

Computing Educators Oral History Project

An Interview with *Winifred (Tim) Asprey*

Conducted Friday, 23 March 2007

At Poughkeepsie, New York

Interview Conducted by Viera Proulx

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[Context for the interview:

Viera Proulx, the interviewer, is a former student of Dr. Asprey's. Also present during the interview was Greg Priest-Dorman, who came to Vassar as a student in 1978, worked with the Computer Science Department during that time, and returned to the department in 1992; at the time of the interview, he was serving as Systems Administrator and Lab Coordinator for the Computer Sciences Department. Statements by Viera Proulx are in regular bold with the initial "V."; statements by Greg Priest-Dorman are in bold italics and marked with the initial "G."; Responses by Winifred Asprey are in regular font with the label "W:"]

1 [0:00]

2 **V: This is an interview with Winifred Asprey from Vassar College conducted by Viera Proulx.**
3 **This interview is being recorded on 23rd of March 2007 in Poughkeepsie, New York. It is**
4 **part of the Computing Educators Oral History Project.**

5
6 **Tim ...**

7
8 W: Are you going to call me "Tim" in this ... ?

9
10 **V: I will call you "Tim" in this interview because all your friends call you "Tim" and ...**

11
12 W: Yes, they do.
13
14 **V: You were kind enough to ask me to call you “Tim”.**
15
16 W: [Laughing] Well, you were amazing enough to change.
17
18 **V: I didn’t change!**
19
20 W: So a few people I’ve known way back before I knew you and so for some of them ... they simply
21 can’t do it. And I’ve had the same problem ...
22
23 **V: Back home people are on a first-name basis or second-name basis ... and a first-name basis**
24 **... it’s a privilege when someone asks you to call them by first name, and then you do so.**
25
26 W: Well, the people who taught me here, for whom I had the greatest respect. And when I came
27 back to the faculty seven years later, everybody, all the new people, were calling even the older
28 people, the top senior people, there they went right into first name. But I could no more do it than
29 fly. I never did accomplish it with either Miss Wells in mathematics or with Mrs. Hugh in
30 chemistry. I just couldn’t do it. The rest finally came, though for a year I did not call people I’d
31 known before anything at all.
32
33 **V: Okay. That’s wonderful. Let’s start with your family background.**
34 [1:50]
35 W: Okay.
36
37 **V: I know that you had a long history at Vassar College, even before you were born. Could**
38 **you tell us a little bit about that?**
39
40 W: Yes. My grandmother graduated from Vassar in 1882, which a hundred years later I retired, in
41 1982, which I think is interesting. And I’m named after her. So ... but she only lived until I was
42 about two years old, so everything that I know from her has been told me time and time again.
43 And my mother graduated from Vassar in 1905. And my grandmother was a very young student
44 and I have a silver bowl that’s dedicated by her class to the baby in their class. That’s about all
45 that I know.
46
47 No, I know one other fact. The other fact is that they all called each other, no matter how close
48 they were as roommates, “Miss So-and-so”. You didn’t use first names, even with your best
49 friends. And so that always struck me as most amazing. But I did hear a great deal from my
50 mother. As I grew up, Vassar was my college and I knew that I was going there. That was all
51 right during the 1920s, because the times were good, and the family had saved Liberty bonds in
52 World War I, enough to get me through at least some of it there.
53
54 We lived in Sioux City, Iowa, and were utterly remote from any life such as I found around
55 Vassar. But I knew I was going here. I nearly got kicked out of a class in Next Generation in
56 junior high school because I refused to choose — we had to choose three colleges we would

57 think of attending and I refused to choose any but Vassar, I said I know I am going to Vassar. So,
58 that was fine.

59
60 Came the Depression, and it became a much more serious item. But ... and then, I graduated
61 from a public high school and very young. I had just finished my fifteenth year when I
62 graduated. And Vassar told ... Vassar at that time dealt completely with your parents, the
63 officials at Vassar dealt with your parents, you had nothing to say, you were still a child. All of
64 us were. But they had the ... I can tell you what ... they suggested that, if possible, I be sent to a
65 private school for a year to grow up a bit and also to see that there was a different life than the
66 calm life of a Midwestern city. So, we did, I went to Brownell Hall for a year in Omaha,
67 Nebraska, and there I learned how you study. It was remarkable! The teachers were good; we
68 had instant attention. There were twelve of us in the dormitory, because people couldn't afford it
69 any longer — so it was a very close relationship. And I give full credit to Brownell for the
70 preparation that I had, I could tell you much more about ... particularly ... it was superb.

71 [5:27]

72 **V: Well, I was wondering about your high school. How many girls were in the high school, and**
73 **were they all going to go to college?**

74
75 W: It was a huge high school. It's still in existence. And the ... No, relatively few people went on. In
76 the first place the Depression hit hard enough, so nobody could afford it. And in the second place
77 is, college was not mostly of interest. There were a few of us that did. We were kind of put in a
78 group to satisfy the college requirements.

79
80 **V: You are saying ...**

81
82 W: Not prepared, we didn't prepare at all for the SATs or the other tests.

83
84 **V: Yes. How about siblings? You have two brothers, right?**

85
86 W: Well, I had two brothers who lived. But I had several others who didn't.

87
88 **V: I see.**

89
90 W: And the ... but the two that did, one of them just died a couple of years ago. Top notch chemist
91 at Los Alamos. And the other brother is still alive, and he is a well known historian, particularly
92 in military affairs ... a writer.

93
94 **V: So, when you finished ... so, then you got to Vassar. What can you tell us about your years**
95 **at Vassar?**

96
97 W: I say close to being bliss.

98 [6:54]

99 I loved it. And I had been trained in the fact that you never got homesick. That you had a family
100 who loved you (that was obvious from the time I was born) and that therefore, you had fun, you
101 come back to your family, it was a very close relationship.

102

103 And my mother drove me to Vassar from Sioux City, Iowa, a long, long trip, in cars that are
104 quite different from today's cars. So that she had took a friend of hers and her daughter, who was
105 a good friend of mine, and the four of us took off and had some rather interesting experiences. I
106 remember one over the mountains in Pennsylvania, that Mother was driving, had never driven in
107 territory such as that. And so we were always looking out the window, trying to see anything
108 through the fog and the mountains. And all of a sudden we came across this great big huge rock,
109 and painted on it was "Prepare to meet thy fate".

110

111 **V: [Laughter] Oh yes.**

112

113 W: But we got ... first time I've ever been as far east as Chicago. Chicago, to me, is still east ... of
114 Sioux City, of course. And, so that ... and then New York ... oh, Washington, DC — that's
115 where I smoked my first cigarette and choked.

116

117 **V: Yes, that's interesting.**

118

119 W: I was so grown-up. I was all of sixteen.

120

121 **V: Okay. So by the time you graduated from Vassar you were only 20 years old?**

122

123 W: 21. Just made it. I made it in April.

124

125 **V: Okay. So, what can you tell us about your years at Vassar?**

126

127 W: Interesting!! As ...

128

129 **V: You didn't start as mathematician.**

130

131 W: No, I started as Latin major. My mother had majored in Latin and my grandmother had majored
132 in Latin and Greek. Practically 90% of the student body did.

133

134 **V: What was your mother doing as a profession? I forgot to ask.**

135

136 W: Being a mother.

137

138 **V: She was just ...**

139

140 W: No, no, gosh, she did every political help thing of the city. She was one of those women doers.

141

142 **V: So, she was not officially employed, but she was doing a lot of things all her life.**

143

144 W: Yeah. And she was a great golfer and a tennis player. Her daughter failed in that.

145

146 **V: And your father, what was he doing?**

147

148 W: Well, my father ran his own business for a while. Then we had a mayor commission form of
149 government, so he was elected as one of the commissioners ... of parks and public property. And
150 he loved it. And he served in that for six years. And my mother carefully prepared him, that if at
151 any time he did not get elected ... I forget how often the elections came ... that they would then
152 move to California where the climate would be warm and the sun would come out all the time,
153 not just summer. So, he finally lost after six years; he knew everybody in town and everybody in
154 town knew him. And it was an interesting town in many ways. Indians were very common on the
155 streets and in the reservations across ... in Nebraska and South Dakota. But it was very much ...
156 a separated town. If you lived in a certain district you were among the ones you lived with. If
157 you lived in another district ... my father knew everybody and everybody was "Hi, Pete, Hi,
158 Pete," everywhere you went. So, it was interesting.

159
160 But we went to public schools very definitely, all of our lives. And that's where I got into trouble
161 with my schedule, because after a while, when you were in a public school, if you were either
162 being disruptive, which I wasn't too disruptive, they skipped with your family's permission ...
163 they had you skip a grade and I skipped the Junior Third [clearing throat] and I skipped Junior
164 Sixth and then we went into Junior High School, seven, eight, and nine. And somewhere I
165 mastered that enough to skip a grade in high school. So that's why I graduated so easy. But it
166 wasn't uncommon. Otherwise we were not very helpful in class.

167 [11:53]

168 **V: Yes. So you started at Vassar with being a Latin major?**

169
170 W: Latin major. And I loved Latin, I still love Latin. I taught Latin. And, so that ... but I was a Latin
171 major. The person who taught me was a top notch person in the department, who also taught my
172 mother. And my mother adored her and I did not.

173
174 **V: I see.**

175
176 W: I was scared to death of her. [chuckles] But at the end of the first semester, she went on leave,
177 sabbatical leave or whatever it was called then, and another person, Inez Ryberg, took her place.
178 And Inez restored my confidence in my abilities, so that I went on with Latin II.

179
180 In the meantime I had discovered French. Now French, to an Iowa-speaking person, causes
181 innumerable difficulties in pronunciation. We say "ah" for 'a' and you don't fool with it. You
182 say, "I took a "bahth" this morning," and there's no "baath" in there. I thought it was the funniest
183 thing to hear "baath". So that ... but the ... other than that, it was OK. And I was very good at it,
184 I had a good memory and ... but we were taught by a teacher in the local high school who did
185 not speak French. She wrote French on the board, because that's all the preparation she had. So,
186 my mother spoke French quite fluently. And she was the one who taught me the basics of it, as
187 she did on the Latin, too. So I was fortunate. And then my French teacher was glamour above.
188 She sat ... the straightest person I ever knew at her desk in the basement of Rockefeller Hall.
189 And the first day I was horrified. Classes ran to about fifteen students at that time. And it seemed
190 to me everyone had had a French nurse or governess or something, or they spoke French or their
191 parents did, and here I was with my high school French that I had never really spoken at all,
192 except with my mother. And it was horrifying. And this very, very sophisticated, lovely woman

193 sat up above and oh so straight. And she spoke, she spoke both in English and in French, and to
194 my horror I didn't understand either one.

195 [14:38]

196 And now, I've been trained all my life never to cry in public; I still don't. But that day, I came
197 awfully close to it that day. After class I went up and said to her in my excellent French
198 "Mademoiselle," and with a beautiful accent. And I said, "I don't understand either your French
199 or your English, what am I going to do?" And she looked at me, I think stunned, and she said,
200 "Well, here's what we are going to do." This very, oh, impressive woman. And she said, "You're
201 going to come in class every day and I promise I will not call on you unless you raise your hand,
202 and then I will." So she said, "You don't have to raise your hand all semester if you don't want
203 to." And she said, "But you must listen very, very carefully to the students around you." I think I
204 told her how they all knew French. And she said, "You'll find they make many, many mistakes.
205 You listen, so you won't make the same mistake." Then she said, "By Thanksgiving time, if we
206 aren't ... if you aren't feeling better, we'll do something about it." I am sure she had no more
207 idea than I, so she assumed we'll do something about it. Ah, but I was so relieved. I adored that
208 woman. And she kept absolute to our agreement.

209
210 Finally I learned my real technique. And that was to memorize, which I could do easy, what we
211 were discussing in class. And when the discussion came anywhere near to what I had memorized
212 in the textbook, up went my hand, and she called on me, as she said she would, and I rattled off
213 that French at about a thousand words a second. And everybody kept looking at me — I had
214 horrible accent, of course — and it worked. And I became very comfortable. And then the
215 second year I took her French Drama course. And the ... and I would have majored in French
216 had it not been the fact that she only taught a limited number of courses. I didn't want anybody
217 else teaching me French. So ...

218 [16:55]

219 And by this time mathematics began to be my best and easiest subject. So that I eventually, end
220 of the sophomore year, decided on mathematics.

221

222 **V: Well, we were very lucky that you did.**

223

224 W: [Laughter] Aren't you nice.

225

226 **V: So, do you remember any of your mathematics teachers?**

227

228 W: Oh, yes, I remember almost all of them.

229

230 **V: Could you tell us a little bit about some of them?**

231

232 W: What, the ones I liked or the ones I didn't?

233

234 **V: It's your choice.**

235

236 W: Well, I think I'd better be quiet about the ones I didn't, just be silent, since Vassar people may
237 hear this.

238

239 **V: That's fine.**

240
241 W: My favorite one of all was my freshman year one, named Miss Cummings. Miss Cummings is
242 from Canada. And we had to meet in the basement of Rocky, because she wasn't well enough to
243 come upstairs to where the math is still taught, in the office up there today. But I had by that time
244 a good friend who was a cousin of my roommate. And she was science and chemistry. So we
245 were bonded from the beginning, though I wasn't taking chemistry, but the mathematics did it.
246 And we were the only two in the class that did our homework. Both had been trained by the
247 private school that I had gone to after high school for a year. And so that we did our homework.
248 And we ... I remember walking over to the final exam at the end of the semester (and her
249 nickname was Tommy) and Tommy and I looked at each other and said we wondered if studying
250 for ten minutes was enough for a final exam. And it was, we both had As.

251
252 **V: Oh, yes.**

253
254 W: And my French had an A, so I was Dean's list for freshman year as a result.

255
256 **V: Oh, that's wonderful.**

257
258 W: Yeah. I didn't even know what I was talking about. So, the ... but it was those two that were
259 absolutely superb my first year. And then there were lots of them I liked. I was very, very fond of
260 languages and Latin now was the easy one to get along in. I took German, eventually, as being
261 ...

262
263 **V: Yeah. You had other math teachers. I heard about Mary Evelyn Wells ...**

264
265 W: Oh, she was tops of all, but I didn't have her until I was a junior.

266
267 **V: You didn't have her as a ... ?**

268
269 W: ... as a student ... as a freshman or sophomore. I knew about her. But she was over in India. She
270 went over there and taught in India, helped set up the system in India and was famous for this.
271 Little tiny woman, came up about to here on me. But when I came back to the faculty (she'd
272 asked me back) she called me "Little Asprey". But we were very formal. She called me
273 "Winifred" three times during my college career and I can tell you the exact circumstances of
274 each time. That's the closest we ever got to being informal.

275 **[20:18]**

276 **V: So, after freshman ... so when did you decide to be a math major? Second year or third**
277 **year?**

278
279 W: No, sophomore ... end of my sophomore year.

280
281 **V: Yes. And then you had some other teachers ...**

282
283 W: I know when I had Grace Hopper.

284

285 **V: When was that?**

286

287 W: She didn't enter my life, really, until I was a junior. But she was a new ... she was the youngest
288 person in the math department. Vassar graduate herself, the class of 1928. And I'd ... I just was
289 in with the regular bunch of teachers. I had one or two in there that didn't leave much
290 impression, and certainly not favorable. But the general ... and then, Miss Wells came back
291 junior year. And I took every math course I could. I took Grace Hopper's class in probability and
292 statistics and I fell in love with that subject. And that's what I did my master's in.

293 [21:17]

294 **V: That's great.**

295

296 W: And so that ... but Grace was an extraordinary teacher. And young. She was in her twenties and
297 [indistinct]. And had just come from Yale, where she got her Ph.D. And so she had ... being a
298 Vassar graduate, Miss Wells had selected her to come back. And she came back, I think it was in
299 the ... well, I don't know, around the early 1930s somewhere.

300

301 **V: Yes.**

302

303 W: But I didn't meet her until that time. And for some reason ... the probability and statistics was
304 marvelous. Gosh, I enjoyed that course. And the ... and then I got Miss Wells, I took the
305 complex variables [course]. I was up high enough so I could take some things like that. I took her
306 advanced calculus [course], too. And she was the best teacher I have ever known in my entire
307 life, bar none. And she covered that blackboard in that big window room that looks toward Main
308 there — and this little tiny woman — and just absolutely brilliant explanations. She came in
309 class with her and how she managed — as I thought, I tried to copy her in later years. And I
310 found out another person's technique does not work; you have to dream up your own. So ...

311

312 **V: Yes, that's a good lesson.**

313

314 W: And when I did come back, I attended every class that she taught when I was free to go to it.
315 Because I wanted to see what she did as a teacher; what she did with the class, rather than what
316 she was teaching. And I had good experiences. Because once I discovered her, I took every class
317 she had run.

318

319 **V: Oh, that's wonderful.**

320

321 W: They were just absolutely outstanding people.

322

323 **V: Yeah.**

324

325 W: Oh, and then ... what's her name? ... Gertrude Smith. Gertrude Smith was a sweet old woman
326 and she taught geometry in particular. But, the ... she taught my mother. And my mother hated
327 math. She failed freshman math, which everybody had to take when she was here. And years
328 later, when I became chairman of the department, I found the exam that she must have taken and
329 failed. So I mailed her a copy of it. And it almost caused a divorce in the family, but we lived

330 through it. But Gertrude Smith taught at the rate that ... did you ever have a class with Janet
331 McDonald? the southerner?

332

333 **V: I'm not sure, I don't remember.**

334

335 W: Well, Janet taught at a rate in which anyone in class could understand, this lovely southern
336 accent, and the ... and I was wiggly, there with Gertrude Smith teaching the same way, but I was
337 way too polite to show any kind of it. I listened intently, I wrote notes properly, though I knew
338 what she had said, and the ... but she was just so dear and so kind to all people. She never
339 embarrassed any student I ever heard. And so that ... what do you do? Of course, you're polite.
340 At that stage, we were all polite. But she was kind in particular.

341

342 But the math department was a very close department. There were eight of us majoring in my
343 class. Now remember, Vassar was half the size at that time, twelve hundred students.

344

345 **V: Yeah, and only eight math majors. You must have felt special.**

346

347 W: Oh, we were special. Definitely, we were special. And there was a lot of attention paid to all of
348 us. And at that time you paid ... even when I came back teaching, anybody in trouble in your
349 class, you suggested they get together with you. And you would have half-hour to hour tutoring
350 sessions with them.

351 [25:40]

352 **V: Yes.**

353

354 W: So, it's very, very different nowadays.

355

356 **V: Yes.**

357

358 W: But ... it was just a natural to do.

359

360 But Grace and I became great friends. And my junior and senior year, along with statistics, I
361 audited ... I was taking too many math classes for an undergraduate to be taking. So, I asked
362 Grace if I could just come and sit in her classes. She did things like mechanical drawing, ones
363 that I never would have done.

364

365 **V: Yes.**

366

367 W: We were on the theory part with the majors. And so she said, sure if I wanted to. So I did. And I
368 attended every class she taught. That was during my junior and senior year. And so that ... we
369 became personal friends, which, then ... even now, it's much more common now. But ... people
370 nowadays call the president by her ... by her invitation by her nickname. She's "Kathy," to
371 students, to anybody, to everybody.

372

373 **V: Yes.**

374

375 W: And so ... but it wasn't true when we were there. I told you, it was a formal condition. But the
376 year I had Grace Hopper teaching and I had Miss Wells teaching, just the whole bunch, there
377 was someone other in that, one taught the algebra [course], but I can't think of her name.
378

379 **V: So you have had many wonderful teachers, it looks like.**
380

381 W: I have. And not only that, I had them in all the languages as well. And I knew I'd never be back
382 in a college again, we just couldn't afford it. And I couldn't go abroad junior year, because they
383 didn't take scholarship students ... and give them any scholarship money at that time. So there
384 was just no chance of my doing it. And I am so glad I didn't. Because I probably would have
385 wanted to go to France — that was my first dream. But, I wasn't upset by it.
386

387 **V: So, what did you do when you finished Vassar?**
388

389 W: I was ... it was a terrible Depression time in 1938 and the Vocational Bureau called in. I forget
390 what you call it nowadays. But the Vocational Bureau was having a terrible time with those of us
391 who wanted jobs. And of course I applied for jobs along with others there. And I was very, very
392 fortunate. Number one, being a math major meant there were practically no people running for
393 the same job I was. Two or three very good math major friends. And so I got a job at the
394 Brearley School in New York. And the Brearley School ...
395

396 **V: This was in New York City?**
397

398 W: In New York City, over on the East River.
399

400 **V: I see.**
401

402 W: And for very, very, very wealthy families. And for students who were picked with the most care.
403 They had to take an extremely stressful exam. Went from kindergarten through high school. And
404 I, of course, went to high school. And I was a student teacher there for two years. Absolutely
405 brilliant teachers for the high school. And I found out all the tricks. I'm going be on a ... some
406 kind of session not too far from now of talking about my experiences with high school teaching,
407 I think. So, but the teachers were just superb. They were master teachers. And they taught me
408 like nobody's business.
409

410 And there were systems ... I don't know if you have ever heard of this school, but it is terribly
411 expensive. And it attracts all of the 'elite,' if you call the social elite, and the people, important
412 people, the poets, and the writers, and everything that was at that time and ... I can't remember if
413 it's gone co-ed or not. And one vivid memory that remains is that when you got on an elevator,
414 the students and anybody else in the elevator were not allowed to speak a word. Otherwise there
415 would be such a jabber and it had ... I can't think ... six floors to the building. But right out ...
416 marvelous for teaching problems on rowing up and down the river, because you can see what's
417 happening to the boats.
418

419 And then I was assistant homeroom teacher to the ninth grade, I think it was. And the woman
420 teaching it was the head of the eleventh grade, the high school grade. And the first time the

421 students entered they were not allowed to sit down until she asked them to be seated. But more
422 than that. They came up and shook her hand and then they came over to shake my hand. I'd been
423 introduced as a student teacher. On ... on that ... and they curtsied. I never in my life had seen
424 anybody curtsy. Maybe I had looked at the queen or something, but it didn't get into my head. I
425 think my mouth dropped open a mile. But, I have very funny experiences that way ... the
426 difference ...

427
428 **V: Very different from today.**

429 [31:27]

430 W: So ... but, good experiences all of them.

431
432 **V: So, were you teaching math there, or just helping teaching?**

433
434 W: I was the student teacher of math.

435
436 **V: Yes.**

437
438 W: And I was given my first class of my own, which were three of the math students who were
439 ready for beginning calculus. Well, not calculus as much as, I'd say, probably trigonometry and
440 higher than they taught at the time.

441
442 **V: Yes.**

443
444 W: And the geometry. But they were three, and they ... two of them died now, but they all came to
445 Vassar many years later. One of them is still a very close friend.

446
447 **V: So this was both boys and girls school, it was not just girls?**

448
449 W: No, it was girls.

450
451 **V: It was just girls school?**

452
453 W: But you'd watch out ... we were up on the fifth and sixth floor for the high school. You'd look
454 out the window in the morning and these huge chauffeured cars would come up, chauffeur would
455 pop up, come around, and this little thing about as high as that would pop out with the chauffeur
456 assisting. And they were in kindergarten or lower levels. I taught seventh grade when somebody
457 was sick. But that was as low as I did.

458
459 **V: Yes. So, you were there for two years. What made you change, or what made you leave
460 there?**

461
462 W: That I was a student teacher and that's all they wanted you. But they ... Mrs. Macintosh, who
463 later became president of Barnard and also became a Vassar trustee at one point ...

464
465 **V: I see.**

466

467 W: And when we met again, she looked at me and said “Well, I certainly did a right thing by you.”
468 So, that was back on the faculty. But she was a marvelous woman. And the ... so that ... but it
469 just taught you a new style of things. I never knew schools like this existed. And they held the
470 students up to the highest standard.

471
472 **V: Yes. So, what did you do after that?**

473
474 W: They found a job for me and I thought I’d like to go to the midwest because my family were
475 living in Sioux City, still. And I did ... I spent summers with them and doing other things too,
476 but the ... I did want to see them and be with them. So that they got me a job at the Girls Latin
477 School of Chicago. Another private school. Very top notch. But very, very different from the
478 Brearley. And the ... so that ... as different as could be. And I was in charge of eighth grade
479 math and I also taught Latin.

480
481 **V: So, why was the school different?**

482
483 W: It was ... had the midwestern attitude of openness and friendship.

484
485 **V: I see.**

486
487 W: And the ... at the Brearley you did very strict ... you rose, and you ... Now in Sioux City we did
488 not rise when ... well, I did when my family’s ... elderly friends of my family came into the
489 living room, then I rose to greet them. But I didn’t just pop up all the time. But at the Brearley,
490 you popped up all the time as a student. And you were never seated until the person in charge of
491 the room said, “Be seated.” And at the end of the class one of the greatest sins a student could
492 commit would be to close her book when she heard the bell. They were not allowed to close her
493 book or make any sign of class ending until you said, “You’re excused.” Believe me, that wasn’t
494 Sioux City High School.

495
496 **V: So, how long did you teach at the Girls Latin School?**

497
498 W: Two years. And the ... at the same time my mother had suggested that, since I would have had
499 four years of experience teaching at that time, why wouldn’t I like to teach in a college. And my
500 family is very good about suggesting things, but never pushed me into doing them at all. That if I
501 was interested in what they did, fine. And so that I thought, “Well, won’t hurt any.” So I decided
502 to get my master’s degree at the State University of Iowa, because that meant that I was going to
503 be in Iowa City, and it’s totally different from Iowa State.

504
505 **V: Yes.**

506
507 W: So, State University of Iowa. And they have beatings if you cross into the wrong one.

508
509 **V: They have what?**

510
511 W: If you quote the wrong one!

512

513 **V: Oh! I see.**

514 [36:28]

515 W: But I would notice that. And so that I began going to ... there for summer school. The Chicago
516 experience was so ... there I had three students from the Latin School who ... I was out seven
517 years after I finished from Vassar before I came back to Vassar. And the last four of those years
518 before I came back were at the Latin School. And the students came back with me. The one I
519 spoke about before still comes now is a very ardent memory. She only stayed two years, because
520 she got married, but I knew her husband and I knew her. And she has been very active and a very
521 generous donor to Vassar and one of the sweetest people I ever knew. And her husband was a
522 marvel. So, it all melded in different ways. But without doubt, interesting and fun. And varied
523 enough from going from place to place, and summers were very different affairs, and doing
524 things in the winter.

525
526 And one year my chemist brother was taking his degree in Chicago and he got his first job,
527 which is the macaroni expert. Canned macaroni that's cooked just exactly the right number of
528 seconds. And as a result ... he and I were living together one year. And it was marvelous.
529 Neither one of us knew how to cook. And we'd had living through the lush period before, we'd
530 always had maids at the house to do the cooking and being nurse and chores, except Mother was
531 usually there. It was interesting. I remember starting a dinner party, would be cooking beets and
532 didn't start the beets until the people walked into the house. They didn't exactly cook. Various
533 little items of that type.

534
535 But he and I had a great time together. Both of us had always felt — he was a year and a half
536 younger than I — and both of us felt that we never had had dessert at the right time. So that first
537 year, we started our dinners with dessert. So that we could see what it was like to have the thing
538 we loved most of all. And that ... we drank very, very lightly. But that was the first time I had
539 ever really had more than one glass of wine, I think. My family offered it always, but I did not
540 like it — I didn't like the taste or the smell. So ... but he and I went and explored Chicago
541 together — it was gorgeous experience, because with your brother you do not have to think of
542 clever things to say as you would with a date. And, it was just right. We were very used to each
543 other, we both adored fishing, we fished all over the world when we went on trips together.

544
545 **V: Oh, it's wonderful.**

546
547 W: Yeah.

548
549 **V: I think having a sibling is nice.**

550
551 A: And then there were ... well mother's first child was stillborn. So, you could imagine the
552 happiness when I survived.

553 [40:06]

554 **V: Yes.**

555
556 W: And I was the only girl and my father adored me. He simply couldn't say no to me. My brothers
557 used to come to me and say, "Ask Dad if we could go to the circus with him" or something. So
558 I'd ask him and we went.

559
560 **V: Precious life.**
561
562 W: It was an easy life as far as I was concerned. You didn't worry about money. I never had any
563 allowance in my life. It was just, you need money, you had it.
564
565 **V: Yes. So ...**
566
567 W: Until I came to Vassar. Then my allowance was five dollars a week. Have times changed!
568
569 **V: Yes. But one could buy more for five dollars then.**
570
571 W: Oh, definitely. But not easily. Books, but they were all probably a twentieth of what they are
572 today, or a thirtieth, fortieth.
573
574 **V: Yes. So you started at University of Iowa in the master's program after doing some**
575 **summers there?**
576
577 W: Well, I went there for the first summer and I met Professor Chittenden, who is the ... renowned
578 in the world; he had been the head of the Math Society, and just an extraordinary man. And that
579 day I met him was when we were choosing classes. So he ... we introduced ourselves to each
580 other and he said, "Well now, what do you plan to do?" And I said, "Well I want to try out a
581 master's and see whether I like it and then, if I do, then I would like to go on and get a Ph.D."
582 And he looked at me and he said, "Ph.Ds aren't for women." Well. So I was so pleased when I
583 was finishing, he asked me to be ... that he be my advisor for my master's — no, not for my
584 master's, yeah — but when I did show up for the Ph.D. He was the one that told me that was
585 necessary and that he would be my advisor. So that made me feel I had won a battle there for
586 women.
587
588 **V: Oh, yes!**
589
590 W: But he was the worst teacher I think I ever had. Big, fat ... if you ever think you're worried about
591 overweight, you should see him, he was enormous. He would take one of the math journals that
592 came and get interested in an article; he just opened it. And so he would put the article in his
593 hand and go to the blackboard and as he read, try to write on the blackboard. Well, number one,
594 you couldn't see through him. And so we had ... he taught classes that he thought I should have.
595 And so then every class he taught. And so we ... but I had to find, I think, four other people, so
596 all my best friends had to take these same classes too in order that they allowed them to be
597 taught. And so we formed a team in which we sat out and when he moved one way this team
598 went down to see what he just put on the board, then he moved the other way, this team would
599 go, and then we got together after class to see if any of us had understood even a word of what he
600 had said. It was an experience, but a good one.
601
602 **V: Sounds like a tough way to learn, but then you have to ...**
603

604 W: Well, it was a good way to learn. And the way his mind worked was fascinating to see. And he
605 and I grew very close friends to each other.

606

607 **V: So, how did you change his mind about women going for Ph.D?**

608

609 W: Getting straight A's in all my graduate studies.

610

611 **V: I see.**

612

613 W: I got many more A's in graduate school than I got at Vassar.

614

615 **V: That's wonderful.**

616

617 W: But no, there were different standards. And, of course, we were in graduate school, too.

618

619 **V: Yeah, yeah, but you must have been smart.**

620

621 W: Well, I was the only woman and so that I had to show that ...

622

623 **V: You had no choice!**

624

625 W: And Professor Chittenden was absolutely wowed that I had come from Vassar to go the State
626 University of Iowa. And so, I couldn't see too much "wow" about it, but it was convenient. And
627 so that ... he just couldn't get over mentioning the fact that I was from Vassar and then had
628 chosen the State University of Iowa. And then he'd ask me early on, when we knew each other,
629 he said, "Do you really see much difference in working here?" And so off the top of my head, I
630 said, "Yes, when Vassar professors enter a room, they say 'Good morning' to the class." Well,
631 that was just on my part. Well from then on, every time I was in class — they weren't large
632 classes — he'd walk in, stand in front of me, and say, "Good morning, Miss Asprey." So ... but
633 he was worth the whole thing.

634

635 **V: So, then you started working on your dissertation and ... ?**

636

637 W: Well, far from ... I got my master's first.

638

639 **V: You got your master's first.**

640

641 W: And I did it in statistics. With a fellow, Professor Allan, who was a marvelous fellow, but then he
642 went ... all the men were going into the Army and Navy, per force. And so they had a terrible
643 shortage of people and they found out my background ... and background in statistics for my
644 master's and they asked me if I would consider teaching in the engineering school. Well, the
645 engineering school had never had a woman in it before. So, this was sort of touch and go. Boy,
646 did I prepare for that class! And slide rule. I practiced that slide rule like zip! it along with
647 anybody.

648

[46:31]

649 And all these engineers were going to come in. I could just see them saying to me, "How do you
650 set this?" and I say, "I don't know." But I did know by the time. And these were men returning
651 from the war. So they hadn't been in a class for a long, long time. They also returned to the class
652 thinking that, "Oh, mathematics, that's always easy. Girls don't know anything about math," so
653 that they didn't know. Well, they didn't know that these were very bright girls indeed, and
654 indeed they did know a thing. And they knew theoretical part, too. They had had the same
655 experience at Vassar ... with men coming in. We took on men for a short time here, in the
656 1930s/1940s ... 1940s. So, you had really funny experiences of men asking you to do something
657 that ... asking me to go close the window for them. I said, "Well, you look stronger than I am.
658 Go close it!" But it was good experience. And we had all the experiences of the experiences they
659 had had in the war. And they loved to talk. And they brought me free cigarettes.

660

661 **V: So, how long were you teaching?**

662

663 W: I taught there for ... how long? ... oh, through ... from the time I left Chicago ... I taught there
664 ... oh! for the three years I had left for my Ph.D.

665

666 **V: So, while you were working on your dissertation you were teaching. I see.**

667

668 W: And very much annoying my advisors, because I insisted on taking hours to help out some of the
669 students in classes.

670

671 **V: Yes.**

672

673 W: Basketball players. I had one who was taking beginning calculus for the first time, I mean for the
674 seventh time in his career at the University. And when he heard that I was going to leave, he
675 came to me and he said, "How am I ever going to get through that class?" I failed him two or
676 three times.

677

678 **V: Were there any other women in Ph.D programs?**

679

680 W: Yes. Very close friends of mine. One was a librarian and her sister was there. And the librarian I
681 brought back to Vassar when I came back. She was librarian here. And then she was out in
682 Oregon for a while. And then she died quite a while back.

683

684 **V: But not in mathematics?**

685

686 W: Yeah, she was in math. She was a math librarian and a science librarian.

687

688 **V: I see.**

689

690 W: And a very, very good one. Except she couldn't spell. Lucille (L-U-C-I-L-L-E) Pollock (P-O-
691 double-L-O-C-K). And her sister was Suzy Pollock.

692

693 **V: Okay.**

694

695 W: She would be well known to the older people at Vassar. She was here a long time.

696

697 **V: So, what did you do after you finished in Iowa? Did you have another job after Ph.D ...?**

698

699 W: Yes, Miss Wells offered me a job. She offered me a job a year before I finished. And I thank
700 God I had sense enough to say no. Because you could come back very tentatively without your
701 Ph.D. But Ph.D had to be finished. And I said, "No, I want to finish my Ph.D while I'm at it."
702 And I did. and it was the smartest thing I ever did.

703

704 **V: Yes.**

705

706 W: John Christie in the English Department. Took him nineteen years or something to get promoted
707 to assistant professor because he hadn't finished his Ph.D.

708

709 **V: Yes. That was smart. How about Alaska?**

710

711 W: Well, that was my dream after I finished my Ph.D. I wanted to travel around the world to be a
712 mathematician and see the world. And the ... Professor Chittenden told me ... I had my Vassar
713 offer there, of course, he knew it, and he told me that he would be honored ... it would be an
714 honor to him if I would go teach at Vassar, so he could say he had his Ph.D student at Vassar. It
715 is his awe of Vassar that helped out a lot.

716 [51:09]

717 So I did. I came back and have been very, very happy ever since. I thought I'd move on after ...
718 Miss Wells left after I was here three years, in 1948.

719

720 **V: So, how many people were teaching at Vassar at that time?**

721

722 W: How many what?

723

724 **V: How many people were in the math department at that time?**

725

726 W: I think there were very ... there were three old ones when I came back, way older than I am ...
727 was at the time. And then two new ones, they weren't tenured then, who had been there for ...
728 one of them had been here two years and one had been here one year. And they both, as the
729 others retired ... Jean Smith retired. But we were very good friends.

730

731 **V: Did you have more math majors at that time than eight?**

732

733 W: Well, the war, of course, brought a tremendous number of returning ones who wanted to be math
734 majors. Yes, the sciences boomed.

735

736 **V: Yes. So, what courses were you teaching when you started? Do you remember?**

737

738 W: We were still ... we still, by that time ... we were still teaching, I think, trigonometry and
739 geometry. Isn't plane geometry ... what geometry did one put in there, before calculus? Greg,
740 you must have taken some of that. Geometry?

741
742 **G: Yeah ...**
743
744 W: What did they call it, do you remember?
745
746 **G: You mean Euclidean versus other ...? Analytic geometry? or projective geometry? Spherical**
747 **... ?**
748
749 W: Analytic, I think, yeah. And it was interesting ... all about the conics. And so if you knew that
750 you had a headstart on your calculus.
751
752 **V: I see.**
753
754 W: But the first calculus we had ... they mentioned it the last week or so as you were doing this
755 geometry. And then you went into the series of calculus courses, differential and integral.
756 Eventually advanced calculus.
757
758 **V: So, can you tell us a little bit about your Vassar career?**
759
760 W: About what?
761
762 **V: Teaching at Vassar. You started in 1948? No ...**
763
764 W: No, I came back in 1945.
765
766 **V: And you had a good time and then you were getting tired of it? Well [indistinct] ...**
767
768 W: I didn't get tired of it.
769
770 **V: You didn't.**
771
772 W: No, I was having too much fun. I lived in the dormitories for the first six years. And first of all
773 lived in Main, as one of nine residents. Main Hall. And then I was asked to go over and head
774 Davidson, who had a French head resident over there. And I, again, was lucky. The students
775 hated her. And so when I came along, anything would have been better than she was. And so I
776 was happily taken on and had a happy time. And then I was in Davidson for a couple of years, I
777 guess it was ...
778
779 Oh I know, we had three terms — A, B, C term — they were trying to decide whether to have a
780 three-year college or a four-year college available. Or both. And so that I taught during the
781 summer term, something 'til August 9th. And end of August, we started the B term.
782
783 **V: Yes.**
784

785 W: But I was in the dormitories and got to know loads of students beyond the math ones, which is
786 good because that ... And then I got interested in student affairs, and I was on a lot of
787 [indistinct], things that people were doing, that ...
788

789 **V: And what was happening in math department in between?**
790

791 W: Not much. I think I was ... when I was hired, I wish I could think of the name of the woman who
792 taught algebra, was so good. I could find out. And the ... we were ... except for one person of
793 high rank, rather high rank, we all got along together great.

794 [56:04]

795 **V: Were you doing anything outside of the teaching, in summers or ...**
796

797 W: Oh, heavens, yes.
798

799 **V: Yes?**
800

801 W: Yeah. Doing everything under the sun I could get my hands on.
802

803 **V: For example?**
804

805 W: Well, mainly summer school. [indistinct] summer until I came back to Vassar. But after that I
806 traveled all over the world. I went to summer programs and my aim was to visit, at least have my
807 foot in, every state in the Union, which I accomplished quite rapidly.
808

809 **V: So, you would go to some summer workshop or summer school and learn something new**
810 **...?**
811

812 W: They had loads of them that National Science Foundation put on.
813

814 **V: I see.**
815

816 W: And out in Oregon, for instance, and ...
817

818 **V: Can you remember any of the favorite ones? Any of the ones that ...**
819

820 W: Oregon was one of my favorite ones, because they had bing cherries. They were on the trees.
821

822 **V: Yes.**
823

824 W: Oh, those were good!
825

826 **V: Did you get to climb the trees?**
827

828 W: Well, I'm ... [chuckles] I imagine they would have let me, but I knew my own capabilities well
829 enough not do that.
830

831 **V: All right. What kind of things were you ... how were the summer programs run? How**
832 **many people would be there? Would it be a week long, a month, or ...**
833

834 W: Quite a number. And they ranged from beginning Ph.Ds, which I felt I was, and the ... to
835 outstanding figures in the field. And you lived in a dormitory, at least most of us did. And it was
836 a novel experience. And one of the most valuable things was people got to know your name and
837 you got to know their names, all across the country. And it's been one of the most useful things
838 I've ever done. Because if I ... parts of the time, there were few women. If you entered a hall, a
839 lecture hall, in many things, at meetings, everything else, there would probably be, maybe eight
840 women and several hundred men. And every man there knew who you were. Well, this is nice.
841 Later on it got hard to find mathematicians that ... I had job offer after job offer after job offer to
842 leave Vassar and come to other places. A head of some state university in Pennsylvania, which
843 ... oh, that was their computer center.
844

845 Oh have you ever read — I don't think you were the one that told me about it — that book of
846 women in mathematics?
847

848 **V: I just went through it today. Yeah.**
849

850 W: It's quite something, isn't it? The thing ... this is the book, Greg, that was published a long time
851 ago and, apparently — I didn't remember it had been published or something — but this woman
852 who did it, Margaret Murray [McMurray? one or the other] took women from the age ... from
853 the year 1945 ... got their PhDs between their 45th and 59th years [between 1945 and 1959] —
854 in that range — and wanted to show that women were getting into the professional field. And so
855 it happened that I was just starting computers and getting ready to do the battle with Vassar,
856 which took me ten years to get the first one. And so, the ... I'm the first one in the book that she
857 started with and picked out for what I was doing. But in the middle of the book — and then she
858 has loads of them from up to ... up through the year 1959 — and takes each one what they're
859 doing — I am the only ones that is ... what I was starting to say — we have a slew of pictures in
860 the book and I'm the first one, because I'm the oldest of that group, and also the only one ... my
861 picture is with the computer.
862

863 **V: Yes.**
864

865 W: And everybody else is ... cites the papers that they've written. And I had not written any paper I
866 cited, but I was this first one. And, so ... really started the computer revolution. And certainly
867 among women and the colleges such as ours. And I hadn't realized that ... what a different kind
868 of creative life I've had after ... than most of the women of that age ...
869

870 **V: Yes, they actually ...**

871 [60:50]

872 W: And I doubt that anyone read ... many of them have papers as old as that, that are read very
873 much, indeed. Whereas everything we do about computers and how we've learned and think is
874 read constantly.
875

876 **V: Well, they actually put a name to it, “scholar-teacher,” for somebody who spends their life**
877 **devoted to education but always wanting something new and always bringing the newest**
878 **things in the world back to the classroom — which is what I think your life has been.**
879

880 W: Well, that’s what I hope a lot of our students will be too. Look at yours!

881
882 **V: Well ...**
883

884 W: It wasn’t just Vassar that did it, it was your whole education.

885
886 **V: Yes. But, definitely, Vassar, for me, was a part of it.**
887

888 W: Yes, thank goodness.
889

890 **V: Thank goodness — that’s why I am here today.**
891

892 W: [Laughter]
893

894 **V: So, you were teaching math at Vassar and going to these meetings and everything and the**
895 **year was 1950s ...?**
896

897 W: Well, by that time I was deep into getting a computer for Vassar.
898

899 **V: So when did you first think about computers for Vassar?**
900

901 W: Well, let’s see [indistinct] ... Oh! I’ve told that story enough times.
902

903 **V: Well ...**
904

905 W: There ... about Grace Hopper?
906

907 **V: Well. Grace Hopper was still at Vassar when you started, right?**
908

909 W: No.
910

911 **V: No, she wasn’t anymore.**
912

913 W: No, she was not. She had gone into the Navy.
914

915 **V: She had gone into the Navy by then.**
916

917 W: And into straight Navy training. Not training ... but when they discovered what she done her
918 Ph.D in, what work she’d done there, they immediately began to offer her special consideration.
919

920 **V: I see. So, she was already gone, and she was in the Navy, and then ... so a couple of years**
921 **after being at Vassar you ...**

922
923 W: No, I was chairman of the department by the time I called her on that ... She and I kept in touch:
924 oh, a letter at Christmas-time; or we kept meeting in airports — and both of us believed in
925 getting to airports early — so we suddenly would have an hour to be with each other and catch
926 up. We did that two or three times, and not planned at all.

927
928 But then ... but she gave me her telephone number. And she, at this time, had risen to a lofty
929 spot in the Navy. And so that ... you couldn't get through just by calling her. But she gave me
930 her private number, at home and also how to get through to her at the Navy. And so I had access
931 to her any time. So one evening, I was thinking about things in the department of math and I
932 thought that ... more and more, IBM was a strong influence. And what should Vassar itself be
933 doing about a computer. So, I phoned her and asked her, and said, "Should we get into the
934 business?" And her answer, which I never forgot, was, "I'd been waiting for you to wake up."
935 And I woke up. So, that is why I became a pioneer: it was Grace that got me into it!

936
937 **V: Yes. So, how did you then decide to ... [continuing in parallel]**

938
939 W: You know this is her house.

940
941 **V: Yes, I know.**

942
943 W: I'm sure I told you.

944
945 **V: Well, tell us about it.**

946
947 W: Well, she and her husband, Ceni, who was beginning to teach at NYU at the time, in English.
948 And they decided to build a house. And they built it the year after I graduated. So, when I came
949 back to Vassar, I'd never seen it before. But by that time she was gone. So, I didn't see it then
950 either, except from the outside. I don't think I even ever bothered to come up here to look at it.

951
952 **V: But now you live here.**

953
954 W: Now I live ... I've lived here more than 20 years.

955
956 **V: Yes. It's a wonderful coincidence.**

957
958 W: Yes, it is. Well I ...

959
960 **V: Did she come and visit you in her house?**

961 [64:57]

962 W: Yes, she did. And she wouldn't stay overnight. But she told me things like ... she said, "What do
963 you think about the kitchen that leads right into the garage?" And I'd had some things built there
964 since. And didn't think ... it took a funny little step down. And then ... she said, "Well, when we
965 were living here, both sets of parents [both hers and Ceni's, Vincent was his real name] parents
966 lived here." And she said, "They're bound, with six adults, having troubles to ... things go
967 wrong. And you get awfully mad at each other." So they left a carton by the kitchen door and in

968 it they put any chipped china, that you had broken or a nick taken out or something. And you
969 were entitled, if you absolutely were blowing up at a single member or every other member of
970 the house, you were allowed to go to the kitchen door, pick out a piece of china, and she had it
971 ... one of those tiny little boards ... and smash it in the cement wall across the way. They had an
972 egg carton underneath to get the remains in, so you didn't have to have to clean up too much.
973 And she said, "And I do hope you will keep it." And I said, "Well, I'm going to be here by
974 myself, I don't think I'll get mad enough to want to throw china, but I'll remember the story."
975 Which I have.

976

977 **V: So, after you called her, how did you get computers to Vassar?**

978

979 W: Oh, boy. Ten years of work. She kindly advised me on things to do. And then, as I say, by that
980 time I was chairman. [indistinct] By that time she knew ... she had known before ... that I was
981 the chairman here and so I wanted to consult her, of course. And then I knew so many people in
982 different colleges and different ways around. And best of all, I talked IBM into giving me a year
983 ... Well, first, before that, I hired IBMers, they were the top of their ... top notch crew of people
984 doing theoretical work at IBM. And they were out at IBM proper, which is less than a mile from
985 us. And so that I did know some of them, not very many for that, but there was that asset to think
986 of.

987

988 **V: So you hired them to do what?**

989

990 W: Teach.

991

992 **V: To teach?**

993

994 W: They would teach classes before we got a computer in here.

995

996 **V: I see.**

997

998 W: And this is in 1945. No, in 1945 I came back to Vassar. This is ... Well, it all started molding
999 together. But I had ... like Steve Dunwell, who was one of the top notches in town, most of them
1000 are dead now. And the ... and then, really top notch theoretical people. They were writing papers
1001 ... oh, Tien Chi Chen, who is out in California still, at least I think he is. And they were all just
1002 ... they were absolutely so eager to come to Vassar.

1003

1004 **V: So, what kind of courses were they teaching?**

1005

1006 W: Top notch courses in theory. And thought that no other college of our kind had even thought of
1007 having taught. And I had to get the high permission of the faculty every time I did it, then of the
1008 Dean, of course. We only had one Dean, now we have forty of them. ... the Dean ... and make
1009 sure ... whether the trustees were in on it or not, I don't remember. But, anyway it was an awful
1010 lot of maneuvering to get it okayed. And I had it, you'd renew it every year. The whole college
1011 ... the whole faculty voted to on it, as to whether I can have it or not. But, again, I was fortunate.
1012 I've been here long enough that — student on — that I knew most of the members of the faculty,
1013 certainly any that had been here a long time, so, since I wanted it they voted for it.

1014
1015 **V: So, how many years were you doing computer science this way?**
1016
1017 W: Well, I was doing it. And furthermore, they taught without charge to Vassar.
1018
1019 **V: I see.**
1020
1021 W: So if you think Vassar was disturbed by this — nooo! They thought it was marvelous. And they
1022 [the IBMers] loved it, because they had always felt ... they told me there were great big walls
1023 around Vassar. And I said “For heaven’s sake! If Yale and Harvard and Princeton and so on can
1024 get over those walls, I can’t see you IBMers can’t get over the walls.” Well, they thought that
1025 was just something to remember. So they began flocking in and having meals with the students,
1026 who invited them eagerly to their things and they would ... and they taught the courses and the
1027 students invited them to have dinners with them. It worked like a charm! But it was just luck of
1028 IBM being here.
1029
1030 **V: Yes, I know. It worked for me, too!**
1031
1032 **So, how did you then learn about computers yourself?**
1033
1034 W: I went out to IBM for a year.
1035
1036 **V: Okay. Do you remember which year it was?**
1037
1038 W: No, but I can’t imagine that it’s not in that *Who’s Who*.
1039
1040 **V: OK, we’ll find out.**
1041
1042 W: It was early on, very early on.
1043
1044 **V: Yeah.**
1045 [70:59]
1046 W: And we ... they were just beginning FORTRAN. And the papers had been full of an article about
1047 Backus ...
1048
1049 **V: Yes.**
1050
1051 W: ... recently, and I remember him.
1052
1053 **V: You met him, did you?**
1054
1055 W: Oh, yes.
1056
1057 **V: And one of your students went on to work with him, right?**
1058
1059 W: I think that was Lois Mitchell ... Lois Mitchell ...

1060
1061 **V: Haibt?**
1062
1063 W: Haibt. Yes. She's gone really to town, the work she's ... she's really top notch.
1064
1065 **V: Do you remember having her in class?**
1066
1067 W: Oh, gosh, yes.
1068
1069 **V: Yes?**
1070
1071 W: She was ... helped in the beginning parts with the computer. We were very, very good friends.
1072 And she's a very quiet girl, very serious, and ... but knew what she was doing. And she did ...
1073 she ... well, some of those articles about Backus pointed her out as outstanding.
1074
1075 **V: Yeah.**
1076
1077 W: I used to hear from her, but, again, I'm so bad at responding to letters, because I get such a pile
1078 of them I don't know where to start.
1079
1080 **V: Where is she now?**
1081
1082 W: IBM.
1083
1084 **V: IBM?**
1085
1086 W: At least the last I heard.
1087
1088 **V: IBM where?**
1089
1090 W: Here.
1091
1092 **V: Oh, she is still at IBM here?**
1093
1094 W: As far as I know.
1095
1096 **V: I see.**
1097
1098 W: She used to drop in every once in a while, but I haven't seen her.
1099
1100 **V: Maybe we'll look her up and talk to her, too.**
1101
1102 W: Yeah!
1103
1104 **V: So, after the IBMers came here and you went on a post-doc at IBM, then you started**
1105 **teaching computer courses?**

1106
1107 W: Then I started to think what?
1108
1109 **V: Teaching programming or computer courses yourself?**
1110
1111 W: Oh, no. Not for a long time. I was much more concerned about could I ever get Vassar to accept
1112 a computer.
1113
1114 **V: I see.**
1115
1116 W: Vassar is not mechanical, no sirree! And had it not been for the fact that I was so well known in
1117 the faculty, I doubt we ever could have had a computer. Because the faculty, except for the
1118 science people, were totally opposed. And they were ... nothing to do with computer or liberal
1119 arts, it's just a machine — you know the age. And the ... what it was to move faculty. But I was
1120 lucky in having strong backing by the president of the college — she was Sarah Gibson Blanding
1121 at the time. And followed by (god in dickens, what's his name) who is that one man that
1122 followed him? (It's a point of getting older, you keep forgetting names!) Oh, you know ...
1123
1124 **G: Before Virginia?**
1125
1126 W: Yeah. He was a ... shocked into ... he came from Chicago and had been a kind of dean there and
1127 he was used to having faculty listening to him ... I'll think of it probably in two minutes, but ... I
1128 knew him well. Well, it'll come. I knew him and his wife, his wife was a dear, but he was a ...
1129
1130 **V: So they would finally let you bring your computer?**
1131
1132 W: Well, no, we had to ... we had to get money for it.
1133
1134 **V: I see.**
1135
1136 W: And IBM was very, very generous.
1137 **[Portion about IBM computer donation deleted]**
1138 But their biggest help, of course, was in writing for grant from the National Science Foundation.
1139 And the ... they ... Tien Chi Chen — a marvelous Chinese fellow, who wowed the students and
1140 cooked Chinese food for them over in the Ferry House — he was the one that helped me most of
1141 all. He looked up all kinds of things for what one would be best for Vassar and Vassar's needs
1142 and we'd put it into the grant thing. And when the people from the government came to
1143 interview me and others about it, one of the fellows said to me, "I bet you had some help in this"
1144 and I said, "Help! I certainly did, I didn't know what I was doing." [whistling clock in
1145 background] And he laughed and he said, "Well, I think it's going to work."
1146 **[75:17]**
1147 **V: Yes. So, I guess that's why you got the computer, because you had all these connections**
1148 **with IBM ...**
1149
1150 W: I had all these outside people around and all the inside people around and just a sheer bunch of
1151 circumstances at work — I was the luckiest person that could be.

1152
1153 **V: Yeah. So the year when you got ...**
1154
1155 W: And, of course, the students were marvelous. They were just thrilled to death at the thought of
1156 putting in a computer.
1157
1158 **V: Yeah. So, you got the computer in 1966?**
1159
1160 W: Installed, you mean?
1161
1162 **V: Installed.**
1163
1164 W: Yeah, well, we opened it in January. I'd say between 1966 and 1967. When people came back
1165 from work it was opened.
1166
1167 **V: And that was not just any computer, it was IBM 360!**
1168
1169 W: 360 Model E.
1170
1171 **V: Yes.**
1172
1173 W: Yeah. [chuckling] 500 KB memory or so.
1174
1175 **V: Yes.**
1176
1177 W: So, that was the absolutely ridiculous ...
1178
1179 **V: But that was right at the beginning when 360's came out.**
1180
1181 W: It was indeed the beginning. Pomona had theirs in before we did. Pomona College in California.
1182
1183 **V: That was the only one?**
1184
1185 W: That was the only one I know about. And I went out the summer before and I had friends at
1186 Pomona. And they asked me if I would teach math in the summer school, because they needed
1187 people to teach. So, I said, "Sure, if you'll teach me your computer." And a fellow up in the
1188 geology department ... was head of the geology ... crazy mad about computers. So he would
1189 come over when we met ... he would come over every evening from his work and teach me how
1190 to use it ... what a computer ... how to turn it on! I hadn't the slightest idea how you turned a
1191 computer on. And then ... it was the same model as we were going to get here, as far as I know.
1192 And the ... so when I came back at least I didn't look absolutely stupid.
1193
1194 One of our workers here ... did you ever know Perl Obramsky?
1195
1196 **G: I believe so.**
1197

1198 W: Yeah, the redhead. And she was assistant to Bill Pulver. So the ... she didn't know the computer
1199 at all, she was just learning it from Bill and from the IBM people. And so the ... people would
1200 line up in front of that glass window we had there and she felt very much embarrassed, because
1201 she didn't know what she was doing. So, what she finally did was to look very studious and put
1202 her finger up and down and then carefully put her finger on a button that she knew didn't work
1203 ... and do it as if yes! she had made the decision; now everything would work. But she says she
1204 was so embarrassed, not knowing what to do in front of all these visitors.
1205

1206 **V: Yes. So, who was then taking care of the computer when it came?**
1207

1208 W: A man named Bill Pulver, who was 6 feet 9 inches tall.
1209

1210 **V: How do you spell his name?**
1211

1212 W: P-U-L-V, as in Vassar, E-R. Absolutely superb. He and I worked together, I can't tell you how
1213 many years. And running ... I did the academic and he did the business part. And I can't
1214 remember ever having an argument. Each one of us was careful to give when the other had a
1215 terrible amount of work to do. And we weren't open ... no classes in the evening at the time. So,
1216 that helped.
1217

1218 **V: So, what were the first courses you were teaching that used the computer?**
1219

1220 W: The ones that we'd been teaching before we got the computer. That the IBMers had been
1221 teaching.
1222

1223 **V: Okay. Programming?**
1224

1225 W: Well, no I told you they were lofty. They were top, senior level ...
1226

1227 **V: I see.**
1228

1229 W: ... ones that were there. And these top-notch people who were doing this type of work just
1230 brought the students right in with them.
1231

1232 **V: I see.**
1233

1234 W: They were ... it really was a ... And they also helped the students get jobs afterwards and ...
1235 found that women were very desired as time went on. And they were way ahead of men because
1236 the war had delayed the men. And we didn't have men, of course, until 1970 graduate. Well, we
1237 did have some, a few, right early on because they ...
1238

1239 **V: Well, I was here in 1969 in Spring and at that time it still all women's college.**
1240

1241 W: And 1970'd be ...
1242

1242 [80:00]

1243 **V: And in the fall that year they admitted men.**

1244
1245 **So by the time I was here in 1969 you were teaching FORTRAN courses.**
1246
1247 W: And APL.
1248
1249 **V: And APL! Yes!**
1250
1251 W: I love that language.
1252
1253 **V: Yes, that was very special at that time.**
1254
1255 W: Did you know Karl Farkas?
1256
1257 **V: I don't remember ... I think so.**
1258
1259 W: No, I think he is later than you.
1260
1261 **V: I don't know.**
1262
1263 W: I think he is 1975 or something.
1264
1265 **V: If he was a student, then I didn't know him.**
1266
1267 W: Well, he was a student. And I just ... He left here and, through the people teaching the IBM
1268 courses still and yet, the seminar type courses, he got a job at IBM. And he'd never taken any
1269 foreign language here — he managed to get away without it from his high school something or
1270 other. And so that he went to IBM and — he was one of the most likeable guys you ever met —
1271 and the ... so that ... he then ... that was very successful and they said that they'd like to send
1272 him to France. That France was doing some interesting work that they wanted to know about and
1273 they thought he'd do it. Well, he left and went to France, and he graduated, I think — I've been
1274 told enough times — in the 1970s somewhere, late 1970s. And he was ... learned French, but he
1275 said he has the most awful accent you've ever heard. And he just can't turn it around. It's sort of
1276 eastern United States or something. But he's proved to be so successful.
1277
1278 And now he quit IBM — this is from dinner last Tuesday night over here — and he quit IBM
1279 and went into the French special thing on new innovations, new ideas, and what they're doing.
1280 He learned ... and he got his French OK, so he could get by with it. Though he said the horrified
1281 look as he pronounces something, but ... and he is really up at the top of that commission.
1282
1283 He was married and then got a divorce about three years ago. Married a Japanese girl who comes
1284 up about to here on him, pretty as a picture. He brought a special computer set-up so I could see
1285 what his wife looked like. And then he's friends with Susan Stevens. Do you know her? Yeah.
1286 And so that ... they met the first day they entered Vassar. And he looked over on this dormitory
1287 step, you know, not ... "What do I do next?" kind of thing — and he saw this young women
1288 standing there and she looked, you know, "What am I doing here?" kind of thing. They met each
1289 other and they have been the firmest of friends since then. He always visits her when he's here.

1290 So, the three of us had dinner together over here the other night. And he is just as much fun as he
1291 always was. But he's back now for three weeks in the United States, touring places like IBM and
1292 other places that want him to find out the newest things the French are doing.

1293
1294 **V: I see. So, you got computers and you ... APL, that was an interesting language in 1969.**

1295
1296 W: It still is an interesting language! And I taught it to the ... the time I was out at Los Alamos.

1297
1298 **V: When were you in Los Alamos?**

1299
1300 W: [Huf huf huf, thinking] The early 1970s. I was there for four years in summers. Oh, and I spent a
1301 year's leave with them. I was one of their staff in computers. And then I taught FORTRAN and I
1302 taught APL and got to know a whole computer staff, which is valuable. And fun. And my parents
1303 went out there for the last four years of their lives, and with my brother. My brother was a
1304 chemist, a top chemist, out there.

1305
1306 **V: So, you were all there during the summer?**

1307
1308 W: And during a full year. Yes, I was there four summers and also one full year, with both summers
1309 attached. Yes.

1310
1311 **V: So, you spent almost every summer doing something where you learned something.**

1312 [84:40]

1313 W: Well, I did. But I wanted to travel and do things and I told you I wanted to visit every state. And
1314 get around. But I also wanted be near enough to my parents, because we'd get to see each other.
1315 And then when they ... they had such a happy retirement life of over thirty years in California.
1316 And then it got so they had to have help. And we moved them, not particularly halfway, but ...
1317 Mother was happy but my Father didn't want to leave Santa Ana. And they ... but they lived
1318 four years. And we bought a house next to my brother's in Los Alamos. And, of course, I love
1319 Los Alamos, it's the ... when I joined the staff there and all the lectures they had. They sent you
1320 to everything that you were interested in and every kind of meeting. They would say, "Well, just
1321 go, you know, we'll pay all expenses." And, again, it was another lucky break.

1322
1323 **V: Yeah. That was wonderful.**

1324
1325 **So, how did Vassar change when women ... when they admitted men?**

1326
1327 W: I think that the ... the liberal arts ... men tried to avoid to a good extent. That wasn't kind of
1328 teaching they liked. And you could see why. Having been in the army and never having had
1329 much liberal arts before, it was a surprise. But the sad thing was the ones that went to the
1330 sciences. And the ... they were used to sciences taught the way Dutchess [Community College in
1331 Poughkeepsie] teaches them, practical. Practical matters, mechanical matters. And Vassar, of
1332 course, dwells on the theoretical side.

1333
1334 [to Greg] Didn't you find the ... that it's a tremendous change when you first started?

1335

1336 **G:** *I had taken a number of math classes at Dutchess. And so, yeah, there was a major difference*
1337 *... a big difference in that approach.*

1338
1339 W: I know ... I remember hearing about you for quite a time, then ...

1340
1341 **V:** **Oh ... all the men came who would otherwise have gone to Dutchess Community College?**
1342 **Why? You are comparing Vassar with Dutchess?**

1343
1344 **G:** *Yeah, because the location ... if you were in the area. Are you talking about the men who were*
1345 *here during WWII or the men ...*

1346
1347 W: Yeah, World War II.

1348
1349 **V:** **Oh, I see. OK, OK, I see.**

1350
1351 W: No, not World War II. No, they were long gone.

1352
1353 **V:** **OK. No, I was thinking about the 1970s when Vassar ...**

1354
1355 W: Yeah, when Vassar opened to men.

1356
1357 **V:** **When opened to men, yes. Well, I didn't realize that there were men at Vassar before.**

1358
1359 W: Yes, they were. They helped out in World War II ...

1360
1361 **V:** **I see.**

1362
1363 W: ... when the colleges were flooded by men coming back from the front.

1364
1365 **V:** **I see. So at that time Vassar had men as well ...**

1366
1367 W: And at that time Vassar opened its doors to the Poughkeepsie area ones.

1368
1369 **V:** **I see.**

1370
1371 W: And they were a ... it was sad.

1372
1373 **V:** **Yeah. How long was that going on for?**

1374
1375 W: About really ...

1376
1377 **V:** **Four years? Five years?**

1378
1379 W: ... three, four years. This is ... one man comes to ... one of the early classes now that always
1380 comes to our class meetings.

1381

1382 **V: I did not even know that that happened.**

1383 [88:09]

1384 W: Yeah. Well, it really was quite an adventure. Everything ... there were so many difficult things,
1385 physically speaking: housing and ... The faculty— did I tell you? — got worried about grades,
1386 that we were failing the men, one after another. And they were miserable and unhappy, and there
1387 wasn't much you could do. They'd been out while they'd been in the service, and before, they'd
1388 gone to Dutchess, which taught the practical side of various matters, and they were not prepared.
1389 They also felt that the ... no women could do mathematics, or biology, or any kinds of
1390 chemistry. And so they came into the classes "knowing" they would rise to the top immediately,
1391 and instead they went this way. And ... and the whole thing was tragic. Well, it was just a
1392 different way of teaching and what was emphasized. And the students knew what they were
1393 talking about from the point of view of the background of it and they [the men] didn't. And they
1394 — no matter how you tried to help them, with student help and everything else, most of them
1395 failed. And the ... well, what could you ... so we had a faculty meeting: should Vassar have a
1396 different grading scale for these men? And there was a great discussion. And the answer finally
1397 was "no!" That if they get a B here, if they get a B with the higher grade [scale] given to men,
1398 and if they get a D if they had been in a normal class, then they go to another institution. And if
1399 they [the other institution] find out what Vassar thinks is a B, they would think that we really are
1400 not much of an institution. So, we voted solemnly that no, they must keep to the regular practice.
1401 And the ... given all the help anybody could think to help them, but ... it was an awful blow to
1402 their pride, especially women knowing all this stuff. And so ... and women teaching it, that was
1403 even worse.

1404

1405 **V: Yes.**

1406

1407 W: [chuckles] So that's ...

1408

1409 **V: Interesting.**

1410

1411 W: But, it worked out. And many of them have stayed and worked at IBM, and are good friends,
1412 come over to Vassar to join their class in the reunions and things.

1413

1414 **V: So, then Vassar didn't have men until 1970.**

1415

1416 W: That's right.

1417

1418 **V: What was the impact of men coming here?**

1419

1420 W: Oh, students welcomed it a thousand times. And they ... because it meant they didn't have to
1421 worry about being asked away weekends, or asking people up here weekends, and so on. And the
1422 faculty I think, for the most part, were ready. Some didn't want it. But the ... they began to find
1423 out that women are good at science and know an awful lot about it from courses at the advanced
1424 level. I think that ... you have ... I was still teaching and I was teaching a huge class of APL.
1425 Leila deCampo and I were the only two able to teach it at that time.

1426

1427 **V: Who was the other person?**

1428
1429 W: Well, she's dead now. Leila deCampo. She was my assistant for beginning of computer science,
1430 when we opened it, I think. And the — awful nice, nice — and the ... it was a mixture thing, but
1431 the classes ... I had sixty in one class here. I think it was probably the largest — except for Art
1432 105 or something like that — largest classes that I can remember. But the boys acted as if they
1433 were in seventh grade. When you're not used to teaching and having them rival you in what
1434 they're talking about and doing. And so I cracked down on it. And the ... but many of them —
1435 Rex Swayne — was he here when ...? he's a neat one; he's still doing APL. There's one that was
1436 just here ... Carl. It's made an interesting combination. And I hear very frequently from the men
1437 — some of them; I mean, some I never hear from at all.
1438
1439 **V: Did the ... computer science become more ... are there now more men taking computer**
1440 **science than women?**
1441
1442 W: Oh, way ... very, very different; it changed completely.
1443
1444 **V: Did that change ...**
1445
1446 W: With under ... when I was here, of course, it was combined with the mathematical language part;
1447 you learned different computing languages. Now they teach one language; what are they
1448 teaching now?
1449
1450 G: *Introductory is Java. Java is still the beginning ...*
1451
1452 W: And the ... which we didn't; we did FORTRAN, and ... We never did do BASIC that I
1453 remember ...
1454
1455 **V: It was PL/I at some point ...**
1456
1457 G: *When I was here in 1978, it was FORTRAN or PL/I in the introduction. There were the ...*
1458 *there was APL on the 5100's, and we had some Terracs that we were running Pascal on.*
1459
1460 W: Uh-huh.
1461
1462 G: *And then, what did Marty use for AI ...*
1463
1464 W: For what?
1465
1466 G: *Well, Martin Ringle.*
1467
1468 W: Oh good for ...! You remember one name I couldn't think of.
1469
1470 G: *I believe the dean was Richard Simpson? Wasn't it?*
1471
1472 W: No, Simpson's right, but Richard's not right.
1473

1474 **G: *OK. It was Dean Simpson.***

1475

1476 W: Good for you.

1477

1478 G: *So, those were the languages ...*

1479

1480 W: See ...

1481

1482 G: *But that was 1978 already, so I'm not sure what was happening in the 1970 to 1978 timeline.*

1483

1484 W: Let's see ... yeah ...

1485

1486 **G: *And of course assembler. We were teaching assembler on the IBM 370.***

1487 [94:32]

1488 W: Yes, yeah. And then we had IBMers ... I think they were coming in at that time. And having
1489 IBM as your asset. They have it right now. A man named Lou Voerman ... who is long at IBM
1490 and very well known and he's a, in my opinion, top-notch person, as a person and a teacher. I'm
1491 very fond of him. And he ... when I first heard — I'd retired by this time — Nancy [Ide] said
1492 that they had hired an IBMer, his name is Lou Voerman. I said, "Oh, I know Lou Voerman."
1493 And so the next time I went to a party and Nancy brought this man over and she said, "This is
1494 Lou Voerman," I'd never seen him before! Turned out that I knew his father. And his father was
1495 practically the head of the whole plant in Poughkeepsie. Very well known. And his son is equally
1496 good and tested and he teaches courses that we probably would have trouble finding people to
1497 teach the way he does. And the students adore him. And the ... and he teaches robotics, for
1498 instance. And he is much for getting other departments to get together and do a common plan of
1499 things of what's in the future. And this is interesting me, because I wanted to plan when I leave
1500 some money for Vassar when I take off this Earth, what do I leave it for? And I'd love to see it to
1501 go into planning for the future. I have a real set-up. And this is what I was talking to Nancy about
1502 today.

1503

1504 **V: Yeah. Well ...**

1505

1506 **G: *That Lenore Cleveland; she was fantastic.***

1507

1508 W: She was indeed. I hear from her every Christmas and so does Ellie.

1509

1510 **V: Yeah. So, you spent all of your life at Vassar.**

1511

1512 W: No, I'd say, mostly not. I deliberately took year ... many year's leaves. And summers I didn't
1513 spend at Vassar at all.

1514

1515 **V: I see.**

1516

1517 W: So that ... vacations I didn't spend at Vassar.

1518

1519 **V: Ok. So, you dedicated your life to Vassar, but spent a lot of time to bring more stuff in here**
1520 ...

1521
1522 W: But a limited time of it.

1523
1524 **V: I think you've enriched Vassar by doing so.**

1525
1526 **Would you like to talk about ... I'm not quite sure. I think we've covered almost anything.**
1527 **There are questions about what challenges have you faced, larger professional community,**
1528 **outside interests — mostly traveling?**

1529
1530 W: I'd say ... traveling, certainly.

1531
1532 **V: Yes.**

1533
1534 W: And I've traveled a great deal after I retired.

1535
1536 **V: I see.**

1537
1538 W: I felt then I could be free and I traveled. I never went to India because I never ...

1539
1540 **V: So, when did you retire?**

1541
1542 W: What?

1543
1544 **V: When did you retire?**

1545
1546 W: 1982. Yeah. My grandmother graduated from Vassar in ninety ...

1547
1548 **V: That's right, you mentioned that at the beginning.**

1549
1550 W: 1882 ...

1551
1552 **V: So you have been retired for quite a while now. So you must have been traveled a lot in**
1553 **between?**

1554
1555 W: Oh, I've traveled all over the world. And I've taught. I taught several years in Spain.

1556
1557 **V: I see.**

1558
1559 W: Not in Spanish, but I learned Spanish ... with my ...

1560
1561 **V: Where in Spain?**

1562
1563 W: At the University ... is it a Missouri; it's a Catholic university there. It's in St. Louis, the
1564 headquarters. And I was in my second year, I think it was, of retirement, or first year, and I saw

1565 this ad saying that they needed somebody to teach in Spain at this Catholic university. Well, I'm
1566 not Catholic, but if it didn't bother them it wouldn't bother me. And so that I just dropped them a
1567 note and said I'd like to know more. And practically got the thing back from the head man there,
1568 who was a top notch ... Catholic priest and ... and very well known. And knowing his first
1569 language, he'd been there for a long, long time. He taught the only English-speaking parish in
1570 Madrid. And that was his hobby. But ... and I had never known a priest. We became, again, very
1571 good friends. And I could ask him questions a normal Catholic wouldn't think it very proper to
1572 ask a priest, but he would answer. He thought I was terribly funny. But we ... he died not too
1573 many years ago.

1574
1575 **V: Yeah. Any other places you have been that are interesting?**

1576 [99:28]

1577 W: Oh, yes. I've taught at Bethany College in this country in Pennsylvania. I taught at Marist
1578 [College in Poughkeepsie, NY] three different terms — advanced mathematics. And ... where
1579 else did I teach? I taught at Los Alamos, of course. Anyplace anybody asked me, I taught.

1580
1581 **V: [chuckling] That's good.**

1582
1583 W: I just love meeting different groups of people and finding out ... and you always find these
1584 connections with people and ...

1585
1586 **V: Yes, I think you are very good at that, yes.**

1587
1588 W: Well, it's fun!

1589
1590 **V: Yes.**

1591
1592 W: My brother Bob — you've met him — is much better than the rest of us in the family, that he
1593 just ... he's always, from childhood on, loved people. And he turns up with everybody; he is now
1594 down in Florida. He's younger than I, but not too much. And ... but ... a veteran. On his 21st
1595 birthday he was a young first lieutenant in the Marines. And he had his own — what do you call
1596 it, platoon? — and they landed in Iwo Jima and had that horrible battle there. His best friend was
1597 killed, but he survived. Thank God, you know.

1598
1599 **V: That ... that was a tough life.**

1600
1601 W: But we telephone each other every night. Neither one of us can travel ...

1602
1603 **V: I see.**

1604
1605 W: ... so that we telephone every night, talk anywhere from half-an-hour to an hour.

1606
1607 **V: That's wonderful.**

1608
1609 W: Catch up on what happened during the day and our correspondence. And what we think of Bush.

1610

1611 **V: [chuckles] Yeah. Anything else you would like to say or add?**

1612

1613 W: Yeah, I could add loads more, but I'd probably go on forever.

1614

1615 **V: Well?**

1616

1617 W: Oh, another place I taught, too, is for high school teachers in the area when they were changing
1618 to the New Math.

1619

1620 **V: Oh yes.**

1621

1622 W: And ... it was a tricky proposition, as I was warned, that high school teachers did not like being
1623 taught by a college teacher. They felt the college teacher's looking down on them. So, we
1624 managed to get around it because, again, I knew enough people that knew [indistinct] me well.
1625 But, it was an interesting challenge to meet.

1626

1627 **V: Yeah. I think there should be more connection between colleges and high schools, but
1628 that's a whole different ...**

1629

1630 W: It's difficult, since the high school teacher inevitably thinks that the college person is looking
1631 down on their type of work.

1632

1633 **V: Yeah, well I think some high school teachers do wonderful work.**

1634

1635 W: Oh, I do to! Watch for a program that's going to come out not too long about the math.

1636

1637 **V: What program?**

1638

1639 A: I can't tell you.

1640

1641 **V: Oh, OK. [chuckles]**

1642

1643 W: It's going to treat that subject.

1644

1645 **V: OK. Do you remember any of the students that you had, that maybe found a role model in
1646 you?**

1647

1648 W: Do what?

1649 [103:05]

1650 **V: That you were a role model for? Or that got started in computing because of you?**

1651

1652 W: Oh, yes, a number say they did.

1653

1654 **V: What?**

1655

1656 W: Oh, there's one fascinating student that I met this year ... oh, wait a minute ... Karen? Karen,
1657 Karen, Karen ... oh, I'm deep in process with her ... Dalton [Doyle Walton] is her last name
1658 now. And she is the provost of Saint ... was it Saint? Sales Church [College] in Pennsylvania, S-
1659 A-L-E-S ... no, D-E, first of all, capital D-E ... and then capital S-A-L-E-S — and I didn't know
1660 — I never heard it before I had her letter. And the ... I ... what it is, is "Sales," and I didn't know
1661 whether you say "de sales," or the "De" looked French, so I said ... salle ... but it's DeSales.
1662 And she publishes all the time, she is deep into books on people in mathematics and what they're
1663 doing. And I knew her first of all when she came here — oh what class is she? 1960, I think.
1664 Somewhere in there. You better not take me for granted on that.

1665
1666 **V: Well, we can ask her or find out or something.**

1667
1668 W: But she ... yeah, I think it was in the 1960s and I was on the ... still working with beginning
1669 students when they came in the Fall, as we all ... most of us do. And I was with the Christie
1670 family. And we had decided that when we were ... had been co-advisers in the hall that what we
1671 would do is to make up our mind with all our advisees put together, so that within one week's
1672 time we would recognize and be able to call them by nickname if we met them on the campus.
1673 And so that they wouldn't be nameless for too long.

1674
1675 Well, this gal, I remember very, very well, a beautiful person, still, as beautiful today. And the ...
1676 she's ... I saw her on the campus and — I was so proud of myself for remembering the name and
1677 that. And so I went up to her and said to her, "How's Johnstown?" And she looked at me and
1678 burst into tears! And I said, "What's the matter?" And she said, "You know my name, you know
1679 where I came from!" And I said, "Yes, I know your nickname, and I know your regular name."
1680 And she said, "How do you do it?" And I said, "Well, just take it as magic or something of that
1681 sort." And so, she said, "I came from a very, very tiny village" and ... (Johnson or Johnstown or
1682 something) and she said that, "I'm terribly young and I knew I'd get onto campus and I'd never
1683 know anybody and nobody would ever know me. And here I haven't been here a week and you
1684 know my name and my nickname." So ... now, that started it, as you can imagine. And it turned
1685 out I was her general advisor. Well, she was going to major in English — that was all settled. But
1686 since I had restored her faith in life on a big campus, she decided to take some mathematics and
1687 got into my calc — she had quite advanced math, so she ended to do the beginning calculus
1688 class. And, she swears, by the end of that week, she knew she was going to be a mathematician
1689 in this life. So she kept taking English, but half-heartedly, and devoted herself to mathematics.
1690 And with good effect everywhere that she went — just so attractive and so likable and so good.
1691 And so then, after she left — we were good friends the whole time she was in college — but
1692 after she left, we kept in correspondence, oh, for quite a number of years and then, as things do
1693 in many to your friends — I am sure they do with yours — they drop off and you don't write
1694 them for a long time.

1695 [107:34]

1696 I had out of the blue a letter from this DeSales College, I never heard of. And I looked at the
1697 name and thought, "No, how under the sun? What is she doing?" Found out that she is doing
1698 fifty million things all over the world. And I told the ... both the Development about her and the
1699 President about her. Because I said, "If you want a lively person from Vassar on the thing, go
1700 talk to her." So, they are in the process of looking her up. But they ... but she said that ... and I
1701 said ... she said, "Do you really remember me?" And I said, "Yes, I can tell you the first time we

1702 ever met and a couple of other things, and what you did in math, and so on.” And she said, “Oh!”
1703 Oh, she couldn’t believe it. She said, “Why I’ve stopped writing you for 35 years I have no
1704 idea!” And I said, “Well, you did have a few things you were doing.” And the ... so we’ve been
1705 in touch. And she brought her husband to meet me. And he is just as much fun as she is. But
1706 what she ... She’s in research. She writes papers. She’s in movements to do things. She is the
1707 liveliest person I’ve ever seen! She’s over in India, where she does the work for the college that
1708 she’s running, I don’t know. But just as refreshing as she was when she was here — enthusiastic
1709 about everything. And the ... so, she has two grown daughters ... and they ... she entered Vassar
1710 from junior year at college, because she went to very small prep school and the ... religious one,
1711 I think. And they ... took the pre-exam to enter before she graduated. So, that was, I think, her
1712 loneliness that came from first thinking, you never ... you know in the big college, but there she
1713 was. And the ... so that we’ve been in constant touch since then and the ... she has more ideas
1714 for things for us to do, and for me to do, and various things that she thinks I should be doing. So
1715 I have been told what I’m to try out.

1716 [110:00]

1717 **V: So you are still making plans for the future?**

1718
1719 W: Oh, yeah. Oh yes! I should say.

1720
1721 **V: OK.**

1722
1723 W: My biggest one — you’re invited to the meeting that we are going to have about it, too, in the
1724 department, so watch out for it. I am talking with Nancy in particular. And the ... and Jenny. It’s
1725 not going to remain all women. But Lou Voerman’ll come, and you’ll come. But, you see, what
1726 I’m going to try to do is to decide what I want to leave Vassar as the last of my so-called estate.
1727 And I’ve got to figure out, somehow, what happens with the economy. Because suppose your ...
1728 the second ... the first portion of your estate is just business and your will. And then the next
1729 thing is anything you want to give in the way of money ... to friends or people. And ... but not
1730 material things. Material things, they tell you, don’t make a list of those, because they’ll change
1731 every month, if not ... or every year. And you’ll just be making it again and you can’t change out
1732 a new will. So those are some of the side things and I’m not worried about those. And then, after
1733 that ... and then you say where you want to be buried or whatever you want to be ... your
1734 wishes. That’s the first part.

1735
1736 The second part, now, is listing people in order. Well ... and then the third part is any special ...
1737 includes charitable contributions, too, on that money list. And then, whatever is left over, you
1738 can direct to where it wants to go. And I have directed for long time — without knowing what I
1739 really want — that it ... to establish some kind of thing that would be useful for Vassar.

1740
1741 Well, the thing that I’ve come across through a bunch of odd circumstances is ... I’ve had
1742 various ideas and plans, but this is my newest one. And Nancy started part of it by an article she
1743 [Nancy Ide] by an article she wrote that I think is splendid. And that is, why don’t we start in the
1744 Computer Science Department and then with the other sciences — and she’s done the lead work
1745 on this — the future of science at Vassar. But not call it that — that what it is to do is ... and we
1746 don’t know what the make-up’s going to be, except for her trial article ... but it’s to get it going.
1747 And you don’t know whether you would talk about it as a foundation or association or what. But

1748 to have science people connected with it. Both biological and physical and, of course, my two
1749 favorites, computer science and math, which we ought ... we have the things going to change
1750 very much.

1751
1752 Nancy has changed it very definitely in the computer science and all for the good. We aren't
1753 teaching languages, is the important thing, that we were teaching when I was there. We were
1754 doing all kinds of things along that line. And then just starting with computers and individual
1755 computers. Tremendous change, of course. And so ... but keep up-to-date, and not only keep up-
1756 to-date, but as Nancy put it in her paper — did you see that one yet? — and it's a talk about ...
1757 that Vassar led from the beginning of the computer thing and why don't we become one of the
1758 top leaders in the future. The plans for the future. And I think that was one of the most appealing
1759 things I've heard. And it would be ... I don't ... I have ... I can't tell you how much money in
1760 there would be, because I don't know what the state of the economy is going to be!

1761 [114:17]

1762 **V: Yeah, well, we're not worried about that yet. That's ...**

1763
1764 W: I am!

1765
1766 **V: ... a few years from now. I hope!**

1767
1768 W: What?

1769
1770 **V: I hope that's down ... a few years down the road.**

1771
1772 W: Well, I've got that all straightened out with my closest friends.

1773
1774 **V: I know. I was more worried about ... more interested about some of your visions for ...**
1775 **what you ... not the details of finances, but the visions ...**

1776
1777 W: I feel very strongly about that.

1778
1779 **V: Well, that's okay. That's ...**

1780
1781 W: You don't mind.

1782
1783 **V: I don't mind, I don't mind. You know!**

1784
1785 W: Well, I have good support.

1786
1787 **V: Yes.**

1788
1789 W: There's something in here I was going to say ... oh, a career in computer science education. Fill
1790 out all the classes I've done. But also I taught the ... did I say that? ... I taught classes for New
1791 York State to the high school teachers.

1792
1793 **V: No?**

1794
1795 W: I had three or four week-long seminars then in which I used my own students as my assistants.
1796 And we didn't have a computer at the time. So, what we did, IBM lent us one of their computers.
1797 One of the early ... what's the one that everybody ... used BASIC and so forth? A long time ago
1798 ... they gave us the computer for Saturdays and I had no trouble getting students to enroll. Then
1799 we still had all women.
1800
1801 **V: Yes.**
1802
1803 W: And to enroll, they said, "Can we bring our dates?" And I said, "Sure! So ... but they have to be
1804 serious about it. And every Saturday — you don't take one Saturday off to do something else or
1805 go to a football game." And they, of course, they were marvelous doing it. And they were a top
1806 notch group.
1807
1808 **V: When was this?**
1809
1810 W: Way back before we became co-ed. Well back. And so that ... oh, it was before we had our own
1811 computer. So, way back then.
1812
1813 **V: Yes.**
1814
1815 W: And so they gave us this room. The first Saturday we were there they attached some IBMer to us.
1816 So neither one of us had ever used whatever computer it was, but it was the kind that Dartmouth
1817 had.
1818
1819 **V: Oh, yeah, I know. The teletypes kind of ... with BASIC.**
1820
1821 W: And we had freedom for the computer. Well, and here were these students that have never
1822 touched a computer, here was I who had learned this way at Pomona, but we could do anything
1823 we wanted. And Saturday morning, but they had to attend. And they did.
1824
1825 **V: Yes.**
1826
1827 W: Then they got so excited by the thing, they asked me if I would mind spending the afternoon
1828 with them, since IBM said we had ... the teachers went home, surely worn out. And we spent the
1829 entire afternoon there at IBM. Playing, doing everything that we could do, trying out all this ...
1830 and the man had left us. I can't remember if he stayed in the morning or not. But he left ... they
1831 just plain left us in this room with the computer. I never knew such excitement!
1832
1833 **V: Yes. I know. Yeah. I remember going to Dartmouth for a conference in 1972 and going to**
1834 **the basement of the dormitory. And there are these terminals lying around. You can just**
1835 **log on and run your BASIC, don't have to sign in, anything. It was great excitement at that**
1836 **time.**
1837
1838 W: Ah, yes!
1839

1840 **V: Do you remember when the Internet came to Vassar?**
1841
1842 W: When what?
1843
1844 **V: Internet.**
1845
1846 W: Oh, yes, I do. But I wasn't involved in that.
1847
1848 **V: Oh, it was after you had left?**
1849
1850 W: After that.
1851
1852 **V: Yes.**
1853
1854 W: Yes. No, I have a whole bunch that keep me up on ... it's mostly on what's taking place, but they
1855 are very good about telling me what's taking place.
1856
1857 **V: Yes. I think ... we are done.**
1858
1859 W: Good!
1860
1861 **V: Thank you very much. This was very wonderful ...**
1862
1863 W: Put it in ... oh, you asked about career path, promotion, tenure.
1864
1865 **V: Yeah.**
1866
1867 W: So, I think I've said enough on that.
1868
1869 **V: Well, you came to Vassar and stayed here and ...**
1870
1871 W: And got tenure.
1872
1873 **V: Nearly forever. I don't think there was any doubt about that.**
1874
1875 **G: You didn't mention anything about Ken Iverson, I know you've spoken about that before.**
1876
1877 W: Oh, yeah, Ken Iverson was up there. You have a marvelous memory of that!
1878
1879 **V: We were talking about ... we were mentioning the name earlier.**
1880
1881 **G: When APL came up ... so I just didn't know if you wanted to ... you had a very long**
1882 **friendship with him, so I didn't know if you wanted to ...**
1883 **[118:59]**
1884 W: Yes, a very long friendship. And ... who is the other one that opened the APL business in town
1885 here? That ...

1886
1887 **V: So, how did you meet Ken Iverson?**
1888
1889 W: Probably at one of the IBM things.
1890
1891 **V: OK. And you've been friends with him for a long time?**
1892
1893 W: Well, I haven't seen him for a long time, but I have. But we were certainly friends.
1894
1895 **V: For a while you were good friends.**
1896
1897 W: Well, it was not for a while ... it's forever. But sometimes it's active and sometimes it's not.
1898
1899 **V: I see. Was he one of the people who was teaching?**
1900
1901 W: I am trying to think if that's when I knew him there? When did you [to Greg] ...
1902
1903 **G: I only knew of him through, you know, when you were getting into J. When he'd come out**
1904 **with that, you had gotten me a ... kind of an early copy of that. And so I was playing with it**
1905 **and we were talking about that at that time. I never spoke with him directly but you always**
1906 **spoke very highly of him, so I was just wondering ...**
1907
1908 W: Oh, yeah. Well, he was one of the IBMers that I got to know. But I did ... mainly through a
1909 geologist at Pomona College. Yeah, that's where he was. And he was over in Spain now ... I
1910 don't mean Spain ... was over in ... where is Ken? ... Scotland! now, because he has a child ...
1911
1912 **V: Where?**
1913
1914 W: Scotland.
1915
1916 **V: Oh, OK.**
1917
1918 W: And he's worth looking up. He's a geologist ... head of the geology department for many years.
1919 Well known up and down in California because he lectured all over the place and was always
1920 examining earthquakes and things. And ... but very likable. And a funny, lively little fellow.
1921 And the ... he was the one that summer that ... when I spent, first of all ... at learning what a
1922 computer looked like. Ken was the one that spent evenings with me. And really taught me
1923 everything I learned about the computers that way. And ... so that ... he visited here quite a few
1924 times.
1925
1926 **V: Yes.**
1927
1928 W: And one time I was to give a lecture on something or other down at Marist and I really wasn't
1929 comfortable with what I was supposed to talk about. And it just happened that Ken decided to
1930 pay a visit at that time as a geologist and a computer enthusiast. So without much effort I
1931 persuaded him to give the lecture; it was the easiest lecture I ever gave!

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- 1932
- 1933 But he got on well with the IBM people here and the Vassar people. But he had his son, who was
- 1934 physically impaired. Awful, supposedly should have died well before he was forty. Last I knew
- 1935 he's well into his forties and they moved to Scotland to be near some relatives, so that, in case
- 1936 they died, the relatives can take care of him. But the boy is very, very, very bright, but can do
- 1937 nothing physically.
- 1938
- 1939 **V: I think ... Thank you very much.**
- 1940
- 1941 W: Can I offer you some kind of food? I've got a lot of cookies.
- 1942
- 1943 **G: *Should there be an official closing?***
- 1944
- 1945 **V: Yes, we can officially close. Thank you very much.**
- 1946
- 1947 W: Well, and if I can add anything or if I think of something ...
- 1948 **[122:32]**