

Oral History Interviews, Reunion Weekend 2008
Interview with Robert Zimmermann, class of 1953
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
John G. Strange Commons, Main Hall
Interview #1 for June 21, 2008

[Start: 00:00:00]

1. Could you please state your name?

Bob Zimmermann, class of 1953.

2. And what did you get your degree in?

My major was in Psychology with a lot of Biology and a lot of Philosophy, Anthropology.

3. And why did you choose to attend Lawrence?

I transferred to Lawrence after my freshman year at Syracuse. I was going to a prep school in New Jersey, because out of high school, my grades weren't good enough to go to college at that competitive time against the veterans. My father wanted me to become a paper chemist. There were two places that offered paper chemistry as a career. One was Syracuse University, and the other was Lawrence. So I did my freshman year at Syracuse, and though I passed and was successful, moderately successful, a big university wasn't my cup of tea. I took a year off to work, and I knew working wasn't for me in New York City. After two months of commuting to New York, New York, I said, "How do I get back into college?" My father agreed that I could go to Lawrence because of the paper chemistry. I came out and started chemistry but quickly changed to a psychology major.

4. And what were your first impressions of Lawrence?

As a transfer, I was kind of part of the freshmen. I had to go through the freshman introduction, I didn't have to do Freshman Studies, when you first get here, learning how to get around the college and teaching about the college. So I got to know quite a few of the people in the class of 1954. Plus, you had to live in a dorm, and all the dorms were full, they had this small house over on Drew Street called Drew House. It was a little brick building with four bedrooms upstairs, and four of us lived up there that year. And the other thing that attracted me to Lawrence when I was thinking about going back is they had a very good cross country team, and I had been fairly successful at cross country at Syracuse, so it was just a natural blend for me.

5. In addition to cross country, what was some of the activities that you were involved in here at Lawrence? Were you part of a fraternity?

I had joined Delta Tau Delta at Syracuse. There were quite a few cross country guys in that fraternity there. When I came to Lawrence, there was a Delt chapter here that was ready for me, you might say. So they accepted me in. In fact another guy, a Delt transferred the same year, Bob Moore, and so we had kind of a cohesive, it was a very nice social move for me too.

6. What were some of the things that you did in the fraternity?

I got caught up in running, and I really wasn't that active in the fraternity. I never lived in the fraternity house. By the time of my junior year which was my second year here, I just became so interested in Philosophy, Psychology, History of Science. I partied as we all do, I started going with a girl here. I hung around with a couple of guys who were veterans, especially one, we got kind of close. I played a lot of cards, so I really wasn't part of that active fraternity. I had parties, and I helped build things for the floats.

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7. You mean floats for Homecoming?

We always had floats on trucks that went down, and for Homecoming we also had the decorations in front of the fraternity house. I was always kind of part of that. When I roomed with the people or the dorms that I lived in, first I lived in Drew house, then I lived in North house my last two years, they're all torn down now. It was nice, in fact my junior year, Jeff LaBrec, now Clay LaBrec, he and I had a room with an old-fashioned fireplace. It was a big old house with this big old room. I found that whether by accident or by design, I kind of started hanging around with people who were really interested in ideas, just not studying for studying, but the ideas behind study and we'd argue Philosophy, and we'd argue Psychology.

And I would hang out at the Union. And faculty like John Bucklew in Psychology, Herbert Spiegelberg in Philosophy would be sitting at a table in the Union. I just kind of morphed into liking my classes, especially when I finished all the requirements, the required math and English, once I finished with English I was free. Because I'm not a novel lover, and I don't think like English teachers think. I partied like most people did, but I studied hard, but it seems like such a natural thing to do. And there was a small group of us that always studied together. In fact, one of our favorite things to do was the night before a Biology exam from Do Brown, five of us taking the class would go down to Bill's Bar, which is the first bar...

8. Which is where Dr. Jekyll's is now?

No, it was two buildings before that, a little self-standing building. And they had a back room there, and we'd each get a pitcher of beer and bring our Biology notes. And Rog Kennedy would be there, and Jim Brown and others. We'd go over our notes, talk about the stuff, and we'd get our last bit of studying in. The involvement, it's intellectual, yet at the same time a lot of fun.

9. I was wondering if you could talk some about the Friday night walk down College Avenue?

Those were times, other people went, but at the time, Deltas were the most famous for this one to one. The bars closed at one o'clock, and the women had to be in at ten o'clock. And George Walter mentioned something about that, he said, "We find that if we lock the women up at ten o'clock, everything else takes care of itself." But the one to one, it was on Friday, everybody would go to the Delta house, and they'd drink a lot of milk and eat bread with butter on it to line the stomach. We'd head down to Bill's and then to Breun's, and so on until we got to the west end. We'd go to the fish fry, all the fish you could eat for \$1, then we'd start down the other side. We'd play dice, which was very interesting, my wife and I stopped in Jim's Bar here when we first got in. And sure enough, there was a dice shaker there. It was fun coming back. By the time I ended my junior year, my whole goal was to go to graduate school. Everything centered on going to graduate school in Psychology.

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10. Can you talk some about knowing that you wanted to be a professor?

The way that occurred was since I was from New Jersey, we didn't go home for Thanksgiving. And this girl I was dating, Peggy Rowe, her cousin was Chandler Rowe, the Anthropology professor. And so once in a while, I'd be invited over to their house for dinner, especially on Saturdays. We'd go over to Peggy's, I'd do my wash there, and then Thanksgiving we went there. James Stewart the Math teacher, John Bucklew in Psychology, I forget there was another fellow. And so we got to know faculty in their homes. I saw this lifestyle, and just sitting at a table with these people discussing politics and the philosophy of this and philosophy of science, a mathematician and an anthropologist, and a psychologist. And they were such close friends. I just said, "This is the life."

Unfortunately, when I got into it, I didn't lead that kind of academic life. I got caught up in the big time research. But Lawrence just set me on that path, the commitment. In some respects I became an academic savant. I just focused, no politics in my life, no arts in my life, I rarely read a newspaper. It wasn't about science, and it kind of excluded it. But I branched out after that.

11. Who were some of the professors that really had an impact on you?

We can start off with Doc Brown in Biology, and Dr. Chu, he was a lab tech. And Herb Spiegelberg in Philosophy was, he just made me think in such a way. In fact later on I got a job at Saginaw, and one of the philosophy professors there was one of Spiegelberg's students, because Spiegelberg left here and went to St. Louis University, and he became quite famous. And then John Bucklew in Psychology, he was my true mentor, the sun rose and set. It was interesting, he was the type of guy, for me at least, when he'd lecture

and I'd go to the exams, I didn't have to take a lot of notes. I could see the questions and I could close my eyes and I could almost hear him talking.

Chester Hill was the other Psychology professor, and he was a genius. He was like these guys, I think he had gotten his Ph.D. when he was 21, he was a super young guy, and an awesome intellectual. We learned statistics from him. The other thing about Chester Hill, when I applied to graduate school, Lawrence had given me this intellectual arrogance. So when I applied to graduate school, I only applied to Harvard, Yale, Indiana, and Michigan. Those happened to be the top four Psychology graduate schools at the time. And they all turned me down. So what was I going to do, here I was a senior, and this was April of my senior year. I thought so well, I'd sign up for the service. A bunch of us from the Delta house went down and met with the Marines, we were going to go to Officers Training School. But Chet Hill had worked at Lehigh University during the war, and he contacted the chairman there, and they had an assistantship. I couldn't afford to go to graduate school without an assistantship, and they had an assistantship open and they were willing to take me. And he got me in on that.

As far as I'm concerned, Lawrence launched me on a ten-year growth curve that was a launching pad. That's the best way I can describe it. Everything I did academically as I went along turned into gold. I did okay at Lehigh, in fact I did very well at Lehigh, and their faculty had such tremendous reputations at Lehigh that I got into the University of Wisconsin graduate school.

And there I worked with Harry Hollow and was lucky enough to work on that project that everybody reads about, with the pseudo-mothers, the surrogates, and the monkeys would cling to these little claw things. So I got many jobs from that one publication. I like to think I literally found my soul at Lawrence.

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That's a good way of putting it.

Yes, so I love coming back.

12. And there was one professor in particular you owe going to graduate school to. You were saying yesterday evening about Professor Friedlander?

I haven't seen her yet. To go to graduate school, to get a doctorate, I knew I had to learn languages. Languages were my nemesis. I had an elective left in my senior year, and so I took German. This was when classes met six days a week, and German was taught at six o'clock and at ten o'clock. And I was a senior, and I wanted the ten o'clock class. And Dorothy Draheim, the registrar, put me in the eight o'clock class. And I went and told her, "Miss Draheim, you're going to ruin my life, my health, getting up that early." I was a senior. And she said, "I'm sorry, Freshman Studies is at eight o'clock and the freshmen have to take that class at ten o'clock." I ran across campus with those frigid mornings all winter. And I studied German with her. She taught me beginning German, one full year

of it. And that was enough, so when I got to graduate school, I had to learn to read scientific German, but the core knowledge she gave me of how to read German was really the difference. A lot of people in Wisconsin didn't get their degrees because they couldn't pass the German exam. I credit her.

13. I was going to ask, what were some of the activities that students did in the Union? Given that the new campus center is being built.

The Union was, you'd go from class and you'd go to the Union. You'd sit down and play a card game, bridge games were going here, sheep's head, and faculty and students sitting around talking. I remember one time I was sitting with, it wasn't Dr. Brown, it was someone else, maybe it was Dr. Darling, and then John Bucklew. And Spiegelberg comes along and he says, "Ah, we have someone from the Science Hall sciences, and we have someone from the Main Hall sciences." The Union, and by the way, it was just built while we were here. Because the first year, all we had was a big old house.

Hamar Union.

Yes, but we didn't hang out there. The new Union literally became a center of student activity, just socialization.

And professors went there too.

Yes, the amazing thing I guess for me at Lawrence was this informal social interaction. They weren't afraid to talk to you outside of class. And actually, they would talk about things that would give you new ideas for other classes. As a matter of fact, I'd get ideas from one class and take them to another. I remember one time, I guess I was taking a course with Chandler Rowe, I was talking to Bucklew about something and I brought this thing up in class and Chandler said, "Oh, you've been talking to Hill again." But it was also intense studying. After class I'd go back and I had terrible handwriting. So I'd go back right after class and I would type my notes up. Because Jeff had said, "The difference between, you cram the night before for the exam because that's the difference between an A and a B+."

The other thing I have to be honest about is that the Korean War had started, and New Jersey Draft Board didn't appreciate people with college deferments. And so you got drafted depending on where you stood in your class. And one semester I went from middle of the bunch to number 1. It's nice to see where you rank each year. That was an incentive to study too. But always time for good times. I remember the girls who hung out with others like us who would get bored because all we were talking about was shop. We'd talk about the political philosophy of a professor, and Al Townsend was very socially active. So it was very refreshing.

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14. Well, we're almost out of time. I was just going to ask you, coming back as an alumnus, how has Lawrence stayed the same and how has it changed?

The buildings are awesome, but Main Hall. One of the women in our class said today she just comes back for the scenery. We came back one fall, one October, because the Founders' Club was having a thing for Ed Gross, and I knew Ed, so we came back for his award. And A.C. Denny was being inducted at that time. And fall is so beautiful. I also belonged to the Ski Club, Harry Patterson, and we'd go skiing and stuff like that.

We're out of time, and I'm going to go ahead and turn off the recorder.

[End: 00:21:10]