out once. I don't know why I did that. But she was the first person that I had a form of expression that matched what I wanted to say.

ANDERSON

You haven't mentioned this yet. Had you had a feeling in your life at that time, a strong feeling toward self-expression? Or did you just discover it when you started writing in her class?

WEISBURD

That's a hard question. I don't know. Really, my main interest in general in high school, I majored in math and science. My ambition was to become an aeronautical engineer. I loved airplanes and I never got over that, particularly ones with propellers. [laughs]

So I read a lot of—I remember reading the books of Beirne Lay, Jr. Now, he's the one that they made a movie out of called I Wanted Wings, and there was another one about North Island off San Diego. I also read Mutiny on the Bounty, and I used to read in high school James M. Cain. I really liked James M. Cain. [laughs] I wasn't exposed to any real literature. Yes, I really liked James M. Cain, and those things sort of fed my fantasies.

Now, did I want to express? I really wanted to, I think, and I did. I think I tried to write about pilots, stories about pilots. I remember I wrote one called The Last Fighter Pilot, only one fighter pilot left on this Pacific Island, and he had to take on the Japanese Navy. [laughs] But I don't think I was a very precocious writer.

ANDERSON

Well, in Mrs. Garrison's class, now, was this an elective that you chose?

WEISBURD

Yes, it was an elective.

ANDERSON

So you were drawn to the creative writing?

WEISBURD

Yes. I wasn't bad at math, either. I was pretty good at math.

ANDERSON

You had both things?

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

As a teenager in high school, those went together for you?

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

Is that a way of looking at it?

WEISBURD

Yes. Well, they went together, but it created, as we may see, a theme through all my work, of division, of trying to humanize technology, of trying to bring them together rather than being considered in compartments.

Therefore, because society—

ANDERSON

Now, you say that with hindsight, but in high school what were your thoughts about it?

WEISBURD

I wanted to do both. Yes, in high school I wanted to do both, but I was more interested in the science side, much more interested, because there was only Blanche Garrison. There weren't any other courses I could take where I could express myself. Well, that's another thing. I'm looking in hindsight again. Because Blanche Garrison was a woman and her interest in writing and poetry seemed to link with this ideal mother, do I call her a muse? Or it was something I might have been encouraged by a mother. Now, again, I'm putting thing together, but I think these were my feelings but not able to put into words then.

ANDERSON

Yes, maybe not. You weren't totally conscious of it then.

WEISBURD

No, I was unconscious.

ANDERSON

So when did you graduate from Dorsey?

WEISBURD

I think it was '45.

ANDERSON

Okay. Tell me if I'm right in thinking that you had a—it was three years, high school was three years, tenth through the twelfth grade.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

The war was going on, but it sounds as if you were enjoying your high school years.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

What about your parents and your family? Did your father ever get a job in the defense industry?

WEISBURD

Yes, he got a job in the defense industry, and we bought a house on Potomac Avenue.

ANDERSON

Is that still in West Adams?

WEISBURD

Yes. They bought it for \$3,500 under—what was it—FHA or whatever it was then.

ANDERSON

So there's a kind of real security that comes, it sounds like.

WEISBURD

Yes. I had a life, you know. I had a life, and I liked my stepmother. I don't know if she was affectionate. She seemed very warm. Then in this last year, my father left.

ANDERSON

Really? What happened?

WEISBURD

And he told me, "Minnie doesn't want me anymore. She wants a divorce." So he left, and I stayed with them.

But then one day she came into my bedroom, she said, "You have six months. I'll give you six months, but then you have to leave."

ANDERSON

You were still in high school?

WEISBURD

Yes. And she bought me a Model-A car, a Model-A, and actually she bought me the Model-A before she told me that. It's like she's getting me ready for the outside world. But by then I took some army examinations to go into something called the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program, called ASTRP, and they accepted me and they sent me to Stanford.

ANDERSON

You hadn't graduated from high school yet.

WEISBURD

Oh, I graduated, yes. Nobody came to my graduation. That was another—I had a terrible feeling about no one coming to my graduation, and I cried privately. So I had all these things, there was nothing celebrated in my life, my birthdays or anything, and I cried. But I went into the army.

ANDERSON

What made you think about the army? What made you think about taking this exam?

WEISBURD

Well, I wanted to get into the air force.

ANDERSON

That's what I expected you to say, because you liked planes so much.

WEISBURD

Right, but at the time she told me, there were no more examination go in the air force. The war seemed to be winding down.

ANDERSON

Did you want to get into the war, is that partly, or you just—

WEISBURD

No, I just wanted to fly. [laughs]

ANDERSON

You just wanted to fly.

WEISBURD

Dummy. [laughs] I was immature, retarded in my fantasy life, arrested development. We have all these terms now. We don't have to go into detail about them anymore. Arrested development, age three, five. [laughter] So anyway, I got accepted and they sent me to Stanford. They gave me clothes and they fed me, and I took the courses, but my father—

ANDERSON

You were excited, weren't you, when you got into the program and they sent you out there?

WEISBURD

Yes, I was. I remember the first day I got off the train, it stops right by Stanford then, and I walked through this beautiful field of trees before you get to the campus, the Spanish structures, I said, "Oh, boy, this is going to be fun." [laughs]

And I made friends, had friends there. But I had made a contract. It was a contract. After I had two quarters, I had to go on active duty.

ANDERSON

Now, please tell me what year this is and where we are with World War II.

WEISBURD

Let me think. Forty five.

ANDERSON

You graduated in '45?

WEISBURD

High school. But I was at Stanford in the rest of '45, and I remember V-J Day.

ANDERSON

Yes, the war ended while you were in the program.

WEISBURD

V-J Day, and I went to San Francisco, pretending I was a soldier, with my uniform, with all the crowds there.

Then what happened? Then from there, I had a commitment to go on active duty. No. I'll tell you what happened. While I was in San Francisco, I went into the U.S. Naval Air Corps, and I said, "I want to join the Naval Air Corps." So, okay, they gave me examinations

ANDERSON

Did you go to the Presidio?

WEISBURD

I don't know where that was. And they gave me all these examinations and physical, and I was perfect. I did well on the math. I did well on everything. And they said, "Well, you're ready to go. You can go anytime," or something like that. But in the meantime, I was sent to Aberdeen Proving Grounds.

ANDERSON

Where's that?

WEISBURD

In Maryland. They didn't know what to do with me or others like us because all the soldiers were leaving. The barrack windows were broken out. I had to sleep on beds that had no mattresses, no sheets, in the cold weather, and I got bronchitis. Then I got picked out to be in a drill team as an exhibition drill team, where we wore shiny helmets and white gloves and did fancy thing with the rifles. It's hard for me to believe I was in such physical shape now. [laughs]

Then after that, I was sent to West Point, New York, as a clerk, enlisted man clerk.

ANDERSON

But you're still in the U.S. Army all this time?

WEISBURD

Yes. Then I did something very foolish. I wrote to the War Department and say, "I want to be released to go into the Navy Air Corps, V5 program." Somehow that went back down the chain of commands, and I was called in and threatened with court-martial that I went over the chain of command. [laughs] I was a technician fifth grade, and they busted me. I said, "I didn't understand the whole thing. I was going in for a higher use of me, and I just didn't understand the whole thing."

ANDERSON

It's called the military, right?

WEISBURD

Yeah, it's called the military. So anyway, I eventually got my little stripes back.

Then while I was there at the West Point, I took a trip to St. Paul and saw my girlfriend, Rita, again, and spent an afternoon with her, and we petted and necked and kissed, and then I asked her to marry me, and she said yes. [laughs] Then I had to go back again. [laughs] I'm having all these things happen while I was committed to something else.

So I finally while I was away in the army—we wrote letters to each other. While I was away, she got married. She was ready to be married. She was nubile or whatever. [laughs] No, wait a minute. She didn't get married yet. I went back to L.A., god knows where the hell—oh, yes. My father married the third time. My life is so complicated. And he used to write me, he said, "Sonny," he used to call me Sonny, "I have a home for you now, finally."

So I go home, and I have my duffle bag, everything. The house of this woman was a two-story or three-story down near USC somewhere. I come into the house and she welcomes me, and we have dinner and I sleep over. The next morning she pulls me aside and says, "You know your father never told me he had a son. You're going to have to leave."

I said, "When?"

"Today." So I'm always getting kicked out. So I left. To this day I don't know where I went or where I stayed.

ANDERSON

Do you think you blocked it out?

WEISBURD

I think I blocked it out. I don't where I stayed. Did I get to a motel? Did I go where? I don't know. But I ended up renting a room in a house on Bronson, Bronson near Adams. But I was somewhere else before that, and I can't remember.

ANDERSON

It must have felt like quite a blow.

WEISBURD

I keep having these blows where everything keeps breaking up. So I'm in this house and I register at UCLA, and I'm ready to go to school.

ANDERSON

Now, I just want to ask you, had you been thinking about college when you were in high school?

WEISBURD

Yes, I always wanted to go to college. I wanted to take engineering courses and—what, am I going through a blackout now?

ANDERSON

Because you went straight into the army after—

WEISBURD

Oh, UCLA, I think I basically went to the wrong school, because they didn't have an engineering program. [laughs] So all I could do is take engineering-like courses, and I don't think even USC had aeronautical engineering anyway.

So anyway, I was there and I was taking calculus and physics and all that, and then while I was there, I met a girl. She was a German Jewish exile, very blonde, very beautiful, and I met her only by virtue of seating arrangement in Psychology 101 or 121.

ANDERSON

So she was a student. Was this a required class?

WEISBURD

No, I think this also was—I think I was minoring in psychology and majoring in math and science.

ANDERSON

Would you call that a strange combination? [laughs]

WEISBURD

Yes, because—

ANDERSON

I'm sure your fellow math majors weren't minoring in psychology.

WEISBURD

No. I was muddy, I was muddied, and the worst thing is I fell in love with woman and she fell in love with me, and she was just loaded with culture. She was educated in Germany, and she quoted Heine, Goethe and Mahler. She knew Mahler and all the—she educated me. We went to concerts. I remember going to the German Requiem at the Immanuel Presbyterian Church down on Wilshire.

But I came to her house and her mother interviewed me, sort of like you are. "Why are you taking this? Why are you taking that? What do you hope to do in the future?" And I didn't have very good answers, so she forbade—is it forbade or forbade?—Stephanie—that was her name—from seeing me. So we saw each other secretly for a total of two years. I had this hovel where my father lived. When she'd come over, he would be gone. We made love and everything. She was my first love. And then one day we thought we'd get married. We went out and got a marriage license, but she was strangely tense about it, and I was strangely tense, thinking, "How am I going to afford it? I don't even have a job. I haven't even finished up in where I'm going." The attrition of it was such that she had to break off, and that was another blow. That was one of the biggest blows.

So I had two girlfriends that I was interested in and a mother who disappeared and a stepmother who disappeared. [laughs] So I had a long line of this stuff.

ANDERSON

Now, I want to ask you, because in addition to the relationship with Stephanie, which was new, it sounds as if your life took a new turn, the kinds of cultural events you were attending.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

Maybe you could talk a little bit, because it seems as if you might have becoming immersed in what was going on culturally in L.A. in a new way.

WEISBURD

I started writing poems. I wrote one poem I called The Dance Poem, and I submitted to the McGowan Theater for admission, but I got rejected.

ANDERSON

Could you please talk about the McGowan Theater? What was going on there that you—

WEISBURD

I don't know.

ANDERSON

You submitted it to the—

WEISBURD

I don't know who I submitted it to.

ANDERSON

Did they have some kind of—were they publishing or—

WEISBURD

I don't remember. Maybe I just put it in the mail. [laughs] Or was there an application? Maybe I applied to the theater and I put that as an appendage to it. And it's probably an awful poem. I don't have it anymore. I probably threw it out. But it was a poem to be danced to, and I knew nothing about dancing either. [laughs] I've been a charlatan all my life. I shouldn't say that on here.

ANDERSON

[laughs] When you were going to these concerts, was this something that you enjoyed?

WEISBURD

Oh, god, yes. Again, that was feeling in the music that I felt. I understood it completely. It was a perfect expression of what I felt, and I loved Brahms. Well, I liked the three Bs. I liked all of them. I liked Mahler. I liked Ferde Grofé and "The Grand Canyon Suite." I got to have quite a musical knowledge, although no musical talent. I can still hum some of that stuff.

ANDERSON

And it may have partly begun with that relationship.

WEISBURD

I think so, because to express it without knowing music, you have to express it in poetry.

One of the books I read that influenced me was Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus, and I write about that in my memoir, and also Joyce, and I saw this multidimensional metaphoric vocabulary, the richness of it. So poetry was the way that I could express it, and I wrote a lot of poems about music. In Doctor Faustus, Leverkühn, Thomas Mann tries to duplicate some of the music in prose poem-ish style, and I loved it. I loved everything in that book and his analysis of Beethoven and particularly the one on Opus 111, the piano sonata.

The music more than the poetry very much influenced me in the arts. Stephanie was majoring in art, and she wasn't a bad artist, and she was going for a teaching credential in it. So she was the alma mater, really. I remember mostly all of that more than I do all my English Victorian Renaissance courses. Also, although I wasn't taught it, I was in love with T.S. Eliot.

ANDERSON

So you were just at this point really—

WEISBURD

T.S. Eliot was like music.

ANDERSON

—really you were hungry and you just one thing led to another, one book led to another.

WEISBURD

Yes, that's right. That's right.

ANDERSON

And that was it from then on, it sounds like.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

I mean, you were together for two years, which is actually a long time, and at some point, I've read that you got your undergraduate degree in English.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

So how did we go from the physics and the calculus courses to taking enough classes to major in English? How did that happen?

WEISBURD

Well, first of all, I took a lot of courses at Stanford in math and physics, too, so I had a lot of credits. So when it came time where in the two year you have to decide on your major, at that point I had two years left to take a lot of other courses. [laughs] But if she wasn't there, I probably would have gone on with a science type of degree.

ANDERSON

So you really made a big pivot, a big shift.

WEISBURD

I did and I didn't, because then you came to graduation and getting a job, and there was nothing for an English major. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Now, before we get there, did you go to UCLA on the G.I. Bill?

WEISBURD

Yes, yes, definitely.

ANDERSON

And you had left the army? I don't know what the proper term is for it.

WEISBURD

Discharged.

ANDERSON

You were discharged, honorably discharged, you'd served your time, and went, as I guess a lot of people of your generation, really.

WEISBURD

Yes, exactly, the G.I.—

ANDERSON

You must have known a lot of other students who were also there on the G.I. Bill.

WEISBURD

I didn't have many friends there. I was a commuter, took a bus home every day. I had no friends there. Maybe I had one male friend, yes. There was another girl I was seeing, too, but that was about the extent of it.

ANDERSON

So you didn't know any other G.I.'s who were students?

WEISBURD

I was not good at making friends. I was really not. I was clueless. I mean, if it wasn't for a seating chart—and actually she made the first move. I mean, I was doodling, and she says, "Oh, you doodle okay." That's the first thing she said. She says, "Try it like this." [laughs]

ANDERSON

She gave you an art lesson, a drawing lesson.

WEISBURD

Yes, she gave me an art lesson while we were listening—I don't know, there must have been 150 students in the class, and the teacher stopped until we stopped talking. [laughs]

ANDERSON

So that's how you met Stephanie?

WEISBURD

Yes. So then, of course, as I say, she broke up, and she went to practice-teach at Los Angeles State College, and then she also went to USC, and couldn't find her anymore after that, so I don't even know if she's still alive. I once contacted UCLA to see if I could find her just for the heck of it, and they started looking. Then they told me it's private, they can't tell me, so that ended that.

ANDERSON

So you had two years to take any courses you wanted.

WEISBURD

Yes. I took the novel, no creative writing courses I wanted more than anything. I did take one in the summer by a visiting poet named Byron Herbert Reece, and he wrote a book called *The Ballad of the Bones*, and that was quite helpful.

ANDERSON

Because you got to write in the class?

WEISBURD

Yes, I got to write in the class. That's when some other kid said, "You write too much like T.S. Eliot. You should learn how to write American." [laughs] Anyway, that guy, who said that, I later met, and he was Tom Viertel, a member of the Viertel family.

ANDERSON

Oh, my goodness.

WEISBURD

So I couldn't see who it was. He was in the back of the class. And the first thing I did when I met Tom Viertel—the first thing he did is, "I was the man in the back of the class."

ANDERSON

You should mention who the Viertel family is.

WEISBURD

Well, the Viertel family is a family that came from Vienna. Gosh, I think Berthold Viertel was a dramatist back there. He had several sons: Peter, Hans, and Tom. Was there another one? I don't know. Peter became quite famous. Hans became a linguist and worked with Norm Chomsky. I guess you know this.

ANDERSON

Peter was a writer and a screenplay writer.

WEISBURD

A writer and a screenplay, and he associated with Hemingway a lot. Tom was the youngest and had no accomplishments. He was the baby, and apparently he was spoiled. He had a lot of nannies. He was partially crippled, and I don't know what kind of condition it is. I don't know if it was Parkinson's or what, but he wasn't able to hold a job.

Now, I'm way ahead of myself on this. This is for another phase.

ANDERSON

Right, but I just wanted to make sure that we know who the Viertels were, and you were telling—

WEISBURD

And Salka. Salka Viertel was a confidante to Garbo, and I met her.

ANDERSON

Well, we will get to that. I just wanted to—you mentioned—so Tom Viertel was also a student in Byron Herbert Reece's creative writing class—

WEISBURD

Yes, that's right.

ANDERSON

—that you took during the end of your time at UCLA, and it sounds as if you studied literature as well.

WEISBURD

Yes, yes.

ANDERSON

Was it bifurcated in the sense that the first couple of years you really were focused on your science courses, and the last couple of years you were really focused on studying literature?

WEISBURD

That's generally true, but a little mixed, because I had to take a Subject A course, and a Subject A course, we had to write a composition. I think that guy's name was—no, not Nesbitt [phonetic], Newell [phonetic]. I wrote one about being drafted into an informal baseball team at the grammar school,

and I was a shrimp, a little shrimp, and all the kids made fun of me. And the first time I came to bat, I hit a homerun. [laughter]
And the teacher said, "This is a documentary. This is a good story." He's telling the other kids, and I think he had me read it to the class. That was a little bit of seed planted there at the early part of my UCLA career.

ANDERSON

Did it make you more confident as a writer?

WEISBURD

It made me feel I could do it, yes. That's all I can remember about it.

ANDERSON

I'm actually thinking that we can end now, because we're coming to the end of your schooling here, and then we can talk a little bit about the next phase, if that sounds okay.

WEISBURD

Okay.

ANDERSON

If there's something that you want to add, though, please feel free, and we can always come back also as you think about it. Between now and then, we can always come back.

WEISBURD

The only thing I would say is I graduated. I did not go to graduation ceremony.

ANDERSON

Were you trying to avoid what happened with your high school graduation?

WEISBURD

Yes, I guess so, yes. It seemed no point. I didn't get any honors. I did win a prize, a poetry prize called the Shirle Robbins Poetry Prize. I submitted a poem and I got fifty dollars for it. I don't know if they still do that or not. S-h-i-r-l-e Robbins. And that was a little bit of a lift.

While I was going to UCLA, I was writing and I was submitting stuff to magazines, and some woman wrote me, Mrs.—god, I don't know her name. She was an editor. And she said, "Even though we didn't take your work, we encourage you greatly to continue. You write like Robert Lowell."

ANDERSON

Wow.

WEISBURD

And I didn't know who Robert Lowell was. And she mentioned—what was the book about a castle? I don't know.

ANDERSON

Well, he was probably the most prominent poet in America at that time.

WEISBURD

Yes. So I was both like Robert Lowell and T.S. Eliot. [laughter]

ANDERSON

Well, young poets are always imitative.

WEISBURD

Oh, wait a minute. I got published.

ANDERSON

Where?

WEISBURD

In a magazine called Poet Lore, a very old magazine. It goes way back. They published a verse play of mine. Here's where Eliot's influence comes in, because I read The Cocktail Party and all that stuff, and it was called The Appointment."

ANDERSON

Was this published here in Los Angeles?

WEISBURD

No, no, in Boston. I think the magazine's still going.

ANDERSON

Say the name of it again, please.

WEISBURD

Poet Lore. L-o-r-e.

ANDERSON

Well, it sounds as if you were spending—in order to do that kind of writing and that kind of publishable writing, you must have been spending a pretty decent amount of time on your own working on these pieces.

WEISBURD

I'd have to go back and look at my journal books. I wrote a lot about my affair with Stephanie, and the breakup was devastating to me.

It's a very funny thing, parenthetically, my grandson went through the same thing at the University of Oregon, and I tried to comfort him as much as I could. It's terrible when it happens, but yet people's destiny have to separate when you're in college, in a way.

So anyway, maybe I'm talking too much.

ANDERSON

No, you're not talking too much, but I always think—let me—

1.2. Session 2 (2013)

ANDERSON

Recording. When we ended last time, we ended with you as a UCLA graduate, and you had made your way—

WEISBURD

Yes, I discussed going to UCLA already, yes. Okay.

ANDERSON

And you had majored in English, and we talked about your years at UCLA, and you won a prize, a poetry prize, at the end of your time there, although you took a lot of courses in science and engineering. So what were your thoughts about what you were going to do after college?

WEISBURD

Find any job I could. I would just be a liberal arts graduate looking for a job, and I tried, applied for many jobs. I had a few part-time jobs, like I sold paint at Sears, I worked in shipping of delicatessen products, but mostly I was unemployed, living off the \$52.20 money you got from being a veteran, and I took lots of civil service exams.

I taught myself to type. I taught myself to type, and I thought that might be a cheap skill, and I looked for clerical jobs too. Then I also looked for some technical writing jobs. I remember I applied to a swimming pool company, but I didn't get it. And it was pretty miserable for a whole year. I did not have a job. I didn't know if I ever was going to have one.

Then I took civil services exams, and there was one more or less up my alley, and it paid very good money, and I did extremely well on the exam and I got hired. That was with the new agency, the Los Angeles County Air Pollution Control District. There were about nine other liberal arts graduates. There was a former Bruin editor, Martin Brower, he was in there. And we all got hired, and we were trained for—I wasn't sure what we were going to do, you know. I was very naïve. But they gave us training on industrial equipment and control equipment, equipment that catches particulates and [unclear], and the theory of combustion and things about fuel and different fuel oils. I still didn't quite have an idea. [laughs]

So finally we're all through with the training and we're supposed to go to a garage to get our cars, and I said, "What are we going to be doing?"

He said, "We're smog cops." So they gave us badges, and we had a big zone. Each of us had a zone, and we were to do a number of things. One, we would go systematically through plants and inventory all their equipment and see if they're all in compliance. Another thing we would do is give factories and people and everyone violations if they smoked, and here it was like smoke everywhere. Could you imagine? There were apartment house incinerators, backyard incinerators, open trash burning everywhere. The smoke was like a battlefield. So my job was rather straightforward, and I had to get up enough courage to do it, because, first of all, we were a new agency, and we'd have to explain what the heck we were doing. We'd write out a notice, notice of violation.

A couple places, I got chased out, and there was one place out near Rosemead where they were burning car bodies and rubber tires, and that makes the most amount of smoke. I went there and I had to go across a yard full of rubble and everything. And we didn't have uniforms. Later they came up with uniforms. We didn't have uniforms, and they said, "Who the hell are you?" And I told them. "You have no right being on this property," they said.

And I said, "I do have a right. I have to tell you that if you refuse my entry, that's another notice. Besides you had a violation of the smoke.

He says, "You get the hell out of here," and they came with a pipe after me.
[laughs]

ANDERSON

Now, this was about 1951 or so?

WEISBURD

Yes, about 1951 or '52. I don't remember.

ANDERSON

And you were saying smog was—I mean, it was the smoggiest city in the country.

WEISBURD

It was the worst. It was very terrible. Even though we still get smog here every now and then, we don't get the eye irritation where people's eyes were going like this.

ANDERSON

This is something you remember.

WEISBURD

Plants were being damaged, and they didn't have any antioxidants and rubber tires, and those would get cracked, so it was a real serious problem, and people were up in arms. Places like Pasadena got it worst, and there were several protest marches, which eventually resulted in the ouster of the man who was running it, and then they got replaced by others.

ANDERSON

Running the agency you worked for?

WEISBURD

Yes. So I was there for ten years. I got promoted to a senior engineering inspector, but eventually I started taking notes on what I was doing, just for my own sake, and they got wind of it, and they let me write a manual on the legislating and enforcing air pollution laws. And I had some other assignments, like I became an editor of some of the technical. I was working out of classification.

ANDERSON

Explain that. You had a certain government, you had a certain—

WEISBURD

I was a senior engineering inspector, but then I was writing. I wasn't out in the field inspecting anymore. And I also was on a Speakers Bureau, so I went around to different places talking and answering questions.

ANDERSON

Would you consider yourself and the work that you were doing, this was pioneering work, really?

WEISBURD

Yeah, it was very pioneering work. I wouldn't say I was a big pioneer. The bigger pioneer was a professor at Caltech whose name is A.J. Haagen-Smit, who discovered what smog consisted of, and that led to attention given to

automobiles. He outlined the photochemistry of it and he proved that eye irritation, everything comes from it.

So eventually I started working on—I worked with a photochemist from Caltech at UCLA, Dr. Lowell Wayne [phonetic], and became good friends with him. I would edit all the stuff about the photochemistry. So, yes. And we also had eye irritation chambers, and I volunteered to be exposed, and we started it. We built up a rather large research outfit for a local agency. We had dynamometers for cars, learned how to test emissions from automobiles.

So I put all that in this book, and there were many people in the agency that didn't want to support me with that book. The director of engineering said I had no right—he called me a circus clown and a charlatan—I had no right trying to write a book like that. But the new man in charge of it, whose name was S. Smith Griswold [phonetic], I didn't know was cheering for me behind, and finally when I completed—I had to go out and arrange with the printer. I didn't have an editor. I had to edit it as best as I could. [laughs] I went out to the printer and I made a slick publication out of it. [laughs] Then the next thing I know, people from the U.S. Public Health Service was down, and they wanted to reprint the book and give it widespread distribution. But by the time they got around to it, the Public Health Service, the environmental part became the EPA. So the EPA mass-produced the manual.

Then later when I had my own company, they contracted with me again to make it more applicable to the eastern kind of industry rather than California, more steel mills and coal-burning industries, and, of course, they gave me a lot of information to work with.

ANDERSON

It's so fascinating. Was there any other city or county you were aware of when you were doing this work that this similar work was being done, similar research, inspection, levels of enforcement?

WEISBURD

No. Well, the two big places where there were air pollution operations were in Pittsburgh, and eventually they did a good job. Actually, eventually the steel industry moved away from Homewood and the other parts, and New York City had an agency, and Chicago did too. Eventually I visited all those agencies.

After I left the district, after my ten years was up, S. Smith Griswold said, "I think I have a job for you," sort of telling me that what I was doing was kind of over with. In fact, all of them, many people there were—things moved up to state jurisdiction and now to the federal government. He recommended me to the American Medical Association to help start up a Department of Environmental Health there, mostly to educate doctors. And it was a good salary, so I went, to the unhappiness of my wife. [laughs]

ANDERSON

About when was that? Was that around 1962, something like that, or when you left the county?

WEISBURD

Let's see. I think I worked from '62 to '64 for the AMA. Yes, 1962 to '64. So we moved there and—

ANDERSON

Where?

WEISBURD

Evanston. Evanston, Illinois. I liked the job. My wife was prejudiced because the AMA was a very conservative organization. But they wanted some good press, I guess. [laughs] They wanted to show they were interested in the environment. So we had a lot of conferences and congresses all over the country, and I wrote an article in JAMA about it, the Journal of American Medical Association, and Today's Health. They published Today's Health then. And I answered letters to doctors about asthma, and I wrote an article for Encyclopedia of Sports Medicine about how ozone might affect athletes in Denver, because they're going to have the affair in Denver.

ANDERSON

The Olympics?

WEISBURD

The Olympics, yes. And I half made up this stuff. It was pretty logical. Of course, the evidence wasn't so well developed, so you could speculate. It wasn't really speculation.

ANDERSON

And you turned out to be right.

WEISBURD

Yes, I turned out to be right. And what else? Well, then my wife—let's see. Anything interesting happen there? Oh, while we lived in Evanston, I started writing poetry again and I joined a poetry group. In that poetry group was a poet who was a Pulitzer Prize winner since I left there. Her name was [Lisel Mueller]—oh, god, don't do this to me. She was well known. She's blind. Oh, god, I just had the name. It will come back to me.

ANDERSON

No problem.

WEISBURD

She was very good. And there was a fellow from L.A. who taught at Northwestern, his name was Scott Greer [phonetic], he was also a poet, who was close friends to Bill Pillin, the poet out here.

I got a little job at night in the Catholic Adult Education Center. They have a poetry group. The only name I can remember for that poetry group was Bill Knott, K-n-o-t-t. I think he's probably still around. Who else? Once Robert Bly came, and once stayed over my house, apartment. Bill Pillin once stayed there.

Well, Chicago's an interesting place intellectually, actually, and we made some good friends with a family there that were very active in Catholic politics. He taught at Mundelein [phonetic]. He's the one that got me the job at the Catholic Adult Education Center. They were very progressive Catholics. I don't know. It was an interesting experience. Also, my mentor at Los Angeles State College, did I talk about Tom McGrath [phonetic]?

ANDERSON

No.

WEISBURD

I didn't mention that about him?

ANDERSON

We talked about your work in the smog control agency. I don't want to interrupt you talking about Illinois, but I know a while before you got to Illinois you were also involved in cultural—

WEISBURD

I forgot all about Coastlines.

ANDERSON

—activities in Los Angeles.

WEISBURD

Or did I talk about Coastlines at all?

ANDERSON

No, we're not at Coastlines yet. What I'd like to do is find out when you went to what we call Cal State L.A. now, Los Angeles State College. Was this before you went to Evanston or after?

WEISBURD

Yes, before. Before.

ANDERSON

So maybe it's a good idea to backtrack a little bit too.

WEISBURD

Yes. The Coastline period coexists with my smog period in L.A. They were together, frighteningly together sometimes. [laughs]

ANDERSON

So definitely talk to me about while you were working at the agency during the day, at the same time you were still very much involved in cultural life. Maybe you could talk about your decision to even go to Los Angeles State College. How did that come about?

WEISBURD

Well, I had an apartment near there. The only reason I had an apartment near there was my girlfriend was near there, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me anymore. So while I was there, I thought, "What the heck. Why don't I take some classes at night."

ANDERSON

Was this while you were at the agency already?

WEISBURD

At the smog control, yes. The thing was, it's sort of hellish driving around L.A. I'd put on two hundred miles a day, and I'd have a little bit of excitement here and there, but it was very boring. It's like a patrolling cop or something. I wrote a poem about this, about the car going along and running over the seams, making noise as it runs over the seams of the car, and then I said, "That's dactylic, that's anapestic, that's —," and so many lines of poetry would come at me at random. And I wrote a poem about that. So I said, "I think I've got to go back and write," or get a teacher's credential. That was one of my thoughts, that I would get a teacher's credential.

So the first course I took there was called Literature and the Fine Arts. It wasn't even a writing course. It was taught by Thomas McGrath. One of the books that were put in circulation, there's a little article in there about my first impressions of that class.

ANDERSON

This was the first time you saw Thomas McGrath when you walked into his class?

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

What were your impressions?

WEISBURD

I was scared to death of that guy. He looked like a bus driver—a truck driver. He looked like he had a chip on his shoulder. He was red-faced and his eyebrows drooped, and he looked tough. I said, "I bet he's anti-Semitic." [laughter] I sat in the back and kind of out of sight.

He come in the first day, he'd say, "You students need to learn how to read fast or how to gut a book. You don't linger. You should be reading many books at the same time." So he writes on the board ten books to read, and he'll give us a test by Friday.

And somebody in the back of the room said, "Asshole."

And I got so frightened, I thought maybe I'd quit.

So the next time I came back to his class, the class was half the size. So he said, "Well, now that the student teachers are gone, we can get down to business." [laughs]

And then it turned out to be a very interesting course. He talked more about cathedrals and the community effort to construct cathedrals, and he tried to communicate the idea that all the artisans and artists were laborers, were part of the community, and that we should seriously consider poetry that way, too, that we have a function and a purpose. He had us read a book called *Illusion and Reality* by Christopher Caudwell. Have you heard of that name?

ANDERSON

Yes, I've read it.

WEISBURD

He was a Marxist. Of course, I didn't know he was that. [laughs] But what he wrote in that book made sense to me. He helped me with the idea of integration, that it took both art and science to understand the world. You couldn't understand it one without the other, and he integrated it together in various kinds of schematics, and he traced poetry back to tribal functions and things like that, so he gave it kind of a root. So that course very impressed to me. During the time I was there in that particular class, he taught them in bungalows. They were in bungalows then.

The college had a magazine called Statement. Do you know about that?

ANDERSON

Yes.

WEISBURD

So he was the advisor to the magazine, but I didn't know that, and so I submitted some poems. I was only getting Cs in his class.

ANDERSON

Why?

WEISBURD

I don't know. My exams weren't so good, I guess. [laughs] But then he called me aside and he said, "I like your poetry, and we're going to take several of the poems for Statement."

Then on another occasion he pulled me aside and he said, "Let's go out and have some beer," and he took me to Melrose Caverns [phonetic], I think it was called, and we sat there and talked and talked and talked. He wanted to know about my childhood and thises and that's. I never had a teacher who got so interested. I told him I had a bad love affair, and he understood. He eventually invited me to his house, and I met Alice McGrath.

ANDERSON

The house on Marsh Street.

WEISBURD

Yes, the house on Marsh Street. Then next semester, I went into a poetry writing class.

ANDERSON

He was teaching that class?

WEISBURD

Yes. And I never had a class like that. Of course, at UCLA I said the only writing class I had was with a visiting guy who wrote Ballad of the Bones. I think I gave you his name. UCLA didn't seem much interested in dealing with student writers, but this was a very good class and with a lot of exercises and we made poetry. The whole emphasis was the class was to develop a vocabulary of surprising words. The surprise was a very strong element in poetry.

He himself had done what I guess Caudwell wanted to see, is he didn't—see, Caudwell did not reject Western poetry. He did not reject Eliot or any of

them. Capitalism moved in certain stages, some of which were beneficial. So the basis of that were the metaphysical conceit from Elizabethan times, and McGrath wrote like that. But then he had political stuff in it, making commentary, very strong penchant commentary and some of it very satirical, some of it very angry.

He had a wide emotional range from tenderness, like Beethoven, you know. Beethoven could be very tender and very bombastic. Although he hated Beethoven. He hated classical music. He didn't hate it, but that's one of the things we were talking about. He says, "You've got to leave that royalty stuff," or whatever he called it, "and get down to Cisco Houston and Pete Seeger," and a whole list of names at the time.

ANDERSON

So folk music, blues—

WEISBURD

Well, I don't know if he was folk, maybe folk. Jazz, he loved jazz. There was another place that played jazz with Kid Ory, was at Beverly Caverns [phonetic], I think. I never made it to there. But he was a good jazz—I would say he was a jazz poet, but he had the formal, structural, metrical lines that had a drive to them, you know. Of course, I felt very humble with that kind of thing, because my poetry was—well, it was naïve, but it was more romantic, not hard-skinned. I was more tender than anything. [laughs] In the class we had Bert Meyers, Hank Coulette once in a while, Stanley Kiesel. Have you ever heard of Stanley Kiesel?

ANDERSON

No.

WEISBURD

Stanley Kiesel's an interesting case. He's had some books published. He was a kindergarten teacher, probably the only male kindergarten teacher in L.A., and he wrote very sympathetically about kids and how parents were not noticing, teachers were not noticing the inborn talents and the feelings of kids. He wrote a book—I think it was published by a major publisher—called *The Pearl is a Hardened Sinner*. Then he wrote another one about a revolution of kids in a classroom; that was a paperback. I don't know if I have that anymore. I can't remember the titles. And he wrote poetry. So he was there.

Who else was there? There were some other people there I don't remember. There were some people who were associated with the Unitarian Church. Burt Meyers had a friend who was, and his name may come to me.

ANDERSON

The Unitarian Church was doing a lot of programming of the arts.

WEISBURD

Oh, yes, yes, it did. Yes, those were one of the places all over.

Then McGrath was called up before a subcommittee of HUAC, and I didn't know about this until I was out smogging, and I had some coffee and was

starting to get—I think it was the Herald Express. It was a green paper. There was a picture on the front page of Tom McGrath with a bowtie. And I said, “What?” [laughs] I got so angry and pissed, and when I went to the campus, there were hundreds of students were organizing. He not only was called up, he made some brilliant statements before the committee that got published everywhere. I remember I was with the crowd of students that went to his office, and he seemed like—he said, “I’ll be okay. It’s okay. Things will be okay.” Then we met outside of the classrooms. There were others in the group like Naomi Raplanski [phonetic], Carrol Zimmerman, Rita Moser [phonetic]. There were a bunch of names. McGrath was just on the verge of producing a volume of poetry of his students, including some good poets already established, like Don Gordon and Ed Rolfe. He wasn’t going to be able to complete the project, so Gene—Gene Frumkin is another story. That’s another story. [laughs] But Gene and I by that time were good friends.

ANDERSON

Did you meet in Tom’s house?

WEISBURD

No. There was a woman I used to drive to UCLA, and I was interested in her, but—let’s see. Her name was Beverly Bayless [phonetic]. She knew all the important people at UCLA. Have you ever heard of her? No. Well, she knew Clancy Sigal, and Clancy Sigal was once voted the number-one lover at UCLA. [laughter]

Anyway, I was trying to date her. I was not her material, but once she called me up and said, “I’d like you to meet somebody. He’s just like you.”

[laughter] That was very flattering. It turned out she was working at the California Fashion Press, so I met her there.

While I was on my smog jaunts, I stopped off on, I don’t know, Spring Street maybe, and I went and met her there. I thought we were all going to go to lunch together. She said, “Oh, I have something else to do. I’d like you to meet Gene.” So I met Gene. We went over to the Alexandria Hotel. He was a journalist. He had been the editor of the Daily Bruin in a bad time. He did some heroic things there. I say that’s a big story in itself.

ANDERSON

What are examples of some of the things he did?

WEISBURD

Well, he had to deal with the Red Schoolhouse on the Hill problem and that there were too many Jews on the Daily Bruin, and the Daily Bruin covered too much national and international news at the expense of student news, and that there were Communists on the staff.

ANDERSON

So there was a kind of McCarthyism at UCLA.

WEISBURD

Oh, yeah. It was really all over UCLA. It was all over UCLA. I remember this one teacher, Stewart, in critical writing, and I took that class with Clancy Sigal, whom I liked very much, very young man, and he suddenly disappeared. And I heard that the bathrooms were bugged. Are they still bugged? [laughs]

ANDERSON

That's a good one. I don't know.

WEISBURD

Well, I heard it from a number of sources. I didn't have any firsthand experience that I know of. I wasn't anybody at UCLA. I mean, I can't remember. I was just a commuter. I was just in love with a girl there. [laughs] Now where am I?

ANDERSON

You didn't know Gene while you were both students at UCLA?

WEISBURD

No, I did not know Gene. Well, so Gene—

ANDERSON

So you're having lunch with him at the Alexandria Hotel downtown.

WEISBURD

Yes. So he asked me, "How do you write poetry? I hear you write poetry. I hear you're a good poet." I don't know that I was a good poet. And he was very interested in it, but didn't know anything about it. So it ended up we started going out with each other to movies and things and I came to his house, and he shared me his poems and they were love poems about Jean Harlow, and they were horrible. [laughter]

The other thing was that impressed me in his home—well, there were several things, but he read a lot. He really did. He's been a reader all his life, and he had bookcases lined up with everything possible.

Am I going over time?

ANDERSON

No.

WEISBURD

So I said, "Why don't you join me in taking a poetry class. I know a very good teacher, Tom McGrath, and he's nothing like you would see at UCLA."

So all right, so he came. He came with a leather jacket, like he was a motorcyclist, and he tried to write poetry and nothing came out.

McGrath pulled me aside, "Who's your friend? He doesn't seem to be with it, you know."

Gene then disappeared from the class, and every now and then he'd show up, and then he'd disappear, and I'd call him. He says, "I don't think I can be a poet."

I said, "Yes, you can."

He says, "I can't write as good as you do."

I says, "Yes, you can."

So he stayed away for a while and then finally he came and he had a poem. Now, McGrath had what was called the "butcher block." It's just a wall, and he'd tape—put the poem up there, and we'd all comment on it. We'd stand up and comment around the butcher block. So Gene's was a very well-crafted finished poem, and it was about his father, a tailor. It looked like he'd just assimilated. Suddenly all the poetic elements in the classroom came together in Gene's poem. It was a better poem than anything I had written at that time. So then Tom took him to Melrose Caverns.

So that brings us back to the Marsh Street Irregulars, when Tom put out something else in connection with the committee business. He put out a brochure of poems called Witness to the Times, and maybe Estelle knows about that or has it. I had a copy of it once, but I don't have it anymore. I don't know what happened to it. But then he had this other collection of poetry, and then Gene and I said, "Let's start a magazine, and we'll use that first collection."

ANDERSON

So this was—I mean, Statement, this is—

WEISBURD

Oh, incidentally, I became editor of Statement.

ANDERSON

Yes, that's what I would like you to talk about that, because you were certainly Tom McGrath's student.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

And then there was this circle of you taking his class, people who we know are really extraordinary poets. But Statement was also being published, and he was the advisor, so what role did you play?

WEISBURD

I was the editor. I was—oh, I don't now, the junior editor at first, and then I became the editor, and I published all my friends and other people too. I can't remember all their names.

But when I got into that, I got into Student Council politics there. They didn't really like the magazine. They were very niggardly in terms of financing it.

So I said, "What the hell? Okay. I'm going to go out and sell some ads." And I did. I went out and I got some ads. I don't know if anybody ever thought of doing that. [laughs] So then I got the business side of running—it was a dry run on the business side in putting out a magazine.

ANDERSON

You were the publisher and the editor, in a way.

WEISBURD

Yes, publisher and the editor. It wasn't a bad little magazine. It was good.

ANDERSON

Now, it was the student magazine. It wasn't a literary magazine per se, right?

WEISBURD

I think it was a literary magazine. It was a student magazine, too, but it was a literary magazine in that it published poetry, short stories, and artwork.

ANDERSON

Okay, got it.

WEISBURD

So I would call it a literary magazine. So eventually somebody else took it over.

ANDERSON

How was it for you? You've played so many roles.

WEISBURD

I wrote an article. I did write an article in there. I put an article in there. Oh, this helped me with the air pollution agency.

ANDERSON

Oh, your air-quality article.

WEISBURD

I wrote an article, The City That Outgrew Its Air, and it got to the attention of the first director before he got fired, and he's the one—Larson, Gordon Larson [phonetic], he's the one that was so proud of the article that it explained everything we were trying to explain to the citizens, that that's how I got to go further in the writing business, working out of classification, not as a smog inspector but doing it. Then they published it in the employee newspaper called the Ringleman Roundup. So suddenly I was there. [laughs]

ANDERSON

And you really married those parts of your life.

WEISBURD

That's right. I did.

ANDERSON

Well, one thing I'm wondering if you could talk about what it was like to step into the role of being editor of a magazine. That was also something new. You'd never done it before, edited a literary magazine.

WEISBURD

It seemed very natural. I don't recall having—I recall between the job and my marriage and that, I was pressed for time. Then I don't know how I felt. I think I enjoyed it. I'm sure I enjoyed it, but it didn't seem like a hard thing to do, as long as I had material.

ANDERSON

How did you apportion your days? What was a day like for you with all that you had going on?

WEISBURD

Well, the day. Well, I never thought about it. I had my office in my car, my patrol car. [laughs] And I'd sometimes go hide up in Nichols Canyon under a

tree and work, looking at poems and thinking about Statement and later Coastlines. One flew right into the next.

Then I did it at home, and my wife was always irritated by—well, when Coastlines came along, she was awfully irritated by my working with 3-by-5 cards on subscribers and contributors. I'd be up late at night. That caused a lot of tension. But on the other hand, she had a big role. When Coastlines came along, we had to raise money for it, and we did it with parties. We threw parties.

And our first parties, let's see now. When I was single, yes, the first parties were at Barding Dahl's house, on Virginia Road. Then when I got married, we had parties in our house on Beachwood Drive, 2465 North Beachwood Drive. That's the place where Charles Bukowski would knock on the door to bring his manuscripts, and I never saw Charles. My wife did, and he seemed to scare her. [laughter]

Then our parties after Virginia Road and Beachwood Drive, then the parties were conducted in Alexander Garrett's [phonetic] house. I think it's 47—I shouldn't give addresses—in that canyon. What's that called? Santa Monica Canyon? Sycamore Canyon? No. The one that goes down—well, it's on Sycamore Street there. The name of that will come to me.

ANDERSON

That's not Benedict Canyon?

WEISBURD

No, no, no. It's near the ocean.

ANDERSON

And we do have her address, because we have her papers.

WEISBURD

Yes, I remember 473 Sycamore. So she was nice, very nice, very helpful, and she threw a lot of parties.

ANDERSON

You've mentioned your wife several times going back to once you got out of UCLA. How did your marriage come about?

WEISBURD

Oh. When who got out of UCLA?

ANDERSON

You. When you did.

WEISBURD

Oh, yeah. I had been going with some women, and one of them introduced me to Gloria. She also lived on—maybe I'm getting confused. She lived on a street called Sycamore too. [laughs] It's Sycamore, I guess at mid-Wilshire.

ANDERSON

Oh, sure, just a little east of La Brea.

WEISBURD

Yes, right. That's right. She lived there, and she lived in a second story, very steep stairs going up.

But there was a little party at her apartment, and this woman who became a lifelong friend of ours, Harriet, said, "I want to introduce you to someone." I came in, and it was a small apartment. I was sitting on a couch, and the doorway was like over here, and Gloria wasn't in the room at that time. Then suddenly she appeared from the doorway, and I looked up at her, and I said, "That's the one." [laughs] And she looked at me the same way. I mean, she was warm, welcoming.

ANDERSON

It was mutual love at first sight?

WEISBURD

Yes. I don't know if it's love. Mutual attraction. A mutual attraction, and I wouldn't say it was all physical. She was very gracious and she didn't seem intimidating at all, and welcoming. She had a great smile and a welcoming smile, and she was humble. Turned out she was also very smart. [laughter] That started up and we started going with each other. Then we had our ups and downs, and finally we got married. Of course, marriage was a big adjustment for me. I guess for her. She had a pretty bad time as a child. Her mother died at sixteen, and the doctor told her not to tell anybody. She had to harbor the secret that her mother was going to die anytime in three months. Then when she did die, she had to take over every household responsibility while holding down a hard job and taking care of her older sister and her father. It got to be so horrible that she escaped and went to—said she was going to stay with a friend but instead got on an airplane and went to Los Angeles to a place she had never been.

ANDERSON

Where was she from?

WEISBURD

Bronx, New York. So she started a whole new life here. Her mother died when she was sixteen, and she couldn't take her father. Her father didn't want to put her through college. She did her own education. She went to school for a long time. She finally ended up graduating at night at Roosevelt while we were in Chicago. So this is her work.

ANDERSON

And the marriage lasted for many years?

WEISBURD

Fifty years. The last four, I took care of her. She was demented and had all kinds of complications. So that's why I wrote for the mourning, I wrote that book *The Gloria Poems*, to get through the mourning.

ANDERSON

Exactly, yes, and we are sitting in a room that's filled with her artwork.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

So you married an artist.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

So that during those years after the war, after your graduation, you were working in this agency really doing some groundbreaking work, but at the same time, you were working as a literary editor, writing poetry in what sounds like almost a full-time job, another full-time job, and you have your marriage.

WEISBURD

Yes, and I had a friendship with Gene, and Gene got married and had kids. Then Gloria cared for all the poets, a lot of them had problems, and Gene had the biggest problems. His wife, who was a very talented artist, Lydia [phonetic]—you heard about her? No. Lydia, she got schizophrenic.

ANDERSON

That's a tragic situation.

WEISBURD

They moved to Albuquerque. Gene got this job through—was it Robert Creeley [phonetic] or John Logan [phonetic]? Gene was getting published everywhere. He had a lot of poetic supporters and that's how he got Robert—I think it was Robert. It was either Robert Creeley or John Logan who recommended him to the University of New Mexico, and he moved out there with Lydia and their two kids. But he only had a contract for a year. So he made it through the year, and so they hired him. But Lydia didn't want to live in Albuquerque, so she took the kids and came out here, and Gloria watched out for her. I wouldn't say supervised her, kept her eye on Lydia, because Lydia would often—every time she had a problem, she'd come to Gloria, and it was very hard on Gloria. She had a lot of friends like that that she kind of helped, went out of the line of duty, beyond the line of duty to do that.

Then it became clear that Lydia was living in poverty, and Gene started divorce action. In order to get the kids, he had to kidnap them, and he took them to Albuquerque, where he raised them, finished raising them, and then she died. So he had a very hard time there.

ANDERSON

He did a lot for Los Angeles writers and poetry while he was at University of New Mexico Press.

WEISBURD

Yes, he did. Yes. I almost got published there until the editor got fired. They were going to publish my book. Yes, he did a lot for me too. I did a lot for him. He knew that if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be a poet. I can take honest credit for that, and, of course, McGrath. But he had to be dug out of that Jean Harlow cocoon. [laughter]

We were good friends all the time, even when we were at a distance. He came here, he slept over. Once when I left the business, Gloria and I slept in

his house. We adopted each other. We were both only children, and we consciously adopted each other as brothers. So he died in 2007, my wife died six months before, 2006, so I lost two important people.

ANDERSON

Yes, people you were closest to.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

I wanted to ask about—I feel that you might have more to tell me about after Tom McGrath went before HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee. What happened?

WEISBURD

What happened to him?

ANDERSON

Yes, and what happened to the group that was around him?

WEISBURD

I don't know about the timing of this. First of all, the thing that happened to him after that was he and Alice split up. I remember he came to our house and he was crying, and he wanted to talk to Gloria. I think he did. He was my ideal, and I never saw somebody in such bad shape. Then he went into—it's sort of like Dante's Inferno, where the popes are upside down in hell. Well, he got a job as a board member in the Stock Exchange. [laughs] Excuse me for laughing.

Then he got a job with somebody by the name of Stan Schwartz [phonetic], who made animals out of wood, very tasteful, very good ones. So he worked in Stan Schwartz's factory.

ANDERSON

He was fired from—

WEISBURD

He was fired from State College, not only fired but blacklisted, had a hard time getting a job teaching. He eventually did, but when I got out of the loop by going to Chicago, I don't know all the sequence of events, but he moved to Fargo and taught at, I think, Moorhead State College. And that being a very progressive area educationally, I mean intellectually, he didn't have any problem getting a job there, and so he became very well established there.

ANDERSON

I guess he was on home ground too.

WEISBURD

He was on his home ground, and Gloria and I and Stefi went to stay with him in Fargo, and I saw him twice in Fargo. At the time he was in Fargo, he was an alcoholic and he was a little off his beam because he was working on Letters to an Imaginary Friend, and he had these six-beat lines, these long lines that danced across the page, and he was so much into that. Another thing he was into, he liked flowers, and he planted flowers.

Then also after a ways—this is hearsay now—I think he married a woman named Genia [phonetic]. They had a child together, Thomas McGrath, Jr. Then there was a case where there was an Indian that was going after Genia, and he apparently killed the Indian, and so there was a court case about it. I guess he got off, but I don't know the details there either. Also when he was up in that area of the country, because I saw him when I was in Chicago, but there were other poets up there that moved there. Albert Cadona-Hine moved there. Stanley Kiesel moved there. Eventually Sidney Gershgoren moved to Minneapolis, and he had a son, I guess, who's still there. Sidney is in Berkeley, I think.

ANDERSON

You know, speaking of Tom McGrath, *Letters to an Imaginary Friend* is probably one of the most important poems by what people call a radical poet in American literature. It's a book-length poem, and I was familiar with it. I think certainly some people are familiar with it. What I was surprised to learn is he began writing it in Los Angeles.

WEISBURD

Yes, *Coastlines* was the first one, yes. The first chapter's in *Coastline*.

ANDERSON

As you're describing these times, the theme runs through of McCarthyism, repression, through the example of Tom McGrath, also your friend Gene Frumkin, even at UCLA. For people who come after that time, how would you convey what it was like? I mean, was it something that you were aware of, the repressive environment, HUAC, the Senate committees, the blacklisting?

WEISBURD

Well, there was also another writer, Ed Rolfe and Don Gordon, both of whom worked in the film industry. Ed Rolfe died. Anger and fear. I was constantly worried about guilt by association. I wasn't a member of any party, but I do know when I did go for security clearances, it took me years before I'd get an answer. I was told by the security people at System Development Corporation that it had gone all the way to McNamara's desk. But by that time, there was so many lawsuits about it that I got my clearance.

I'm not answering your question. We used to get magazines from Poland and China, and there would be little notes attached to the mail that, "This is subversive material and we want you to know that," and we ignored that.

And there were always people coming to poetry readings that were dressed in suits and had briefcases and yellow lined pads. They'd be writing.

The feeling of surveillance was everywhere. Even once when I came by Tom's house with my county car—oh, that's another thing. I came by with my county car, and suddenly we're sitting in the living room and somebody comes to the screen porch, "I'd like to discuss with you your insurance needs."

And Tom would say, "I'm all taken care of."

And he said, "Well, maybe you're not. Maybe you need to know more. I just want to ask you a few questions."

So the guy went away, and then Tom says, "That's your FBI agent." He could smell them everywhere.

So where am I with this? Oh, the other thing was L.A. County was considering a loyalty oath. There was a time when the administration of the district was changing over to people who were working for the Chief Administrative Office. I had to share my car with an investigator working for the district. He had worked in OSS and tells me he's continuing surveillance of certain people in the district, and I'm riding with him. And every now and then, he says he hated Communists, and every now and then he'd go crazy. He'd go, "Those commies, I'd like to kill those people. I'd like to kill those people." And he was an investigator. He was the kind of guy after you'd given a notice of violation, he investigates the case and takes it to court. Then he wanted to invite me up. After I was married, he invited me up. He wanted to show me his files. I said, "Really, I don't want to see your files."

ANDERSON

Wow.

WEISBURD

But I have a feeling he was playing cat-and-mouse with me. So that was weird.

Now also, the boss I worked for—not Griswold, who was in enforcement—he had been the head of the Red Squad in the police department. They were trying to militarize the smog control in the changeover, so they had all the patrolmen have uniforms with sirens and lights on the cars. So he kept firing people, for whatever reason I don't know, but for some reason he liked me, because I was working on this enforcement publication, this publication that was going to convey the message of the organization.

And I had the same kind of experience when I worked for the AMA. I was a pet liberal. I didn't sacrifice anything. I was very outspoken, and they fired my M.D. doctor boss because—I don't know whether I mentioned it. I was trying to get the AMA to support the first Clean Air Act. Was that on the other tape?

ANDERSON

No.

WEISBURD

I've done so many things, I can't keep track. I convinced my boss. I did some research at the AMA that supported water pollution control way back when, and I said, "Why doesn't the AMA support this?" It was the Roberts bill going through Congress. "Why doesn't the AMA support that?"

And he said, "Gee, if they did it in water, they should do it in air." So we went to a conference in Washington, and Howard K. Smith was the emcee, and I told him, I said, "Why don't we get the AMA to send a telegram saying it supports the Roberts bill."

And he thought for a while. I guess his first thought was negative, and then his second thought, "Why, those bastards, yes, I think we should." He was a southerner from North Carolina. So he called the vice president of the AMA, and he'd say, "But Bert." I could hear him. "But Bert, we did in water pollution."

So the vice president said, "Okay. Send us the copy for the telegram." So they sent the telegram, and near the summation Howard K. Smith said, "Even the AMA is supporting enforcement. It looks like it should be passed." The bill got passed, but afterwards, a whole contingent from the National Association of Manufacturers descended on us, and I was told by the vice president, "You don't open your mouth. Don't you say a thing." I remember the guy's name was Cannon [phonetic], the president of the NAM. He said, "We've supported your legislation that you put through. How can you do this to us? Enforcement of the law is not your business." So the AMA ended up retracting it, and my boss got fired and I got a new boss.

ANDERSON

Wow.

WEISBURD

Not only that, there was one guy who was writing a book for a major publisher, who worked there. I saw this ahead of me. I don't know. I can't remember his name. He said he was publishing some factually negative things about the AMA, I guess including positive, and they discovered the galleys, and they came to his office and lifted him by the chair and threw him out, and everything he had, on the sidewalk. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Wow.

WEISBURD

But here I'm walking around, a division director invites me, an M.D. invites me to go to Boise, Idaho. I don't know. They liked me. They liked me, and I guess they liked—maybe there were various political things within the group that wanted to push and push back. I guess they had to represent all the doctors in some way. So I stayed there. I had a good time there. I mean, I almost became an alcoholic. A lot of them were drunk, and I almost became an alcoholic, until Gloria said, "I'm going home. I've had enough of this." [laughs]

So then I got a job with System Development Corporation, Santa Monica.

ANDERSON

Well, I think we'll take up where we are stopping in our next conversation.

WEISBURD

Okay.

1.3. Session 3 (2013)

ANDERSON

Good morning. All right. Great. Well, the last time we spoke, we talked about your association with Thomas McGrath and that whole circle, the March Street Irregulars, your editing Statement, and then we also discussed a whole phase of your career in Evanston, Illinois. But somewhere in there, you and Gene Frumkin published Coastlines magazine. So maybe you could talk about how the magazine was started. How was it founded?

WEISBURD

Well, it started McGrath was teaching at Los Angeles State College, and he had to suddenly appear before the subcommittee of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and I didn't know that was going to happen. I found out about it by reading the newspaper, the Los Angeles Herald Express. Then the next part of the thing is he was going to get fired, and he did get fired, and there was a huge student protest. By that time, we were frequenting Tom's home, a lot of us. He was getting together—he produced, as a result of this, a publication or—I don't think it was printed. Well, no, it had some distribution. I no longer have the copy, called Witness or Witness to the Times or something like that, so I don't have it. I had a copy once. Then he had been collecting poems from students and others that he knew, and he said under the present conditions, he wasn't in a position to publish it. It was a mimeograph collection of poems. Gene and I, at the same time, we were thinking—we were talking to each other about starting a magazine, maybe just a little bit before that, and we had some concerns.

Well, wait a minute. I'm ahead of myself. My memory is very sketchy at this point. But we talked about it, and then we went over to see Tom and then Tom announced he had these books. Then Gene and I talked it over, and we thought why don't we publish it as our first issue of the magazine, and that made Tom happy.

But both of us were a little concerned about our jobs. I do not know what Tom's affiliations were, political. I know the funny thing about the times was the norm during those times under the Roosevelt administration in general, until McCarthy came into the picture, the norm is what we would today call left wing, although I didn't think of it as left wing then because Tom, along with other writers, came from the thirties and forties, which was a time during the Depression and during the war, and there was a great deal of social consciousness, and people felt free about it, but we, the younger set, had no political affiliations. Gene and I would discuss what this might mean. I had just gotten married and had a child, and Gene did, too, and I was working for the county of Los Angeles. He worked for the California Fashion Press. I think the name of the guy he worked for was Joe Shirengo, who was a liberal and who had been at UCLA. So he felt secure in his job.

We just took the attitude that our policy would be free speech, without any concern. We would try to do it on merit, and, the other aspect, we'd try not to be too serious. We tried to be a little iconoclastic of both the Left and the

Right, so to speak, but we were really within the traditions of the Democratic Party. So I said the only card I carry was Kaiser Permanente. [laughs] So that became the first issue of the magazine, and it had a lot of good poets in it, had some of mine in it, Gene's. We were the younger poets. Eventually we got published Anthologize, in Walter Lowenfel's Poets of Today. That was the first issue, and we held a party to publish it. I think we raised about sixty dollars. In those days, that was enough to print a number of copies.

Thanks to McGrath, he knew this artist David Lemon up in Berkeley, and he had been collecting David Lemon's work. We thought his work was absolutely right on for the covers of the magazine. It exemplified the kind of light but a little serious feeling we wanted.

So we came out, the first issue came out, and I'm trying to remember the second issue. I think by the time of the second issue, I met—Gene married before I did, and I was living in different apartment houses, and I met Bard Dahl, who owned this three-story house on Virginia Road near, I think, Washington Boulevard, and I joined that. I moved in there, had a big room on the second floor.

There were other people living there, namely Tom Viertel and somebody by the name of Len Harris [phonetic]. Bard had various activities going on in the place. It was sort of a precursor to Beyond Baroque, in a way. [laughs] There was an artist living there.

Anyway, we started on the second issue. The mimeograph was lousy. [laughs] As with the second and the third issues, we collated the magazine by having a group of us from Bard's group march around the table and collate it. There in the second issue, we got a cover by the artist Martin Lubner [phonetic], and that showed a picture of Franco. It was a very satiric picture of Franco. So we published that. Right now I'm having trouble remembering what was in that issue. I had a poem, I think, in the back about the art of mimeograph that everyone should publish their work to the world. So that's what everybody's doing now with computers.

ANDERSON

Maybe you could talk about mimeograph. You know there are some people that are, I would say, young at this moment—

WEISBURD

Don't even know what it is.

ANDERSON

It sounds like something very archaic to them. So how you guys organized to put the magazine out is important.

WEISBURD

Yes. You type stencils, and I guess ink ran through it, and there a little crank you cranked, and the pages came out.

ANDERSON

And the smell.

WEISBURD

And the smell. And if you didn't ink it properly, it sometime would smear. So we did a second and a third issue. The third issue came out nice and clean. In fact, you have one on display there with an article by me on science fiction. That one came out very clear. That has a poem in it by Kenneth Rexroth. Then there was my article. Incidentally, then I was writing that article while I had night duty at the APCD, and I was the radio dispatcher because there were cars out there. But at night there wasn't much to do, so I did a lot of writing and editing. [laughter] Thanks to Los Angeles County.

ANDERSON

Now that's come out. That's wonderful. The first issue was dedicated to Edwin Rolfe.

WEISBURD

Yes. Edwin Rolfe. Well, he was historian of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. I got to meet him, Gene and I did. We were invited to his house. He had a wife named Mary, and he was a very intense poet, very passionate. He was intolerant of any kind of injustice, and we all admired him for his courage. I mean, he was a very courageous man. I didn't know he had a heart condition, but he did, and he died. We went to a memorial for him, and one of the persons who spoke for him was—a lot of people did, but what I remember was the actor Jeff Corey gave a marvelous eulogy. That's the only contact I had.

Then the California Quarterly produced his book of poems. I think it's called Permit Me Refuge. When the California folded, we later acquired its properties, and that was one of the things we tried to sell. I was happy to see—and I've been looking all over today for his collected works, which recently came out in paperback, which I was surprised. I've also seen Edwin Rolfe's mentioned in the various articles going back in the New York Review of Books. So he was more generally known. Now, that's an era—he was known in an era of the writers of the thirties and forties. That was before us, and they were—like the California Quarterly was a very mature professional magazine, which I admired very much, and to be published in it was, I felt, like an honor, but unlike most literary journals, which are attached to colleges, this was sort of a byproduct of the movie industry and the blacklisted writers. I know Albert Maltz was in there. Dalton Trumbo. I think Ring Lardner had it. I think I have some—

ANDERSON

Paul Jerricho, yes.

WEISBURD

Was it Paul Jerricho? Frank Scully. And Sanora Babb was a novelist, and Meridel Le Sueur. Those are some of the names I remember. Then later they started publishing we young people, and then they invited Gene to be also an editor.

ANDERSON

Yes. He was on the editorial board.

WEISBURD

Yes, and I think there was someone helping him out by the name of Dale Pitt . Dale Pitt and her husband did a whole encyclopedia of Los Angeles that you may know about.

So I really didn't know some of the other writers. I met Philip Stephenson [phonetic], who I think was the editor once, and Don Gordon, I think, was on the staff. I think they kept adding editors like we did and were probably nonfunctional but were interested in helping out.

ANDERSON

I think that California Quarterly stood out for many reasons, because they published writers from around the world, for one thing.

WEISBURD

Yes, they did. They translated too.

ANDERSON

Yes. And also they published that famous issue that was the screenplay of Salt of the Earth.

WEISBURD

Salt of the Earth. Oh, I was going to mention that.

ANDERSON

Yes, would you talk about it?

WEISBURD

I don't know too much about it. I had a copy. Gene wanted it desperately, and I gave it to him. But it was produced by Michael Wilson. I think it took place in New Mexico at some abandoned mine, and the film was about labor rights and also women's rights. It brought up both subjects. Michael Wilson was supposed to have made some good—I think he made a movie called Friendly Persuasion. Was that with Gary Cooper? I don't know whatever happened to him. But there was another movie made, and I can't remember the writer. It's Ben somebody, something, a movie about the city, but that I can't call it up. Some days my axons are falling apart.

ANDERSON

Well, Salt of the Earth. You mentioned blacklisted Hollywood writers, and Salt of the Earth, the film itself was put together by a group of blacklisted filmmakers and they tried to find their own distribution.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

And California Quarterly ended up being a huge way of getting the word out about the film.

WEISBURD

Yes, yes. That was a big landmark in the publication of that magazine. I have a great deal of respect for it. But we were like little foolish kids with Coastlines.

ANDERSON

How did you come up with the name Coastlines?

WEISBURD

I don't know. I've never liked it. [laughs] Gene and I batted it about, and we saw the Coastlines as sort of a jagged kind of thing with indentations, and it's next to the sea. I felt like we were farming poetry out of the sea. We couldn't think of any other name, so we stuck with it.

Then I called Coastlines literary magazine to make sure it wasn't a truck line or Roto-Rooter service or something, because the name Coastlines is used commercially all over the place. I think there was a novel by somebody else called Coastlines, and then there was another magazine after us called Coastlines.

ANDERSON

That's right, yes.

WEISBURD

So I don't know whether there was copyright infringement or what. [laughs]

ANDERSON

How were those first few issues received, and how did people find out about it in the beginning?

WEISBURD

God, I don't know if I ever had any feedback on how it was received.

[laughs] Well, this place where I lived was—we accumulated mailing lists, and we advertised our parties with all kinds of ingenious invitations to all these parties. We had no connection to the media at all. Never thought of us to deal with the media. I think that came towards the end of the magazine when Sandra Garrett [phonetic] was there. She tried to save the magazine, and she got some columnists to help with that, and she made a desperate effort to raise the money. She couldn't do it.

I don't know what we did. We put it on newsstands. I mostly—in fact, I was the only one that did that. I went around to the newsstands. I was acting as the businessperson in a sense. We sent it to bookstores in Berkeley, and I canvassed libraries all over the place. And we traded magazines with other magazines.

So it seems the magazine has more of a reputation now than it did then, but it was like the only game in town. The California Quarterly, being older, mature staff or whatever, was a little aloof, and we were more energetic and participated in poetry readings and in the local poetic politics and things like that. And you could tell by the submissions. Now, that's where you feel like you're being recognized. We got some of the people who published in the California Quarterly, and we got others from all around the country and from

Australia and Great Britain. The work in the magazine gradually seemed to get better and better and better.

So I would say among writers it was getting recognition, and it was a place to—as Charles Bukowski said—I have a letter that he wrote. I finally found one. I had a big correspondence file. I gave it all to Sandy. I don't know whatever happened to it. But he said, "Your magazine is a hard one to crack into." [laughs]

ANDERSON

High standards.

WEISBURD

Oh, I don't know if it was high standards. Yes, high standards, but we weren't—we were anti-academic. I think that's our only issue we had with—and that's the one thing that links us with the Beat generation, is that we weren't interested in the stuffiness of the literary exclusivity of the academic, you know, like the Hudson Review or Poetry or even a magazine like Prairie Schooner in those days.

ANDERSON

It's still around.

WEISBURD

It's still around, but I think it has a different kind of approach to things. But anyway, yes, it lasted longer than we did. [laughs] We voluntarily committed suicide.

ANDERSON

That's what you said in that last issue. But before that, it sounds as if you and Gene and the others around Coastlines were really aware of kind of the literary culture in the United States and—

WEISBURD

Yes, I would say that. I would say that.

ANDERSON

By not affiliating with the university or being anti-academic, you were making some kind of statement.

WEISBURD

Yes. I went through different periods. My own feeling was I wanted to be part of the culture of Los Angeles. My dream was somehow to get into the mainstream. [laughs] As I said before, I found that having compartments and divisions in my life intolerable, and I had this between myself and my job. Like now I'm writing a lot about my jobs. I wanted to bring science and industry into poetry, and I failed in getting literary magazines interested in that. I had one guy who reviewed my book Windows and Mirrors, who brought that up, and thought that the serious literary magazines ought to look at this kind of poetry.

I'm rambling here.

ANDERSON

Well, you said also that you wanted to be part of the culture of Los Angeles, which I think is interesting.

WEISBURD

Yes, because it's so chaotic here, and that writing about L.A. could maybe somehow bring it together or start in that direction. So I thought we would look at that.

ANDERSON

And there wasn't anything else like it.

WEISBURD

We had a great richness here of finding writers here in L.A. I think later we became—the writing got better, but we probably got more eclectic as like other literary magazines. [laughs]

Now, when Laughlin McDonald [phonetic], who was an editor of Chicago Review, came out here and he joined our staff, he had the same feeling as I did, and it was his idea to have this special issue on The Nonexistent City, and that I really liked.

ANDERSON

That was a phrase—I noticed that he used that phrase actually twice. He wrote a review of two books of Los Angeles poetry, and the title of the review was The Nonexistent City. Then you all did this entire issue called The Nonexistent City. And it was a poetry issue, pure poetry.

WEISBURD

Yes. Estelle picked up on that, but I don't think she gave him any credit. [laughs] But she may not have known that.

ANDERSON

Would you talk more about this conceptualization of Los Angeles as a nonexistent city?

WEISBURD

Well, first, it's a city with a hidden center where the center seems irrelevant. It's a city that is constantly growing, and it seems to be pushing towards some kind of shape, but isn't, at the same time. It's a melting pot of cultures, but yet it's disperse so that you can't feel that so much. There was a lot of technology here, and I wrote a poem about Caltech not so long ago which mentions a lot of that. There was a writer who wrote a marvelous book called Quartz City.

ANDERSON

City of Quartz, Mike Davis.

WEISBURD

City of Quartz, Mike Davis, yes. I admired that book a lot, and that came much later, of course. But then there were a lot of writers before that, I discovered, who were writing about Los Angeles, some very famous.

ANDERSON

Carey McWilliams.

WEISBURD

Yes, Carry McWilliams. Is there somebody by the name of Adamic [phonetic], Adamaic [phonetic], and another guy by the name of Rolfe, R-o-l-f-e? I have that. I had a list. When I was trying to sell my memoir, I did research and I made a whole list of predecessor books about this, but I sent it out. Nobody wanted it. So they didn't even hear of Coast—they knew nothing of Coastlines, I mean. So I had the history of Coastlines was not yet significant enough for a lot of publishers to publish about it. They might say, "Who is Gene Frumkin?" Or nowadays who even is Tom McGrath? But I think maybe something's happening that is making that more possible now. I think I've wandered off here someplace.

ANDERSON

That's okay. You mentioned before, David Lemon and your first cover of Coastlines. One thing about the entire run is that the cover art and the art within the magazine, extraordinary vivid, bold graphic art. How did you come up with that kind of policy or idea to work with those artists?

WEISBURD

Well, again, it comes from the idea—well, the first issue is the San Francisco Bay, but it so happens that it was printed at a time when things were happening in San Francisco, and there's the water and the coastlines. Then there was another by Chris Jenkins [phonetic], who did animations for the movies. That was the fourth issue, with the little boy looking out.

ANDERSON

Over Los Angeles.

WEISBURD

Yes. You could see the land and you could see the ocean, and that did it too. Then there were other—there was a cover with a work drawn by a woman by the name of May Babbitts, and I think she was—

ANDERSON

Yes. We have her papers.

WEISBURD

She was doing Bunker Hills and things like that. So she was getting into old Los Angeles. Then there was the fabulous Morton Dimondsteen, who did the beautiful artwork in the Quarterly. He did a cover for us, the fifth issue, which was about—Bard had an article about Tijuana in it. Then Estelle in her book did a lot of those reproductions in there, which made it very good.

ANDERSON

Did you select the art?

WEISBURD

I selected the art, not all the issues. Gene selected some of them. When he was editor, we traded off. Gene was tied up with all kinds of things, so I started shifting more to business, because he couldn't handle that. So but I still read manuscripts and did things like that, sometimes in the backseat of my patrol car. [laughs] The county might send me a bill for that.

ANDERSON

Well, at some point—

WEISBURD

Wait. I don't know if I answered your question. What was it?

ANDERSON

Asking about how the artwork got selected.

WEISBURD

Oh, yes. David Lemon was prolific, and I selected that.

Then Gene was married to Lydia Frumkin, and Lydia went to the New School of Art, which was by Lubner and, I think, Mesches and Dimondsteen, and she knew other artists. So we got someone by the name of Bookman [phonetic], a woman. We got several, and they were all marvelous. They all came out of the same—there again, I'll say, left wing animus that was in L.A., which in turn is an offshoot of the blacklisted writers and some of them not blacklisted, and artists, lots of artists in L.A. There's another thing about—it's rich here, but dispersed.

So I'm trying to think of other covers. Lowell Nave [phonetic], I didn't select that. That, I think, Curtis did, Curtis Zahn [phonetic] did. He had his own ideas how he wanted that magazine, that issue, and I'm the one that opened it up to him. But then in the middle of it, I was moving to Chicago, so Bard Dahl took over because Gene was going to New Mexico.

I don't know if I answered the question.

ANDERSON

Yes. Well, you published your own poetry in Coastlines, but you mentioned, I think it was in 1955 in December, you also published an article that kind of analyzes science fiction. I thought this is very unusual for a literary magazine, and especially in 1955 when you wrote it, it was kind of the peak of science fiction in the movies and radio. So a lot of people, I think, people who think of themselves as literary might think, well, science fiction, that's pulp culture, you know.

WEISBURD

Well, my feeling was that was a medium where you could imagine different social orders, you could imagine different cultures. That's why I called it From Escape to Freedom, escaping restrictions of censorship. So I felt justified in writing about it, and at that particular point I didn't really care if I was violating—I had nothing to lose about violating any traditions, and the more violating, the better. [laughs] But that was my main idea. I'm not happy with that article; I never was. It's sort of immature. But that's the point I wanted to make, that imagination can find an escape from constraint and repression.

ANDERSON

I think it's a really provocative idea, especially because you wrote that article at the middle of McCarthyism, and it seems to suggest that not only for the writer of science fiction but for the audiences that maybe science fiction is an outlet.

WEISBURD

Yes. Yes. Incidentally, Ray Bradbury was published in the Quarterly, the California Quarterly, just an aside.

ANDERSON

Well, also, I think, to see you both contributing poetry as well as articles on science, that's you all over again, right?

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

I mean, both sides of you. [laughs]

WEISBURD

Yes, I'm working both sides of the street. Well, did I tell you that I published in Statement an article called The City That Outgrew Its Air, about air pollution, which was very unusual for a college magazine. [laughs]

ANDERSON

And it was kind of pioneering just generally.

WEISBURD

Yes. I did what I felt like doing when I could do it, and the hell with the rest. [laughter]

ANDERSON

Well, in 1957 in the spring issue, you published a piece called The Merchant of Venice.

WEISBURD

Oy vey.

ANDERSON

About Lawrence Lipton. Maybe you could talk about what led up to that.

WEISBURD

God, I wish I could remember that. What led up to it? I don't know whether his book The Holy Barbarians came out or I read an article he wrote where he was—somewhere he was talking about Los Angeles writers, and he mentioned a bunch of writers that I never heard of. And I said, "What about all these like Ann Stanford and all these writers, wonderful writers, that we've been meeting?" Doesn't mention them.

I know at a party McGrath was drunk, and he was pissed off too. I don't know what the event was. I don't think his book had come out yet. And he started rattling off names, I mean name-calling, and I picked up the name, I remember. [laughs] The Whitmanites and people that drive up to Big Sur to see Miller. What was his first name?

ANDERSON

Henry Miller.

WEISBURD

I said all these marvelous names. [laughs] And I threw them into the article, and I think he wanted me to do that, but he didn't tell me to write the article. I wrote the—The Merchant of Venice was one Shakespeare play I had

never read, and I didn't realize it wasn't Shylock who was the Merchant of Venice; it was Antonio. [laughter] And I was worried about being anti-Semitic. I had it a little mixed up. But I guess we were afraid, you know, what's going on here? I guess there was a turf battle. That's the best way I can say, it was the beginning of a turf battle.

The thing about Lipton was he was so good about getting publicity, and I envied that. Once there was a poetry reading at the New School of Art, and he was there. He got me to the side and he says, "Why don't we join together with Coastlines."

And I said, "And then what?"

"Well, you read my article about American literary underground, and this, that, and the other thing." I thought his article about the American literary was not new at all. I mean, this is what little magazines have been doing all the time. It's like he just discovered them. And I suppose I didn't want to give up my control, you know.

Oh, then he'd call me on the phone and he'd say, "You know, you got a dumb job. Why don't you just join us in Venice," or something like that.

I just had a wife and a kid. I said, "No way." [laughs]

He says, "Well, you're collaborating with the corruption of this country." I mean, he was saying this in a very extreme way. I'm not exaggerating.

And I said, "No thank you." So we split, and I was very generous with him, letting him publish in our magazine.

I don't know the details. Things kept coming out in the newspapers, and then finally there was a debate. I think it was at NBC or CBS, I actually debated him on the radio, but I don't know what I said or what he said.

[laughter] Maybe you can find that.

ANDERSON

Even later, I mean, Gene Frumkin wrote an article that was the first thing you saw when you opened this issue, The Great Promoter, about Lawrence Lipton.

WEISBURD

Yes. That was after his book came out, and that's after— [telephone interruption]

WEISBURD

That's started with the reading of Ginsberg at Bard's house, and then Lipton wrote about it in The Holy Barbarian, and he wrote about us in a very derogatory way. He labeled us virtually as Communists, and we were all left-wing Communists, and we have no taste in furniture, which was Bard's house, and it's right there, the furniture was terrible. But it was a generosity in giving this reading to Ginsberg and Corso, and there was a lot of room in that house. There was a big audience there.

Then when the book came out, Gene got very angry and he wrote that article. I'm glad he did, because even though he was angry, he was a little

bit more level-headed than I would have been. But I don't know if anybody ever read it. So I don't know.

ANDERSON

I think one of the things that's revealing is that there was a lot going on in Los Angeles in the culture, in the literary world, and there were feuds and there were different stances that people were taking.

WEISBURD

Yes. It happened so fast. This poor little Jew guy, me and Gene, maybe, didn't know what to make of it. I mean, you see, what is happening, the magazine—there's such a thing, I believe, as a zeitgeist, and you could tell in the contributions to the magazine. Suddenly everybody's writing about children. Why? I don't know. Suddenly everybody's negative about everything, everything, parents, this whole flood of negativity about our society, and the poems lacked what Eliot called objective correlative. They didn't have any internal motivating thing. They just were exclamations. And we were getting a lot of it, and I was not able to distinguish that stuff from Ginsberg's work. We published Ginsberg and Corso. When I heard Howl, I wanted to leave the room. [laughs] I didn't know who were these angels and these drugheads. I never met them. I lived in an insulated—I was middle class, and I hated it.

I liked Corso's poems better then. It took me a long—you know, there's a review by McGrath about some readings, very interesting review for its ambivalence. He had the same feelings as we did.

ANDERSON

About the Beats.

WEISBURD

But on the other hand, he felt there was something there. He says it has a real impact, and the impact is not inward literaries, but outward to society as a whole. He's talking to society, not to a poetry journal. And it took me time to learn that, but maybe that was also part of a culture of which both Gene and I were not. We're not druggies. We're not out of work. We're doing things largely we like to do, we're trying to build a family, and we were the enemy middle class who just wanted social change in a constructive way. Now, I have this appreciation for the works of the Beats. I'm always wrestling with the labeling that way, because I don't even think Ginsberg wanted to think of himself that way. That was coined by somebody in San Francisco. I think Kerouac had a different idea about Beatitudes, the spiritual kind of thing. But I've long felt that the Beat culture and the hippie that followed it has led in very subtle ways to antigovernmental feelings today. I think it contributed to the right wing, either in providing the right wing stereotypes or in saying too much, "A plague on both your houses," and, like today, nothing gets done. I feel there's a whole thread of that, that I want to write about. Then again, I'll be [unclear]. [laughs]

I know I'm putting on this thing of Beyond Baroque, and they said, "We don't want to hear this old thing about Beats versus Coastlines. It's old hat already." I don't think it is, because who the hell's heard of Coastlines?

[laughs]

So it's the followers, it's the people like—I think his name was Charles Foster, those that committed suicide, those that went to drug extremes. I don't know what the hell they proved. Lipton didn't prove his point. He didn't. He had this idea he acquired from Kenneth Rexroth about the social contract, and then in the social contract, the people give to the government more than the government gives to us, and therefore we should break it. I don't think Kenneth Rexroth didn't feel like going as far as Lipton went with it, but I don't even think Lipton believed it, and I don't think he ever took acid, like I did.

I think we had more of the ingredients in our magazine of the original because we were both anti-academic, we were both printing free verse and tackling all kind of subjects. Curtis Zahn is a great example. He wrote satiric fiction. There's a story called SADC. That's a satire of the Rand Corporation and, by extension, System Development, where I eventually worked.

[laughs] I'm very complicit in—and the AMA. I worked for the AMA, so I'm really very complicit with the enemy, but I felt like I did good things there. Everything I did was positive for—I did a lot about educating doctors and whatnot.

I'm wandering again. You'd better stop me.

ANDERSON

Let's talk about—I want to go back to what you were saying about taking acid, and in Coastlines in 1958 you published an article, Lysergic Acid and the Creative Experience. Now, how did that come about?

WEISBURD

Oh. I was seeing a psychologist by the name of Murray Korngold. I think he has a reputation that's kind of known. While I was in therapy, he said he was trying to enlist creative people to take LSD, and he convinced me I should take it. It was supervised by Dr. Oscar Janiger. There's a window where he could supervisor, after which it was legal until '62, somewhere around there.

So I took it, and it was an extremely wonderful experience for me. It's the only time I took it. Maybe I'm a chicken, I could have taken it more, but I didn't want to have a bad experience. It was so rich with metaphors and with feeling whole, I mean, all the clichés you can apply to feeling good, and seeing hyper perception, seeing things, seeing things within things, and feeling like you've been in love and it's a happy love, blissful, a lot of bliss, and the sound of children was wonderful, and people. We went on a tour. We went to La Cienega Park, and people's faces looked like leather and the bark on trees like Grand Canyons, you know. And we went in a sports car,

and the street went—it seemed to be like waves, and it was very psychedelic.

So I was asked to write something about the experience, and I did, and I said, “Well, I’ll stuff it into Coastlines,” so I did. So it was reprinted. Let’s see. There was a book called Best Articles and Short Stories, and then it’s in Estelle’s book. Then it’s been referred to—sometimes I’ll be listening to KPFK, and I hear someone say, “Well, there’s Mel Weisburd, who took acid.” [laughs] So that was that.

ANDERSON

What convinced you when your analyst talked to you? What was convincing about taking it? Were you aware of other people or other experiences?

WEISBURD

No.

ANDERSON

Because this was before Timothy Leary in 1958.

WEISBURD

Oh, yes. Incidentally, that was mentioned in the—Wolf was his name. He wrote a book called Love Generation, and he mentioned my having the experience before Timothy Leary and that mine was more sincere. But Lipton referred to me as a “Sunday slumber in paradise,” because I took it under supervision. So I guess I should go out and get some dirty acid someplace and then after that, shoot myself. [laughter] When I did it before, I did it before—I think I did it before most people.

Now, a lot of people took it in the same period, and some of them I know. Later, Alvaro Cardona-Hine took it and Gene took it. Gene never talked about it so much as [unclear]. As a matter of fact, Gene, Alvaro, and I were all at what’s-her-name’s house, Josephine Ain or Chuey. They were on acid and I wasn’t. I was visiting L.A. from Chicago, and I wrote this poem called Reunion where they were on acid, but I wasn’t.

Alvaro’s point was that I had only one trip, and if I had more, I would have gone farther into more and more dimensions, which I think Alvaro was capable of doing without acid. [laughs] He’s taken peyote and all those things.

But now I forgot the question again.

ANDERSON

I wanted to know also did you get reactions when the article was published in Coastlines? Because that was an unusual kind of expression in a literary magazines in 1958. Did you get any?

WEISBURD

No, none that I’m aware of. Maybe everyone thought I was crazy, I don’t know. [laughs] No, I don’t remember. And it isn’t that it—that may have indeed happened. I just don’t remember feedback. Maybe I was too isolated or too busy to be in a position to see it or hear it, so I was really working blindly with my writing.

ANDERSON

You mentioned KPFK and Coastlines. I mean, Coastlines, the first issue came out in—

WEISBURD

Fifty-six.

ANDERSON

Fifty-six. And Pacifica established KPFK radio in Los Angeles in '59. And you all had a relationship over time, Coastlines and KPFK Radio.

WEISBURD

I don't know. The dates, it sounds like it might have been earlier, because I remember we had these advertisements on the back of the magazines. I think the person who had the connection was Alvaro. I think Alvaro had more connections with people like Paul Vangelisti, and he knew Charles Bukowski. He had a lot of connections, and I think that was through him that—well, I don't know about the advertising. I may have done that. But I think he got some of us reading on KPFK.

ANDERSON

Yes. Early on there were ads on the back cover for KPFK, and eventually there was a whole—maybe it was under Alexander Garrett, but there was a show that was the Coastlines poetry show.

WEISBURD

Oh, I was probably in Chicago. I probably didn't even know about it. Nobody told me. Everybody gives a party for me, but I'm not there. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Now, something else that is a highlight, I believe, is that in 1962 you published the antiwar issue of Coastline. Curtis Zahn was—you invited to be the guest editor, and if you could talk about that. I mean, Curtis Zahn had spent a year in prison as a conscientious objector. Was it during the Korean War? He was a conscientious objector during World War II.

WEISBURD

I think it's World War II, but I'm not 100 percent sure. I think he was too old for the Korean War. Yes, he must have been. So it was World War II.

ANDERSON

When you published that antiwar issue in '62, which was a time of relative peace, so what did it mean to publish an antiwar issue in 1962? What did that mean?

WEISBURD

It was anti-nuclear war, anti-nukes, but there were peace marches all over the world. It wasn't my idea to do that; it was Curtis'. I had a very good relationship with Zahn, and he convinced me that he should do this issue. He was a pacifist. I said, okay, that would be fine, and he would take care of the publishing and printing and everything. So I said okay. I didn't give him any restrictions. I had confidence in him that he would do it justice, and I thought he did.

I didn't know many of the organizations or groups he represented in there. There were a lot of—there was Pilgrims. There was some lady who was a big marcher. He took my—I was writing a novel. I'm always writing a novel. [laughs] He took a chapter from it called The Firestorm, and he liked it very much. I think he got Estelle and Sid, those people in it. Then we had something in there by Kenneth Patchen. There were a lot of good writers in there.

But I think it was peaceful, but it was part of the Cold War, which was the time of—who was that scientist? Libby [phonetic] at UCLA, I think it was. He wanted everyone to build bomb shelters. Sandra did. Sandy did. [laughs] And getting under desks and things like that for children. There were a couple people, scientists, working for Rand Corporation, is it? I can't remember. The kind of people that show up in a Dr. Strangelove movie, they're real. So there was this horrible feeling that there was going to be a nuclear war.

I don't know when the Rosenbergs were executed. There's a whole series of—the whole climate was just poisoned. So I think Curtis Zahn felt that way, too, and he felt like we were going in that direction of mass killings. So I felt sympathetic to it.

Now, after he published the magazine, I was in Chicago already, so I don't know what kind of reception it had. I think I didn't want to know. I think there was some trouble between Bard and Zahn that resulted in some kind of a court case, and I think Bard was accused of pirating some of the money. I don't know if any of this is true, but after that then—when did Curtis die? That I don't recall. I might have still been in Chicago. Bard became my enemy after that. Not my enemy, but he broke off friendship with me, because I think he felt I left him with a mess. But I sold the magazine to him for a dollar. [laughs] It had goodwill. I don't know whether he's mad at me because of that or not, but I suspect it. I suspect it because he doesn't respond to me. I don't know where he is right now. He's probably—last time I heard, he was way down in Mexico someplace. He's published several books. He lived on a huge ranch, he had a ranch there, and the nearest phone was miles away, and that's the way he wanted it.

So that's that about the antiwar issue.

ANDERSON

One of the things about that issue is that it looks a little different than the normal. The cover was different, it had a dark paper, and that line, that illustration by Sylvia Jerricho, those sort of pillars, so you kind of noticed the aesthetic shifted a little bit although—

WEISBURD

That was Lowell Naeve, wasn't it?

ANDERSON

Pardon?

WEISBURD

Lowell Nave, N-a-e-v-e?

ANDERSON

Who did the cover art? I checked. It is Sylvia Jerricho's drawing.

WEISBURD

Oh, it is?

ANDERSON

Yes.

WEISBURD

She did another one with little animals on it.

ANDERSON

Right.

WEISBURD

I loved that. [laughs]

ANDERSON

That's very whimsical.

WEISBURD

Yes, I loved that.

ANDERSON

I think those are her two covers, yes.

WEISBURD

It sounds like we were trying to be a cross between The New Yorker and Masses & Main Stream. [laughter] See, I got that [unclear].

ANDERSON

That's a great way of putting it.

WEISBURD

Yes.

ANDERSON

Also in the issue, you already mentioned the excerpt from your novel, Firestorm. Could you talk a bit about that excerpt and what the novel was? [telephone interruption]

WEISBURD

There's subtext to everything. The motivating deepest subtext was my German girlfriend at college. That's one level. Then the other was across the street on Beachwood Drive, an elderly German woman lived, with whom my wife made friends and I was introduced to. Gloria went to New York once, and I went over and talked to her, and she said she had been in the Hamburg firestorm, and she told me a few things about it.

Then I went to the library and I took out a book by someone by the name of Caitlan about the firebombing of that, and I just felt putting all that thing together, I would write about it was part of the novel. It was a novel, not a memoir, so I was mixing imagination with fact. So I wrote it, and I didn't think of publishing it in Coastlines because I thought it was a novel.

Incidentally, I was imitating Kerouac and typing it on rolls of teletype paper and then cutting the pages.

So when he's taking over the magazine, I gave it to Curtis Zahn, and he published it, so there it is. It's done. Then I didn't finish the novel. [laughs]

ANDERSON

I was going to ask you about what happened with it. When I was looking through the issues of Coastlines, I read the excerpt, and I think that was the first time I realized that you had been writing a novel then.

WEISBURD

Yes, I'm always writing a novel. And if I live another three years, it'll get it out.

ANDERSON

Absolutely. As you think back on it, who are the contributors to Coastlines that really kind of stand out to you?

WEISBURD

I think there are about 255 total. I like Winfield Townley Scott, his poem about Leif Erikson's voyage. I just loved the excitement in his lines, a little bit like McGrath in that sense. I remember Robert Sward. My mind is going backwards. Oh, my god, maybe I hated it all. [laughter] Maybe I need to think about it. I liked Gene's poetry. I always liked Gene's poetry. Men Fail in Communion, I love that poem. I love all the [unclear], Bert Meyers. I loved "Eichman" [phonetic] and "a plane passing by like a drop of sweat."

I liked Tom's work. He published the first section of Letter to an Imaginary Friend. I wasn't too crazy about that, but I am very crazy about some stuff inside that book. I may read it at Beyond Baroque. The one where he's confessing as a boy to a priest, it's so hilarious. Oh, I like a lot of his short poems.

Who else? I like Don Gordon. There's Stanley Kiesel, I like some of his children's poems. I should find some woman writer. Diane Wakoski. There's some poems that I really was impressed by people I didn't know, and I can't remember their names. Sometimes I didn't even pay attention to the names. If I liked it, it fit in.

I like Mel Weisburd. [laughter] A little wordy, yes, he's a little wordy. Let's see. Who else? I liked Lachlan MacDonald's story The Hunter. I have to say I like Ginsberg. [laughs] Ginsberg produced a great body of work, and some of it is very formal, going back, going back to formal writing. I always liked Gregory Corso.

There was a whole bunch of readers in San Francisco. Phil Whelan published in Coastline. Yes, Philip Whelan. But there are a lot of San Francisco poets I—Gene got to know them but, I mean, their work, that I haven't yet caught up on. Brother Antoninus, I met. Who wrote Turtle Island or Turtle—Robert Creeley. Robert Creeley.

There was a writer by the name of Lesley Wolfe Hedley [phonetic], and the guy who published "Trace," James Boyer May [phonetic]. He wrote telegraphically like the woman, great woman poet. Why do I blank out on

her name? Emily Dickinson. I mean, not as good as her but he wrote dash, dash, you know.

That's about all I can think of right now. I liked Don Gordon. I liked the poems in the first issue that Tom selected. As I said, I liked that review. I think that should be considered historic, his review of [unclear] Howl, how he's ambivalent, which shows a transition in poetry. That's a marvelous specimen for his transition in poetry. I'd put that in a frame. Who else? Probably next time I'll think of it. Is there going to be a next time?

ANDERSON

Yes.

WEISBURD

I wish I could think of a woman poet. We didn't publish—

ANDERSON

You mentioned Josephine Ain.

WEISBURD

Yes, she was okay. Ann Stanford.

ANDERSON

Ann Stanford.

WEISBURD

Yes, she was good. Ann Stanford. But I think Estelle's issue with us was we didn't publish enough women.

ANDERSON

Well, you know, maybe that's something you could talk about a little bit. I think when you look at the literary culture in the United States in the fifties, would you agree that it was dominated by male writers?

WEISBURD

Oh, yes, I do agree. I do agree. It wasn't that we were all—I don't think we discriminated. It's just that there were more male writers submitting. Then there was a class of women writers, which I would call the Chaparral poets. That stuff was too dainty for us. I mean too pat. We didn't run across many women who were trying to break conventions or pioneering or protesting yet. Maybe that came in the sixties.

Who was the New York poet? Diane di Prima or Lenore Kandel. Oh, sure. I forgot Lenore Kandel. I know we had a writer by the name of Rita Mosner, but I can't remember what she wrote. I think it was a short story.

ANDERSON

I think you're recalling a great deal.

WEISBURD

You do?

ANDERSON

Yes.

WEISBURD

My memory's shot. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Not according to this. This is incredible. You've remembered names. You've remembered lines from their poems. That's incredible.

WEISBURD

Well, I said ever since your exhibit I was carried back there. This is the point I almost forgot how to get home. [laughs]

ANDERSON

One of the things you told me is that it came back to you how difficult it was to put out Coastlines.

WEISBURD

Yes, it was a drag. It was fun to see an issue finished, but it caused problems in our marriage. I just was absent. My wife used to tease me that I was playing with 3-by-5 cards. It was subscribers and contributors. "You shouldn't be doing that." And it took hours. Well, writing to libraries, and, of course, everything was slower in those days because you made copies, carbon copies. You typed, and I wasn't that great a typist.

ANDERSON

And you had to raise the funds.

WEISBURD

Then, as I said, I—yes, the funds, the raising money, and I put a lot of my own money into it for those days. If we had a shortfall, I snuck it in there.

"What'd you do with that money?" my wife would say. [laughs]

No, she liked me because I was a poet. That's why we married. I think that's one factor. She loved poetry. But we were part of a strictly middle-class culture, and all her friends were business oriented and this kind of thing, and they thought this magazine was crazy. Then there was another group of few friends who were intellectuals, politically oriented. "Well, why don't you have more politics in the magazine?" [laughs] We felt like we were an outlier. So all of that was hard.

ANDERSON

It sounds as if you made a lot of sacrifices.

WEISBURD

Yes, both Gene and I. Gene said, "I've got to quit. I've got to do my own writing." And I felt the same way, and I was helping him out because relieving him of material aspects of the magazine. Then I would get bitter that he wasn't helping much, you know, all that stuff. Then we'd add on editors and editors, and they don't do anything. We send them some manuscripts, and they'd say, "Well, maybe this one or that one. I have two here. You decide." That's very common.

No, it was very hard, and also one of the hard things about it, the very hard thing about it, maybe the hardest, maybe it has to do with certain paranoia I had. I had to conceal it. I didn't tell anybody at work about it. And I always had the feeling I was being investigated. I once had a—I was moving up in the district, and I was working for the chief administrative officer when they wanted to revamp the organization. I had to share my county car with

another guy, and that guy was—legally, his job was investigator on air pollution cases, but actually all the time he talked—did I tell you this?

ANDERSON

Yes, you did. He had worked for the FBI.

WEISBURD

Yes, and it looked like he was actively spying on everybody, and he wanted me to go up to his house and see his files and all that. I was scared of that guy. Then the head of the enforcement division had been in the Red Squad. And I knew—I said, “I’m going to be found out one of these days,” you know.

It’s that feeling of being odd, not falling in any niche, and yet trying to make it go. And then Tom being called up before the committee, and then his being tailed by agents and whatnot, and his miseries as a result, and then his marriage broke up. The only stable thing going around was my wife and I. I mean, as far as Tom would come and tell us about his problems, and everybody did, and Gloria took care of everybody, including Gene’s wife when she got schizophrenic and Gene was in New Mexico. She carried the burden of a lot of the bad stuff associated with it, so it was hard.

And I was living between two worlds, and I don’t know how on earth I got hired by the American Medical Association, but they loved me. So I always worried about getting fired there, but I never did. [laughs] Then I guess I told you I had to get a security clearance at System Development Corporation, took two years, and it went up to McNamara’s desk. By that time, all the court cases on it liberated me. The trend was changing. I lucked out in my life, so here I am back to square three [unclear]. [laughter]

ANDERSON

When and how did you and Gene leave Coastlines? How did that happen?

WEISBURD

I don’t know what happened first. He got a job. He was recommended to UNM by the poet John Logan . What book did he write? Spring, something Spring. I took a course with John Logan in Chicago [unclear]. [laughter] What was the question?

ANDERSON

How you left Coastlines, and you were saying that Gene was up for being an editor at University of New Mexico Press.

WEISBURD

No, a teacher.

ANDERSON

A teacher at University of New Mexico.

WEISBURD

Yes, instructor. So it just so happened coincidentally I had this offer, came from the head of the district. He said, “I made a connection for you. We’re kind of disbanding, and we’re making recommendations for people to go into other jobs. I have one for you at the American Medical Association.”

I said, "AMA?"

He says, "Yeah. You'll be in charge of environmental health there. They're going to start up a new department."

So my wife did not want to go, but I did. Both events happened about the same time. We decided we wanted to take a train, we had our own drawing room, and everyone met at the station, including Bard. I said, "Bard, the magazine is yours. Give me a dollar, please." And he had something and he signed it, and I felt free. It isn't that I hated it. I enjoyed working on the magazine. I would have loved to do that the rest of my life if I had an income. I seemed to have had an organizing capacity that maybe I should have been really a businessman or the head of a bureau or something, because I organized my company, and I organized Coastlines, and I organized Statement too. They were my proving grounds. And now I've got to organize my house. [laughter]

ANDERSON

After you left town, left Coastlines, what was your relationship like with Coastlines and the people at Coastlines?

WEISBURD

Sandy Garrett was always writing me. She said, "I can't believe the work you did. The magazine is not the same without you guys. It doesn't have the same spirit or élan or whatever it is. I don't know how long I can go on with this." That's one thing.

I still maintained contact with Gene. Gene visited me in Chicago. William Pillin and his wife came to Chicago. Tom McGrath came, and we went to—Gloria and I and Stefi went to Minnesota. What's the name of that place where he taught? We visited McGrath. We were close friends and we corresponded. I have a lot of little postcards, you know, "I'm here," and everything, from there.

So I started teaching a poetry class at the Catholic Adult Education Center, due to a friend in the neighborhood that I knew. There were a number of people in there. I forget their names. The only one I remember is Bill Knott [phonetic]. Reed [phonetic], somebody by the name—oh, Naomi Lizard. She wasn't in my class, but I knew her, and I think she's a well-known poet, isn't she?

ANDERSON

Lizard?

WEISBURD

I guess she's known more in the rest of the country than here. Oh, Scott Greer [phonetic], he taught sociology at Northwestern University. We were good friends with him and his wife Dody. He lived in Evanston as well. I met Felix Anselm, who was another writer in Madison at the University of Wisconsin. And Lisel Mueller, she's a Pulitzer Prize winning poet, and we were in a poetry group there. She corrected my Firestorm article for its

German, and I don't know what the hell I did with the corrected copy of it. She's a fine poet.

So we were still among poets and artists there. Chicago was nice, nice that way, and, I mean, the intellectual life there was more coherent there than here. Did you live in Chicago?

ANDERSON

I've spent a lot of time in Chicago. I never lived there, but I have spent a lot of time there. Chicago is the only urban center in the State of Illinois, you know, and either you're there or you're not. You know what I'm saying?

WEISBURD

Yes. In my job, I got to meet some interesting—I met Buckminster Fuller, who was down, I think, in Carbondale, and I was a good friend of the medical director at Eastman Kodak. I met some interesting people even in the conservative world. [laughs]

Who else was there? Neutra, Richard Neutra, in L.A. I put on a program called Designing, having to do with—I put on a lot of conferences, and I looked at various aspects of the environment, including the architectural. So we had a meeting down here in L.A., and we met at Richard Neutra's house. Then I had a big conference at—what's the hotel they knocked down on Wilshire Boulevard? Ambassador. An air pollution health research conference. I did all kinds of great things. There again, the certain continuity in my experiences in putting out on things that go out to people.

ANDERSON

And also you were using your creativity even pulling these ideas together about design and environmental health.

WEISBURD

This is where the LSD thing was so important in my life, is it made me feel omnipotent and non-categorical, that I could cross lines. When I went to System Development Corporation and in my own company, I worked in a multidisciplinary fashion in getting proposals out and hiring, recruiting. So I was kind of a free agent. So I think a lot of that's due to the LSD experience, believe it or not. I don't know if anybody would agree with me, but I had a certain vision of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipotence, that life force can go in any direction—and it's innate, not necessarily learned. So that's what I'm writing about now, on all that stuff.

ANDERSON

When you came back to Los Angeles in—I'm forgetting what year you came back.

WEISBURD

1966.

ANDERSON

Okay. So Coastlines published its last issue in 1964, I think. I think so.

WEISBURD

Yes, that's what I—we were there four years, so I left in '62.

ANDERSON

You left in '62 then. Okay. You contributed—a lot of people contributed farewell pieces in the final issue.

WEISBURD

Yes, I sent them from Chicago.

ANDERSON

So Alexandra, Garrett, and Bard decided they couldn't keep Coastlines going?

WEISBURD

You mean Bard.

ANDERSON

Bard, tall Bard.

WEISBURD

Yes. I don't know what's going on with them. Bard was interested in mostly prose and short stories, and he didn't like the poetry too much.

ANDERSON

That's a big change.

WEISBURD

Yeah. So I don't know whether he wanted out or she wanted out, or—well, she certainly tried to get money. She wanted to get wealthy people to contribute to the magazine, and she really tried hard.

ANDERSON

I heard that she used to give parties at her home and—

WEISBURD

Yeah. The last parties that we held were mostly at her home. There used to be parties on Virginia Road, there used to be parties at my house, and then sometimes in the house of some other person. But these parties were a drag. And I don't know what else to say. [laughs]

ANDERSON

Before we close today, is there anything else you'd like to say about starting Coastlines and running it?

WEISBURD

I don't know. I liked doing it. In some ways it was like a toy. I'm sure there was ego and vanity involved in it. I did not appreciate its value. I had an inferiority complex about it and myself. I did not know how it was received. I mean, we got letters, some letters. Maybe everybody was changing at the same time and didn't know what to make of anything.

I'm glad I did it. It made life much more interesting than the fifties. Ordinary life was kind of dull, white-breadish, you know. It gave me something to think about, plus exposure to other writers, so part of growing up. I'm sure it contributed to what else I was able to contribute to other things, indirectly.

But I might ask you, why are people interested in the magazine now? Are there people interested in the magazine now? [laughs]

ANDERSON

I think we'll go ahead and end the interview, and I'm going to go ahead and push the stop button. [End of June 26, 2013 interview]

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