

## CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

**Mark Halperin**

**(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 1)**

RS: Okay. It's November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Interviewer is Rick Spencer. We're interviewing Mark Halperin, former professor of English at Central Washington University.

MH: That's correct.

RS: We're going to start with the interview today. Mark, let me ask you first – ask – lets, uh – tell us a little brief history of yourself before coming to Central.

MH: Uh, I – I grew up in New York – New York City. I went to college, then, at Bard College, which is in upstate New York, about 100 miles. I got a BA in Physics and Law combination, and then I worked as a Physicist for a while, and then I went to a place called The New School for Social Research in New York – a graduate school – and studied Philosophy, and then, because I had been studying writing for a long time I went to the University of Iowa, and there I got an MFA, and decided to get married, at which point I started to look for a job, and this is where I came.

RS: Central's where you ended up. Okay. Can you be a little more specific on how you happened to come to Central?

MH: Um, I decided – I actually hadn't decided to – to leave school. I was thinking about pursuing another degree when I decided to get married, so suddenly the situation changed and it was a little bit late – it was probably in June, or something like that. So I was scrambling for places that I might work at, and the best offer that I got was from Central. It was an accident. There was really no reason. I decided I didn't want to go to North Dakota, which was one of the possibilities there, and I don't remember how many offers there were at the time, but this sounded like a possibility, and that's the only reason. It was 1966.

RS: Nineteen sixty-six, okay. Let me double-check something here. Okay.

MH: I'm not going back and forth, I'm –

RS: No, you're doing great. What were your first impressions of both the campus, and of the town of Ellensburg?

MH: Um, they both seemed very small. I had come from the University of Iowa, which is a rather large school. And it also seemed a little barren, because I came up through Vantage, so I crossed a lot of desert, and I think my wife, who's a painter's, first remark was "There's nothing in the foreground here." We lived at the motel at the edge of town – it's not longer here now. There wasn't any place to come. That was the beginning. We rented a house near where the Anthropology Building is now – the other side of the Ganges, as it was called – and it was in the process of being Urban Renewaled, which is one of the reasons that we could even find that place. Stayed there for a year and a half, I think, and then decided to build a house in the country in which we still reside. But it seemed small. I remember wondering if I could live here for a long time.

RS: Now is that your feelings about the campus itself?

MH: The campus was small, and – in fact, we were in Quonset Huts on the other side of the Ganges now, somewhere near where that wind sculpture is. That was the English Department at that time. The – the L&L hadn't been built yet. They were temporary quarters. So the campus was small, and nowhere

near as developed as it is now. The town was smaller, too. I don't know how much smaller, but it hadn't gone through the major renewal that took place downtown. There weren't as many attractive buildings. The road I lived on, which is the old highway to Cle Elum, was the main route. They hadn't opened I-90. So it was a kind of windy, slow way to Seattle that took longer than it takes now. I don't know that we went there a whole lot, but it was the largest city. So it felt, in the beginning, a little less lighted, but the time I had been living in Iowa – Iowa City isn't that large, but it was larger than Ellensburg by a large degree, and of course, New York was larger than that, too. So yeah, in the beginning it felt kind of small and isolated. Didn't feel lonely because I was recently married, so I had that. If I had been alone, I think it would have been much more difficult.

RS: I can't imagine living in this town and not having I-90 right there. That's just an amazing – that's amazing that – I just can't imagine I-90 not being there. That's amazing.

MH: Even the routes – you know, it was the old highway that you took down to Vantage, rather than I-90 [inaudible] across. It just wasn't there.

RS: I've been on that highway, that's –

MH: It's a long, slow highway.

RS: It sure is. Tell us, Mark, about your first rank, and the various assignments you had in your career here at Central.

MH: When I was hired the ranks were slightly different. I wasn't – I think nowadays everyone is hired as an Assistant Professor or higher, but I was hired as an Instructor. In fact, I got tenure and was promoted to Assistant Professor, so I had to go through a lot more steps to become full Professor, which I eventually did. I had no experience teaching. I had a graduate degree – an unusual graduate degree. I had an MFA – more common in Art than it is in English although it's a terminal degree, too. There was nobody else with a background like mine around at the time. So it was probably a fairly low starting salary, and it didn't go up very quickly, again, because I was hired lower and it took me six or seven years to get tenure and be promoted to an Assistant Professor, and through the rest of the ranks.

RS: Did you have any assignments – Chairman of Department, anything that – during your career that you were in charge of that you might want to –

MH: Yeah. I was teacher – or an exchange Professor, and I did lots of that. But – I'm sure I was the head of one committee or another, but none of it so memorable that I can tell you which committee it was.

RS: Can you tell us a little bit about your exchange professorship – where you went, and what that might have involved?

MH: I took advantage of opportunities to travel. I took advantage at Sabbaticals. The trade-off was – Sabbaticals you make less money, but I always took the time. I was interested in – in writing and doing the kinds of research that I do, so I never cared that much, and I was interested in living abroad. The Sabbaticals were about opportunities to live in other places and experience them, and to get other kinds of work done. And even the exchange Professorships gave me time to work on my own writing, too, because there weren't the kinds of committee assignments that occupy a large part of the time teaching here. So I was an Exchange Professor for one year at the University of Arizona, and then I was an Exchange Professor – I don't know if I was an Exchange Professor, but I was there – I taught for one year. I taught for a year at Shimane University in Japan, when we had an exchange relationship with them. I taught – I had a Fulbright, and so I taught in Moscow at Moscow Linguistic University, to which I returned, and then I was an Exchange Professor three times at our University that we still have the relationship with in St. Petersburg – Herzen University. And I've been there in other ways, too. I participated in writing seminars

in St. Petersburg, and they take place through Herzen, so I have a strong association with Herten, and my interest in Russia has brought me back to Russia. And I was – after I retired I had another Fulbright and taught at the University in Odessa, which is [Inaudible], but also Russian-speaking.

RS: Excellent. Thank You. Who were some of the influential or unforgettable people in your tenure here?

MH: Um, maybe David Burton [Burt] was the most unforgettable. David Burton [Burt] was in the English Department. He organized – what was it called – a Symposium when I was first here that brought all kinds of people – I wish the names would come to me right now, but it was early in my tenure here. The student body would have three or four days off, and these people would come, and they would give talks, we would have small groups, and students came or didn't come. Maybe that's eventually what did the program in – not enough students – didn't get enough students excited enough, or maybe it was just that the times changed, but David organized it, as later he would organize the film festival. He also was very active in conservation matters, and roped me into that, and I eventually ended up being on the Alpine Lakes Protection Society that got the wilderness designation for that area. He taught me to fish whenever something happened. When he broke his rod, for example, was one of the best times for me, because he couldn't fish, and so he could only show me things. But we went many times together, and he was a rather independent spirit. I miss him – he died last year – and even though we weren't as close toward the end as we had been earlier on, I think that he's one of the more influential people.

Other people – members of my department that I knew off and on. Chris Johnson who had an unhappy career because of mental problems but still was someone who was a good friend of mine, and there have been others – Joe Powell, now in the English Department, that's also a writer – a regular writer – so that's been important for me. Keith Reinhart, who was the Chair for a large part of the time that I was here, was supportive and I found that helpful. I think that's it – that's what I can think of.

RS: Okay. Double-check this framing here again. Please comment, if you would, on political problems that you might have encountered. And I'll probably – I don't think they're referring to Republican/Democrat type of political problems, but any time of political problems that you'd be willing to speak on, while you're tenured here?

MH: Not really. One of the – one of my blessings is that I'm very stupid about things political, so I don't see them. I think that – that because – because I'm interested in writing, and because I've managed to publish more than most, that oddly enough – that I suffered from that. That is, that I might have been promoted faster if I had done less of that and more committee type of work. We hear it always the other way around, but it depends on what the situation is, and maybe in some ways the politics of the campus over-compensated for activities other than publishing, and generally publishing is what gets you along. I think I was a good teacher, but I was also an active writer, and it seems to me that my career could have moved more quickly –

On the other hand, I've got all the Sabbaticals that I could have. I got chances to travel all the time. I have – I was never – I don't know how to put it, exactly. I was never told how to teach the classes that I taught. I mean, I felt a good deal of freedom, and I was given the opportunity to teach classes that I wanted to teach. So I really had no complaints that way, and my political aspirations were minimal. So that wasn't particularly important to me, but I – I'm not clear about politics, and so I – I'm not aware, which was probably just as well.

RS: Sounds like me. I just don't pay attention to it, and I stay out of it. Have you ever sensed a noticeable town/gown problem?

MH: Not a problem, just a distance. I had some friends, especially when I was working on the Alpine Lakes Protection Society, who were not associated with the University and didn't care to be associated with the University, and I was aware that – that they belonged to different groups than I did – that our only point

of contact was with *that* society. Another point – I play traditional music, and again, the people that I did that with, for the most part, had no connection with the college. So it wasn't so much that there was an antagonism as there was a kind of rift. There wasn't much integration between things that were going on in town, and things that were going on on campus. I rarely saw townspeople at readings, and talks, and foreign film things, but they were open to them. They were always invited, and there were always posters in the downtown, and such things. I put them up. I know. But people didn't come, and I think there was a feeling that this is appropriate to the college, and this is appropriate to the non-college community. But antagonism? No, I never felt that at all.

RS: Okay. What changes on campus during your tenure – organizational, departmental programs, buildings – can you give us a little insight on some of the changes you saw on campus?

MH: Campus is a lot bigger, and there are a lot more buildings, and they're taller. Even things like Barge's restoration have been pleasant to see. But I think, in general, the campus looks a lot nicer than it did when I first arrived.

There's – and this is important to me – there's much more interest and support for things international. I wouldn't have been able to travel as far, as widely, and maybe even as frequently as I did, I think, at the beginning. There wasn't that kind of interest, or there wasn't that kind of support. We had some, but it was very small. Now it seems to me we have a good – a good-sized program that I'm pleased with, and I'm pleased to be able to participate in that.

The school is larger and so it participates in more things, and I think that also helps relieve the sense of isolation. The highway system is better, so you can travel more frequently to Seattle – it's only an hour and a half or two hours at most, except when the pass is closed. So those kinds of things, it seems to me, have improved things.

The other change – that again, it's an area that I'm really not able to say more than a little bit about has been the kind of shift that goes on when – well, two shifts, now that I think about it. One, when Junior Colleges start to teach more lower division classes, and so the make up – the kinds of things that the English Department used to do has shifted considerably. And I guess when I first came here there was – there's still some emphasis, but not to the extent that when I first came here, on Education. I mean, this was a recently – when I arrived it wasn't Central Washington University. I think it was Central Washington State College, and I don't know how long it had been Central Washington State College instead of Central Washington Normal School. The Education Department was the big department, and although it's still probably the biggest department, it seems to me there's been a widening out of things.

RS: I'll check my framing here. Perfect. You have moved – that's great. What are some particularly proud moments for our University that you can recall there in your tenure? Some things that the University might have done that the University should be proud of? And I think they want to talk about some of the problems that *you* had during your tenure, also – if there's anything that you can remember, whether it's –

MH: The symposiums, as I said, I thought were very, very important, and [inaudible], I think, as well. I can't think of particular moments that stand out where the University received some recognition. I know that it's been ranked high recently as a school for undergraduates to go to across the country, and that's nice. An experience – I think this comes in the later question – teaching in other places, and I've never noticed that students any of the other places that I've taught – the University of Arizona, for example – were markedly superior to the students here. I'm proud of my students' achievements – those that have gone on to graduate school to study writing. I don't associate myself that strongly to the school. I'm pleased that I worked here. I'm pleased that I got as much done as I did. I hope I contributed – I feel that I did – but I don't take my identity from University, so I don't think in terms of proud moments for the University.

RS: How about for yourself? Let's talk about any published works that –

MH: Well every time I publish a book I've felt very good. When I got Fulbrights I felt very good. When I got promoted I felt good. I got one of those awards for research. I was proud to have received that. It hangs on my wall.

RS: Tell us about the award, and some of the books that you've published.

MH: I'm a poet, primarily. I've published four books of poems – complete books at the University presses, which is what I've always wanted to do, so I'm pleased with that. Also lots of magazines. I've published a book of translations along with my good friend Dinara Georgeoliani of the Foreign Language Department. I've published a book with a colleague in the English Department about – called Accent on Meter [with Joe Powell]. So that's six books. That's not bad. And the translations have appeared in lots of magazines – big ones like Paris Review and Antioch Review, so I'm pleased with that. I would have – I don't know. I don't – like – you know, it's in my Vitae someplace, not something I can just rattle off. But all of those things are sort of the things I aimed at, so I'm pleased. I raised a son who is self-supporting and lives in California. I'm proud of that. My wife's paintings have been shown in galleries here, and in Yakima and Seattle. I'm proud of that. I caught large fish on the Yakima on tiny files. I'm very proud of that. I don't know – pride probably isn't the right word for it. I'm pleased with those things would be more the term that I'd use.

RS: Outstanding, thank you. What was your perception of the students' capabilities when you first came, and then when you retired? Any changes?

MH: No. I think that there's a good mix. Some students are there and some students are not as [inaudible] on your toes all the time. I haven't noticed them getting better, and I haven't noticed them getting worse. I'm always surprised at the difficulties they have with writing, because here they are in college already – one assumes they have been doing some writing, and yet they were lousy writers when I first came, and they were lousy writers when I left. Something is the matter with the way people learn writing, because they're continuing to have problems, although people seem to be trying to address them. No, as I say, I think – even though Central obviously isn't hard, as it's not the first destination school for top students all the time. It's a kind of odd mixing that goes on, though. I think it's very – it's very good. That means that you do get good students as frequently as you get disappointing students. More.

RS: Okay. Okay. Do you feel that Central provides ample cultural enrichment for students?

MH: Um, it's a loaded question. I mean, if you ask me that question any place, anywhere, I would say no, because you can always do more. Central's 100 miles from Seattle, and it's 50 miles from – less than 50 miles from Yakima, so it's within easy reach of larger cities that probably provide more, and that cuts into what it can provide. But it's also a college campus, and that – that means you've got certain responsibilities. I think there should be more readings, because I'm interested in writing. There isn't – you know – a center for writing in the same way that say, Eastern, which has a press, which has a large MFA program is. There are more there. But it's close to the same size as Eastern, and could have more of that. So although there are good reasons and explanations, there's always room for more.

RS: Tell us about any job changes you had during your career. Any job changes at all? Doesn't sound like you –

MH: No. This is the only place I've worked continuously for 43 years. I mean, I've worked in other places. I was extracted professor, and I've worked in writing seminars, but aside from my beginning work as a Research Junior Physicist and an interim job as an electron microscope technician, this is what I have done.

RS: Electron microscope technician? Is that what you said?

MH: Yes. After I – after I quit my job in a laboratory to travel, and decided I was going to study Philosophy, I needed a profession – a quick profession. And so I applied for a job for which I was probably overqualified, and they trained me to be an electron microscope technician because I had the background in Physics. It turned out to be a huge – I don't know what to call it – advantage for me, because when I left that job to go to the University of Iowa I actually put myself through the University of Iowa as a Research Associate in Pharmacology. I got an MFA in English, but I was a Research Associate in Pharmacology because I could take care of electron microscopes. And because I was Research Associate in Pharmacology I didn't have to pay tuition. It was a job there, and the tuition was a kind of bonus, and so it paid my way, and kept me going. The disadvantage was I was never a TA in English. When I came here, it was the first teaching I had ever done, and since I had never been an undergraduate student of English, I had to teach courses I had never taken. It was a bit of a challenge.

RS: [Laughing] I bet! Um, how about some of your personal contributions to your department and the University as a whole? We've talked about that here – your book publishing, and things like that. Mmm, the last question they have here is – unless there's anything else you wanted to add to that contributions to your department? That's okay? Finally, will you give us a statement that wraps up your feelings about your time at Central – you know, as a whole? Maybe a –

MH: As a whole, I'm satisfied with my [inaudible]. As I say, I got to teach classes in subjects I was interested in, I got to teach them the way I wanted to without anyone – it's not something like monitored, but no one said "You can't do it that way, you ought to do it some other way." There were classes that I didn't enjoy teaching – the required Composition classes, for example – as much as others, because – because the students were compelled to take them, so it was hard to motivate them, and I think that's true of lots of required classes. But they also required to take Poetry and Poetics, or Introduction to Poetry, as it was called earlier, and I always enjoyed teaching that. I liked to see if I could get people interested in a subject that was very, very important to me. So overall, I have enough collegiality. I felt support in my interest in things when I traveled abroad attending conferences, and things like that, and in getting time to do my own writing, so that – I've had a good experience teaching here. I'm grateful for it.

RS: Outstanding. Um, just – was there – is there any other memory that you might want to – something that sticks out in your mind that you go back and think about, or special moment that – we talked about a lot of them. I'm just trying to think if there's anything else you'd like to add?

MH: No, nothing really comes flooding into my head.

RS: Super. Thank you Dr. Halperin.

MH: You're welcome.

RS: This has been an interview of Mark Halperin on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005.