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This interview was conducted with Gene Ervine, alumni, class of 1974, Western Washington University. The interview was conducted in Special Collections, Western Libraries, on October 4, 2016. The interviewer is Tamara Belts.

TB: Today is Tuesday, October 4, 2016. My name is Tamara Belts, and I'm here with Gene Ervine. And we're going to do an oral history of his time at Western and a little bit following that. So our first question is: how did you happen to decide to come to Western?

GE: I think it was economic necessity. I'd gone to Whitworth for a year, and I was realizing that that was expending what little I had for education much quicker than I could afford, so I opted for the state school. And I had a good friend, Dale Zeretzke, who was at Western, and we're still friends after 60 years, so that's something.

Anyway, so I got to Western, and I met my wife of 46 years. The first day I was on campus as a student, I was walking out of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library and met her, and she's been a remarkable part of my life ever since.

TB: Very good. So what were your dates of attendance at Western?

GE: It was 1968 through 1971, and I left with three credits short, so in 1974 in the winter quarter I came back and finished up.

TB: And so what degrees or certificates did you receive from Western.

GE: Just a degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, with a minor in creative writing.

TB: And then did you receive any other degrees anywhere else?

GE: No, just a lot of hard knocks.

TB: And what was your first job after leaving Western?

GE: Well, my first job was to work for Georgia-Pacific as a tree planter and pre-commercial thinner in the timber industry. As an attender of Students for Democratic Society meetings, I realized that it was important that we unionize the crew I was on. So I unionized our pre-commercial thinning crew, and that worked really well. I had a hundred percent on the election to unionize. But about two weeks later, the big boss met us on Mt. Baker Highway and said, So long, it's been good to know you. So, even though I had unionized and everything, and it was legal, Georgia Pacific didn't approve and made our jobs disappear. So my first job cost I think it was seven or eight guys their jobs, which was kind of sad.

TB: Was that in the window of 1971 and 1974 when you were taking a break?

GE: Yes. And after that, I went on to -- we were, our first year's tax return showed an income of just under \$2,000. Now a can of tomato soup cost seven cents (\$.07) then, as a reference point, but -- and gas was twenty-three cents (\$.23) a gallon, but \$2,000 didn't go very far, so I needed to do something. So I ended up getting a job at Scott Papers' Hamilton camp, outside of Sedro Woolley on the Skagit River, and I worked in high-lead logging there as a choker setter, and then chaser on a high-lead tower, [Skyline] they called the crew.

TB: And so then, you got married, she got a job in Alaska, and you went up and worked up there as well?

GE: Yes, and I logged for two years there, and a year in two different camps. It was interesting to be involved in primary extraction industry, whether it's mining, logging, or fishing or farming. Those are all fairly high risk jobs. And some of the possibilities are very stark. I had several near misses. It's pretty amazing when you look over your shoulder and see a whole tree coming down slope behind you, and you get a tremendous adrenaline rush when you see something like that. It's amazing.

It's like combat, because you can walk -- you can be doing the job for days and days, and safely, and something happens that just is unexpected, and all of a sudden you're ambushed and you've got to kind of move, or you don't and you don't have any options. I was forty feet out of the way one time, and a skyline got a belly in it, like you want to flip the garden hose over an obstacle, and I was forty feet out of the way. That's a long ways. And the cable came down like fourteen inches from my boot.

Another time, I was standing next to a yarder, I bent down and picked up a chainsaw, and a log had slid out of the chokers and slid along the side of the yarder and was right where that chainsaw had been an instant before. It was -- just thinking about it, I get little sweaty palms.

TB: So when you guys left the logging camp up there where she [had been] teaching, did you get a different job? I didn't ask her this. Or did she get a different job?

GE: She got a different job. The logging camp was kind of like a farm team for a baseball organization, and she proved herself in the logging camp school, and then was hired in Sitka to work. And I was tired of standing in the rain and being -- and just the whole logging thing was kind of wearing thin. So I looked for something different to do, and I got a job with the National Park Service, which ended up transforming what hadn't really been much of career. It had been work. But I finally worked myself into

what was a real career, and I worked for 36 years in the government then in the Department of the Interior. I retired from the Bureau of Land Management in Anchorage.

TB: So when you first came to Western, did you live at home or in a dorm, or?

GE: Well, when I first came to Western, I lived in the old YMCA down on State Street, in a little room that I rented because the dorms were full and I didn't know -- hadn't figured out how to rent a room or anything. So I stayed there for a month, and then I moved into a house on, low down on what used to be called Indian Street. It's now Billy Frank Jr. Street. I lived in an apartment there for a season, and then moved up, farther up Billy Frank Jr. Street, and there was an old grocery store. I can't remember the address now, but I lived in a balcony above what had been the grocery store, and it was kind of like a converted –

TB: Oh, Hinotes? Is that Hinotes?

GE: It wasn't called Hinotes then.

TB: Okay.

GE: It was just some kind of an old commercial building that had been converted into apartments.

TB: The Hinotes was right across from Mathes.

GE: It was down a little further. About halfway up from, what is it, Holly?

TB: Okay.

GE: Yes. And I ate on campus because what was then called Saga Food Service was way better than what I could figure out with a can of peanut butter, or a jar of peanut butter and a little bit of jam.

TB: And so what was your main course of study? That was English Literature, with a minor in –

GE: Creative writing.

TB: Can we talk a little bit more about what classes you liked best, that you learned the most from? [And who were] some of your favorite or most influential teachers and why?

GE: Well, Larry Lee, L. L. Lee, was a World War II veteran and was my adviser, and we got to be just friends. And again, Maurice Dube, who I mentioned earlier, was also just a good friend, and we just enjoyed each other's company and talking about everything under the sun. And for a young person, I found that very valuable to have somebody to talk to and grow my experience, so I really appreciated that aspect of knowing both Dr. Lee and Dr. Dube. And then –

TB: Could you expand a little bit though. Like for Dr. Lee, did you go to his home, or were there classes?

GE: Just classes. And he was just a kind man, and he had some good stories. He told us once that during World War II, he was a Bangalore torpedo man. Bangalore torpedoes are the kind of explosives that they used during the Normandy invasion to blow the barbed wire out of the way. They were long pipes that they would couple together and slide out under barbed wire and then set it off. Dr. Lee told about after he got out of the service, he went to work for the Forest Service. And since he had some experience, he became a powder monkey or an explosives expert for the Forest Service. And he had a short-lived career because his first job was to shoot a boulder that had come down in a rock fall on this logging road, presumably, and he wasn't quite sure how heavily to load the charge for the boulder to blow it out of the way and break it up so they could move it. Well, he loaded the charge a little bit too heavy so that the Forest Service ended up sending him down the road unemployed. He'd blown up the road so much that they needed to rebuild it. But that was just a little Dr. Lee story. But he was a passionate teacher. He loved English. And as I remember, he had a Greek wife, who was very nice and enthusiastic.

And Dr. Dube, I spent much more time with. He was an algologist in the biology department. He was also a folk music enthusiast and liked what we now called roots folk music, things that went back to the original sources in Appalachia and things like that. That was very interesting to me. We shared an interest in religion, and he was able to talk to me about that, and we could talk through our faith journey a little bit. And that was helpful. I really appreciated him, and appreciated what he sowed into my life.

I had, at the time I was a student, Robert Huff and Knute Skinner were both on campus as poets. And looking back, I think I needed more experience to be a poet, and I think my poetry has matured not because of so much of the instruction I gained at Western, which I admit was helpful, but I think living life and being thoughtful about it was in a way more helpful.

TB: Can you tell me a little bit more about Huff personally, and both of them really? It's kind of nice – Skinner's still alive, but Huff has passed away.

GE: Yes. Robert Huff was an interesting man. He looked like he might have been a football player. I mean, he had strong arms. And one of the reasons he may have passed away was because he chain smoked in our class, and he smoked unfiltered Lucky Strikes. I remember he would routinely get little flecks of tobacco on his tongue that he needed to pick off. It's really nice being -- visiting Western as a smoke-free place. To have a professor smoking in your class was just -- I mean, now it seems barbaric, and it was barbaric, but we just didn't know it at the time. But anyway, he had -- I think he fancied himself a lady's man, and he also -- you know, I didn't interact with him the way -- I had a much closer relationship with this biologist than I had with this guy who could've been a real important faculty member for me.

And I don't know, I think the teaching of poetry is a very difficult thing because poetry is kind of ineffable, kind of like spirituality or something. It's a hard thing to teach. It's not like how to build a robot or something. You don't get points for just hooking a battery up and -- I don't know if that makes sense but --

TB: It's personal, yes.

GE: Poetry is a hard thing because it's a synthesis of all your experience, every conversation you've had, the way you look at the world, who you are genetically and ethnically, and everything shapes that, and

then how you use language and the language that attracts you, and then it goes through you as the filter and comes out the other side. It's a hard thing to teach.

So [Knut Skinner] was a kind of an oversized leprechaun of a man. He was a tall man but he always had kind of the Irish kind of beard that comes down without a mustache. And he wrote a variety of poems, not all of them were great poems. I remember one that had a line in it that was something like, Tonight I suck back the phlegm, phlegm without end, amen. Which was kind of a disgusting little poem. But he certainly has -- in his life he developed a meaningful relationship with Ireland, and I would like to know more about that. And he was in Anchorage recently and read at the local university, but I had a conflict and I couldn't get to it.

TB: Oh, darn.

GE: But it would've been nice to see him again after all these years.

TB: Did you by any chance know Sam Green?

GE: Sam Green of Waldron Island?

TB: Yes.

GE: I've met him.

TB: Okay, because he was a Western student, but maybe a little later.

GE: And [Brooding Heron Press] -- Yes, I have met him. My sister-in-law has ties to Waldon, and so I met him through that.

TB: But you didn't when you were at Western.

GE: No, no.

TB: So anything more about your classes that you liked the best or remember the most from, or other teachers?

GE: I think I was probably a pretty indifferent student. And I didn't -- I look at the kids that are coming up. There's these Compass 2 Campus programs where fifth to sixth graders start thinking about their university experience and kind of get groomed up into coming to Western, and I think that's really exciting. I don't think I was well prepared to understand how to exploit and use the university to the fullest. You know, I'm glad that I did that. Probably the most important thing I got from Western at this point was my dear wife, who's been such a rock all these years. We've raised two kids and had some really nice adventures. So that's been very valuable. I wish I could say that, you know, that Western was a mountain top experience. It was a good thing to check off along the way, but it wasn't that for me. And I think that's as much my fault as it was Western's fault.



TB: So what about extracurricular activities? I know that you were on *Jeopardy*. Do you want to talk about that?

GE: I was the editor of *Jeopardy*, not on *Jeopardy*. I didn't know Alex Trebek.

TB: Oh, yes, sorry.

GE: Anyway, but I just fell into *Jeopardy*. One of the wonderful things that happened because I was editor of *Jeopardy* in 1971, I was able to invite Gary Snyder to campus. And he came to campus. I went to SeaTac and picked him up, and we started to drive up I-5, and we were arriving in a Cadillac limousine that was surplus from a funeral home, and a local printer, who will remain nameless, was using it to haul his paper stock around because it made a pretty nice enclosed pickup truck. But we were driving up I-5, and this printer offered us a joint, a marijuana cigarette. Gary declined and I declined, and we kept driving for about two minutes, and all of a sudden a siren went off and we were pulled over by the State Patrol, who walked up and said, You've got a taillight out, son. But at that time, being caught in a car full of marijuana smoke would have been very bad for all our careers, so Gary Snyder kept me out of a lot of trouble.

The next day, we went down to Teddy Bear Cove with twenty of our closest friends and went skinny dipping. And while we were enjoying the frigid waters of Samish Bay, Gary Snyder whipped out a couplet that he may have had by memory, but it was, *The oysters that you eat today slept last night in Samish Bay*. Then that afternoon, Ken Kesey, the novelist from Oregon, and a group of creative writer types and myself and Gary Snyder were under an apple tree in Fairhaven close to the site of the old Bellingham Co-op that used to be in Fairhaven years and years ago, and somebody had brought a jug of Cribari table wine, a gallon jug, and we were passing that around. And Ken Kesey and Gary Snyder were talking about their different approaches to their art of writing. Gary Snyder was very disciplined as a Zen monk and a translator of Asian texts, and it was a very kind of formal and deliberate approach to his craft. And of course Ken Kesey was a member of the Merry Pranksters and was interested in experimenting with LSD and quantities of marijuana, and it was a very interesting conversation. And I wish somebody had recorded it, because I think it may have been one of the great conversations about that kind of thing from two very notable practitioners of their art. That was very cool.

The reason I had invited Gary to campus was because there was an event called the Western Washington State College Multi Arts Festival. And that was -- his reading was part of that. It was interesting to have him there. It was just shortly after he'd lost a friend who had been living on his property in Nevada City, California, a man named Lew Welch, who was a poet of some renown. He's got a book of poems, which are still enjoyed, called *Ring of Bone: collected poems, 1950-1971*. But Lew Welch was living on Gary's property in a camper, and he walked out one day with a 22 revolver and was never seen again. And Gary was just grieving the loss of his friend Lew Welch when I met him. And I've since become a real fan of Lew Welch. He had a great, a very interesting grasp of poetry, and I've really enjoyed what I've read of him. It was kind of -- I learned about him directly from Gary Snyder, but just after he'd died, so it was kind of ironic.

TB: So were you aware at all, I'm kind of asking because maybe you talked with Paul about this, of Fishtown?

GE: Fishtown and Robert Sund and that stuff?

TB: Yes.

GE: I've met Robert Sund. My friend Dale was a good friend of Robert's. I've just recently really been reading a lot of the stuff that's come out since Robert died about, I think it was about seventeen years ago now. But I've really come to appreciate his poetry. And what I like about it is its -- it captures the moment so clearly. And you know, that was -- that Fishtown thing was kind of a hippie commune, and as a resident of Skagit County I wasn't immediately aware of that. You know, I had my own home life, and I wasn't trying to find a place to squat. And that's basically what Robert and his friends there at the mouth of the Skagit were doing, was kind of squatting in old shacks and buildings. I think that's great, and I really appreciated his -- the elegant simplicity of his poetry. He really thought about paring things down to their essentials. It's kind of like playing the game Jenga where you make a structure and then you start pulling things out. And his poems are so refined that if you pull anything else out of them, they fall apart. That's maybe an inadequate analogy, but.

TB: Wow. Anything else that's an outstanding memory of your college days?

GE: Well, there was the guy that streaked across Red Square on a Harley -- wearing just an old-fashioned aviator's hat and goggles. I didn't recognize the rest of him (laughter).

My wife and I walked a lot, and I just remember walking repeatedly across Red Square arm in arm, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

TB: Well, I think you were on campus, do you remember when they were rebuilding the library? Does that at all ring a bell?

GE: I think, this must be the third rebuild that we're sitting in here, because I don't think it was a major rebuild when I was here, or I don't remember it being a major rebuild.

TB: Okay, that's fine.

GE: I'm sorry.

TB: That's okay. Do you want to talk a little bit about, more about your own poetry since you obviously liked poetry when you were in college, but then it seemed like it's something that you must have kept working on throughout your life.

GE: Yes, I could read a couple of poems. You know, I've done a lot of different things, but I've kind of always been a poet. Let's see, I need to find the other document. Here's a poem that I read at Huxley College this morning to some students in an interpretation class:

Alaska is a Library -- and we're in a library, so this is somehow appropriate.

Alaska is a library

In the anthology

of landscapes
Alaska is
the grand novel of place,
all those intricate stories;
epic lakes, rivers, fjords,
islands, deserts and glaciers.

Alaska is a collection
of short stories,
of kayak capsizes,
bluff charges, narrow escapes,
storm flung float plane rides,
hammering heart beats.

Alaska is creative
nonfiction of
mistakes and victories,
love for a particular cove
or peak at sunrise
that drives hard
into our memories.

Alaska is a theology
of revelation
of how arteries
and islands, mountains
and valleys, can change
your life. This landscape
is an evangelist
that wins hearts
and minds with
its gestures and
the hymns it sings
in our hearts.

Alaska is a memoir
that you will write
sunrise to sunset,
fog wrapping an island
on a still bay, a salmon
splash in the shallows,
low sun in the hoary cold
shining on ice felted birch trees.

Alaska is a poem
which can't be memorized
line by line but astonishes

each learner like a golden
summer sunrise, softened
by smoke from distant fires,
and measured carefully
by the olive silhouettes
of spruce trees marching
across muskeg and valleys,
clear to our final tree line.

TB: That's nice. That was really beautiful. What I'm trying to get at is that there's a real spirituality in that. There's a religious fervor there, and it's also, obvious that Alaska really captured you.

GE: Yes. Robert Service said in *The Spell of the Yukon*; he said, You hate it like hell for a season, and then it grips you like some kinds of sinning. And I think it did. We went north for a year, and it's been forty-some years now.

TB: That's amazing.

Short Break

TB: We are back after a little break, and you're going to read another poem.

GE: This is a poem called *Boreal Spoons*, and the boreal forest is the only circumpolar ecosystem.

Boreal Spoons

Today I think of carved spoons,
I think of blocks of wood
cut from trees, split and stacked
I think of shape, balance, and decoration.
Sharp tools, chips, and shavings

I would like to carve three spoons
Out of birch.
Wood that has been carved
Around the world in the boreal forest
For spoons. Blonde, simple,
Serviceable spoons

A wood that that has heated
Moose, reindeer
Bear meat, or salmon,
for soups, stews and chowders,
Or sourdough pancakes and biscuits

Birch bark makes the best tinder

Bursting easily into flame,
And Bohemian waxwings
flock after its seeds, on the snow
at the end of winter.

Hewing the spoons out
of birch blocks with hatchet
and bow saw working at my chopping block.
Chips, splinters, knife shavings land near by
kindling for bonfire or stove.

The first spoon will be larger than a tablespoon
With a long curved handle, suitable for stirring a pot
and scooping a soup dish full quickly,
A spoon peasants have carved
For so many years no one can count.

Carved for the minder of the pot,
Offered perhaps to make a
woman's eyes sparkle
a gesture of long friendship,
or to mark a new beginning.

Soup is one of the gestures
Of love that the experts
Have missed, but surely
On cold evenings when things
Aren't working well, a good soup

Is nearly love itself.
So one spoon for the cauldron
The stew, soup or chowder.
A spoon for you
A spoon for me.

Your spoon then will be light
Nearly delicate, good for soup
Porridge or berries. A delicate bend
To the handle chip carved,
Viking style and a fine bowl.

My spoon will be plain and sturdy,
Bent handle and larger bowl
Good for the stews and chowders
Something useful for me
While I admire you across the table.

You are smiling at me there,
And as long as I can see that,
Smiling back, spoon in hand,
I, a simple man, feel
Fortunate and safe at home.

TB: Nice.

GE: So here's a good Northwest Washington poem:

Mount Baker

On my skyline
It is a great place to turn to
It tells me where home is,
And talks about the weather.
I like its moods and colors
Sometimes at sunset
You just mutter, "It's strawberry,
It has to be strawberry ice cream!"
Other days that mountain
Slow dances with the clouds
Tucking into the moment
Then disappears!

Anyway. There are a couple poems.

TB: Okay. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you'd like to share?

GE: Well, I think the idea of leaving Western as a lifetime learner, anxious to comprehend opportunities and to apprehend them, is really important. One of the things --

Actually, there is one thing. When I was in -- I forget what year it was, but I was in an art appreciation class from a man named R. Allen Jensen.

TB: Yes.

GE: And he was an artist in his own right, but he was married to Robert Fulghum's sister. And Robert Fulghum was also an artist, but he's also a Unitarian minister who wrote *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. And he came to Mr. Jensen's class and introduced me to a book that I found just extremely useful as a poet. In fact, it's probably the biggest thing that I took away from Western, as a poet. It was a little book by the famous poet E. E. Cummings, who was a Charles Eliot Norton chair lecturer at Harvard. And he wrote a little book called *I: six nonlectures*, and Robert Fulghum introduced me to that book in that art history class, and it was wonderful. Robert Fulghum said in the course of that lecture that, "You are the raw materials, you are the artist, you are the masterpiece, and you are the prize." And then he quoted some of Cummings from that book, and one of the things that he quoted was, "new worlds aren't made, they are born, and their birthdays are the birthdays of individuals." And he also, I'm

not sure whether Fulghum quoted this, but there's a little poem in that book Cummings wrote that goes like this: As long as you and I have mouths and lips, which are to kiss and sing with, who cares if some one-eyed son-of-a-bitch invents an instrument to measure spring with.

TB: Nice. Anything else?

GE: I think that's it.

TB: Well, thank you very much.

GE: Well, thank you.