CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

JOHN VIFIAN

INTERVIEWER: HELEN SMITH

TECHNICIAN: ELDON JACOBSEN

Smith: Today is May 13th, 1998. We are in the Archives Building interviewing John Vifian who has been with us in the English Department and is just about ready to retire. The interviewer is Helen Smith, the technician is Eldon Jacobsen. Thanks, John for joining us, and would you, please, start with a very brief thumbnail sketch of your life before you came to Central?

Vifian: OK, I was born in Portland on June 12th, 1928. I lived in Portland, oh, I failed the fifth grade.

Smith: All right. Do you want to tell us how, and what that did to your life?

Vifian: I wasn’t able to read. At least my teacher said I wasn’t able to read, because I wouldn’t do workbooks. I couldn’t do any math in the fourth grade. I was in the Albina District in Portland where I started to grow up, which is now a black slum. Then it was a white lower class slum. We moved to another school out at the suburbs. That probably saved my life. They failed me, and I had to spend every noon hour working with a teacher. It would be illegal today to do that to a teacher. In any case I lived there and because of the Depression my parents were old and we were on welfare. We couldn’t live any longer near the city. We moved outside of Molalla, about fifteen miles, on a stump ranch, and I went to school at Dickey Prairie Grade School, and was the highest in my graduating elementary class. Seven people. I started high school, this was an eighth grade elementary, I started high school, but couldn’t get to school. It was during the War; they wouldn’t run the bus to pick me up, and simply dropped out of high school completely. I went to work at fifteen, and worked at various jobs until I was twenty-one. During that time I took some courses at night schools, continuation schools, but when I decided to go back to college, I had to transfer credits from college to high school. They didn’t give me credit in both places. There were no GED’s then. Actually there were, but they were only available for veterans, and I wasn’t one. I just missed the Second World War by one year. My father was... came to this country in nineteen hundred from Switzerland. My mother was from Tennessee, so I grew up in a very (?). My father was a peasant, a farmer, and I grew up in a very disadvantaged family. When I... I became quite religious for awhile, and decided to go to Whitworth because it was a Presbyterian School, and also because I was not allowed to be active in my church. They wanted to keep me because they were short of a minister, and they would let me go to Whitworth and study. It was during the Korean War. And so I went to Whitworth five years and graduated finally from there. So I was never really in a high school. I decided not to go into the ministry, and was persuaded to apply for a teaching assistant job, and went to W.S.U. From then on I, well, one year I worked, took off ...(BLANK TAPE FOR A FEW SECONDS)....teaching English as an instructor for one year. Then went to the University of Colorado where I didn’t finish my Ph.D., unfortunately, and came to Central, and had to go back eight years later and finish it.

Smith: And what year was that that you came to Central?


Smith: So, and you were here for how long in that first period, ‘61 to?

Vifian: I think I finished, finally finished the degree in ‘69.

Smith: I see. So you were actually at Central all that time.
Vifian: Yes, I was at Central. When I came to Central I was told that I would not need to finish the Ph.D. to be promoted. They changed the rules the next year.

Smith: Indeed. Now tell us, between the fifth grade then and graduating from the eighth grade at the top of your class, something magical happened in there.

Vifian: No.

Smith: No?

Vifian: No, I actually could read. I had been reading in the slum area. I had been spending a lot of time in the library. I just wouldn’t do workbooks.

Smith: The pedestrian kind with fill-in the blanks.

Vifian: And I wouldn’t learn multiplication tables ‘til I was forced to. And once I did, it was no problem. Actually even in the eighth grade I was rather lazy. We had story problems. There were only a few of us, and the teacher had four classes. It was a two room school, and so I was teaching the eighth grade, and I would let them do the problems. I ‘d tell them how to do them and check to see they did them right. But (?)

Smith: But you were given enough freedom not to have to fill in the blanks, so you continued...

Vifian Reading’

Smith: Voraciously! And still do to this day, correct?

Vifian: Less so in the last two years. I still read.

Smith: And you have a huge library in your own home, I understand.

Vifian: At least two or three thousand books.

Smith: All catalogued, I hope.

Vifian: No. My records are, and my films are, but not the books.

Smith: So your books are arranged so that you can browse and enjoy finding old friends?

Vifian: I seldom re-read stuff I simply don’t read as much as I used to, though I did start Grisham, but I got bored after about the third one.

Smith: Was it the same thing?

Vifian: No, he’s a pretty good writer, but,. and I don’t think I’m going to teach detective fiction again, so.

Smith: You came in in nineteen sixty-one, and give us then the, you have not yet officially retired. This is ‘98, but when do you retire?

Vifian: I retire in three weeks.

Smith: Are you going to take phased, or...?
Vifian: I’m going to take phased.

Smith: And you’ll teach a class a quarter, or something like that?

Vifian: With difficulty, I’m teaching two classes, two quarters, next year. Two classes a quarter, for two quarters.

Smith: That’s practically a full-time load. You won’t have time to go sailing.

Vifian: My wife is still working. She won’t be able to retire for another year or two. So I don’t want to stay home and be a housewife.

Smith: Right. Very good. OK, When you came in ’61, what was your rank, and what was your assignment? What did you teach?

Vifian: I came as an Assistant Professor, and we taught four courses. And if my memory is correct there were two compositions, an introduction to Lit., and a course in the novel.

Smith: And what was your specialty when you came?

Vifian: The eighteenth century novel.

Smith: And so you got a chance to teach that then once every quarter?

Vifian: Right. Not once every quarter, no more than once a year. Actually, I got to teach other eighteenth century courses once in a while, but teaching in English in ones specialty was not the normal practice.

Smith: Right. How about other Departments? Did you ever do any team-teaching with other Departments? I know that was tried here for a while.

Vifian: I taught in Humanities in recent years. A course on Roman History, Culture, and Literature. And I’m currently teaching a course in Humanities on World War I and it’s consequences.

Smith: Oh.

Vifian: Which I just created.

Smith: Is that fun for you?

Vifian: It was going to be, but I’ve had kind of a student rebellion this spring. Freshmen don’t want to read. and so...

Smith: Expand on that, have you found a difference in the kind of student that you have been teaching from 1961 to now? Did they like to read more when you first came, do you believe?

Vifian: Some. There hasn’t been that much difference. One significant difference is that, we were getting a large amount rural ignorance from, what, rural high schools in the State. Now I think we’re mostly getting urban ignorance.

Smith: And do you see a difference between rural and urban ignorance?
Vifian: Not knowing nothing!

Smith: There you go.

Vifian: It’s pretty similar. I think that overall they may be, my impression is that people know less now, coming out of high school than they did then.

Smith: Even with the...

Vifian: The bottom third, there’s not much difference.

Smith: So you don’t think that television has increased knowledge.

Vifian: I’m not sure how much some of these students really watch. They certainly don’t watch the news, and the kind of pseudo-reports, things like Sixty Minutes. I don’t think they watch that. They may watch 90210, but that’s no worse than soap operas have ever been. It’s just on in the evening. It has younger people. They’re more attractive. I’m getting too old to notice that.

Smith: Well, during all your time here at Central, what were some of the really significant problems that you faced, as a teacher in the English Department?

Vifian: Well, during the “great decline” of the late Sixties and early Seventies, we were all worried about “RIF”.

Smith: And “RIF” stood for reduction in force, correct?

Vifian: Right. In my own personal case, it was always the problem of, they kept changing the rules. I came here partly because I really didn’t want to be in a “publish, or perish” situation. I viewed myself essentially as a kind of “generalist”, not a specialist, and which I thought would be useful in a college who’s primary function, along with majors, is General Education. But I found quickly, not quickly, firstly that for promotion a Ph.D. was required. So I managed to get that, and then publication became required for anything, in fact the only thing that was required for advancement. Everything else, if you had publication, people ignored whether you could teach or not. That remains, I think, true.

Smith: So, that was the basic problem that you faced then?

Vifian: Well, all these problems that... trying to teach which is difficult. Students have always come to Central to try and get a degree that leads to a job, and they’re not terribly interested in General Education classes. That was true at W.S.U. when I was there for graduate work. They were primarily Engineering students, and they were not terribly interested in Literature. It was less true at Whitworth. A small private school, I think, learning tends to be more important, but then the people I associated with were not the bottom of the group at Whitworth. And I had to work all the time I was going to Whitworth. I worked forty to fifty hours a week.

Smith: How did you have any energy left?

Vifian: Occasionally I just, well, I had a four o’clock class in Psych and the teacher was repeating the text which I’d read, so I just lay my head down and went to sleep.

Smith: During your time at Central, if you can, please share with us the administrators and faculty that you felt were significant leaders while you were here.
Vifian: Well, my first impressions, Brooks, he and I came the same year, were positive, and became more and more negative. And in view of other people, have become more and more positive again.

Smith: The pendulum effect here.

Vifian: Yeah. What he could do, he did reasonably well, and one thing I thought, more than any other President since, he did occasionally, not always, listen to the faculty. And the Faculty Senate was a relatively important institution. And I think it has ceased to be. And essentially, faculty has less involvement now, than we did when he was President. But I haven’t been on the Senate for two or three years, so I’m not sure exactly at this very moment how things are going.

Smith: Were there others, administrators and/or faculty?

Vifian: I always thought Wes Crum was a very effective administrator.

Smith: In what particular ways?

Vifian: He kept things going. (?)...He made one very important decision. He hired me.

Smith: There you go.

Vifian: Let’s see. Harrington got a lot of bad flack, but I never knew a man who worked so hard to keep from firing people.

Smith: True.

Vifian: He was actually a good administrator when things were going up, but he didn’t know how to handle things when they were falling apart. But he did manage not to fire people. He had people hidden all over this campus, and all over the State.

Smith: What about in your own Department, were there particularly effective people?

Vifian: Rhinehart was very effective.

Smith: Now, he was the Chair for quite some time.

Vifian: He was the Chair for a long time.

Smith: What were his strengths, that you said that he was effective?

Vifian: He was sort of dominant, he got a lot of flack for it. But he basically kept the Department functioning as a unit. And when he stepped down, well, there were a lot of factors. The Department ceased to be very well, very cohesive. We had a severe internal split between language and literature.

Smith: And when did that happen?

Vifian: About the time Cummings took over the skill center, and he was the focus of it.

Smith: So the literature people split...he was a representative of the language people.

Vifian: Yeah.
Smith: And so that split half(?), and did it continue?

Vifian: Oh, it continued.

Smith: And does it continue to this day?

Vifian: Less, much less.

Smith: Happily?

Vifian: It just somehow isn’t an issue. There was a lot of question of growth and control, and how things worked in (?). And Cummings changed about the time he became Chair and became much more, I mean he was a pretty good Chair of the English Department. But there was a while where he was the focus of a real divisive group.

Smith: Again between language and literature.

Vifian: Yeah. He and I are friends; we talk about that.

Smith: Sure, I know that. Well, you’ve mentioned administrators. Were there really terrific problems between the English Department and administrators, or the Board? any of the Deans?

Vifian: Not any more than the usual. The inevitable griping, and the inevitable, what, regulations that people objected to. But I can’t focus on those right now.

Smith: All right. What about differences, significant differences between students and faculty? Did you ever have an uprising of students against the English faculty?

Vifian: Some of them “made” a list of professors you can’t afford to take. It was circulated in the Seventies.

Smith: Now, when you say, that students made such a list.

Vifian: Yes.

Smith: Yes, of course. And that’s fairly common, I understand.

Vifian: A lot of students have chosen to take their General Ed requirements at community colleges rather than face us.

Smith: How does that make you feel?

Vifian: Well, I would certainly not want it the other way.

Smith: How about students and administration? Were you aware of any particular conflict between students and administration?

Vifian: The answer is yes, but they never bothered me. I was involved enough to really remember (?). Like currently, apparently the students unhappy about paying more money for remodeling the SUB, but there was that kind of conflict, I can’t think of...
Smith: Fine. Now we have a long list of topics here that you can indeed comment on, how have you felt over the years about the salary schedule?

Vifian: Well, in terms of myself, I’ve always been much too low on it.

Smith: I think that’s a common complaint.

Vifian: But, if there’s anything wrong with the salary schedule, it’s that all other State employees get regular increments, but we do not. That’s not soluble in the university, so nobody, that isn’t true, I was going to say nobody likes merit, but a few people do, but the majority of the faculty have always wished that merit should come only after certainly, a cost of living has been met, and it never has.

Smith: And that the increment should be...

Vifian: Right. Increments should only be denied for real failure to do one’s job.

Smith: All right. Were you... How about the Faculty Code? Were you ever involved in amending it? Writing it? What do you think of it?

Vifian: Well, I was involved in a lot of it. With being on the Senate and Vice-chair of the Senate. I was in the Senate at least twelve, fifteen years. I was here during the big battle over the Code. When the Board made it clear they could change the Code, unilaterally. So the Code isn’t a union contract. It gives one legal rights which cannot be taken away in terms of one’s personal rights. I mean they can’t stop me from retiring, nor at this moment can they stop me from having phased retirement. They can’t change the Code that way, but they can change it for any future people, and I think they’re going to on that. Currently, they’re considering limiting phased retirement to two years.

Smith: I see. And when did that conflict start, about, you know, between the Board and, about the Faculty Code?

Vifian: The faculty members stupidly thought they had a legal contract, one that could not be changed unilaterally. And that just isn’t the way Boards work under State law. And so many faculty got very bitter. Some of that bitterness is still here. Some people want unions.

Smith: Yes, in fact, comment on unions. Your feelings about unions.

Vifian: Well, I was one of Beck’s Boys once, a Teamster, and I was even there under Hoffa for a short time way back when I was doing various jobs, and I’m very pro-union, but you know what I’ve seen of unions in higher education, have not been good. Certainly I wouldn’t want a union here. The union that people are talking about, or the people leading it here, I certainly would not want to see it even now.

Smith: Name that for our tape, the union. Which union?

Vifian: I’ve forgotten the phrase they’re using. It’s a combination of the education organization and the AATJP, not AAUP, they’re out of it these days, the AFT. And they joined on this campus.

Smith: And could you articulate for us the particular reasons why you would not like to see that happen here?

Vifian: Well, unions have worked. They have generally worked for the advantage of faculty to the real disadvantage of education. That’s even true of the Teacher’s Union. That’s one reason it’s under such heavy attack. And the worst place, of course, in our education, at community colleges where the majority of
teaching is done by part-timers, and the actual faculty get paid much more than we do. But there aren’t very many of them, and to some extent, the unions are responsible for that. It was easier to just hire part-time people and give the faculty their raises for the administration, and they did. Like unions priced themselves out of the market at General Motors and other places.

Smith: Do you see a solution on this campus or other campuses, if we, say, decide not to go to unions?

Vifian: Well, until the laws change, so that unions can bargain and strike I don’t see any point in them.

Smith: And so the protection for faculty, say, would come how?

Vifian: It wouldn’t. I’m not sure that, basically the Code protects you against any kind of arbitrary administrative action, and I think, strengthening, actually strengthening a faculty Senate and getting an administration that would like an active faculty body, would be probably the best thing to do. But I think the faculty can be heard. I don’t think (?). I mean, they were very effective at getting rid of, oh, my God, I’ve forgotten his name. The vice-president, awhile back. They couldn’t get rid of everybody. They got rid of him and Garrity. So faculty are an important voice. They’re not helpless little children who are going to be stepped on unless they organize into a collective body.

Smith: And so this would happen through the Senate.

Vifian: It could. It could happen as it did with the Department Chairs just getting together and saying, “We don’t want this going on.”

Smith: OK, all your years in the Senate, make a wrap-up statement about the value of the Senate as you saw it, after all that service.

Vifian: The Senate was, I think, a good monitor of curriculum. It was less good with General Education because of territorial squabbles. Currently, I get the feeling that administrators, particularly in areas like assessment and whatnot, are trying to take over the curriculum. And I think that’s really bad.

Smith: All right. How about the long range planning? Colleges are always talking about long range planning.

Vifian: Yeah, to figure out where the hell they were going (?).

Smith: I was just going to ask you whether or not you thought long range planning has been effective, or could be effective, and you may have answered that?

Vifian: I think so.

Smith: All right. Research and trouble-ish, research or perish, research Vs, class room teaching. I’d like it if you’d comment on those issues.

Vifian: Well, first of all, there is so much useless research in academia that we have magazines in English that nobody reads except people who need to write another article for the magazine, and since that’s the case, why publish? Poets, for example, sometimes publish, I mean if a poet publishes a volume of poetry that sells a hundred copies, it’s a major achievement. And you begin to think, with the exception, of course, of University presses, which libraries have to buy, and so they have apparently a larger audience. But there’s an awful lot of publication that is absolutely meaningless. There is some publication that is very meaningful, and it should be rewarded. Distinguishing between the meaningful and the meaningless is not, does not make Departments, or the University, too comfortable. And so the result is that almost anything gets rewarded and, of course, in the other areas, they tend to be not easily measurable. I don’t know how
you measure good teaching. You certainly don’t measure it by student evaluations, at least student evaluations alone, they’re an important factor. So research and publication should go on. In some areas, some of the sciences. I think it’s essential that people do research, although there’s an awful lot of useless stuff, so scientists tell me. There’s a lot of senseless little articles published by, little or nothing... They don’t hurt anything with it. They clog up stuff, I guess. But I don’t know about the sciences. In English we don’t really do research. You may, somewhat for a while try to see what’s going to happen in linguistics, but it turned out not to be a very scientific process, so we don’t have the same, what, uncovering new materials. There are books that need to be edited; there are explanations of things that need to be done; there are new ways of looking at things. So there are things which can be published, but it’s not the same thing. (?)...everything gets all put together under this weird term research. (?)

Smith: it seems to me then that you feel that class room teaching if indeed there were some way of evaluating it, would be more important in the arts than research.

Vifian: Classroom teaching and general extension of knowledge background reading. there are areas where breadth is more important than depth.

Smith: Indeed.

Vifian: So if someone is teaching English Literature and they can learn something about Roman Literature, they’d better. And it would help a lot if they could learn something about Chinese Literature, and probably if they are doing that, they’ll never get much published.

Smith: But indeed, could be very effective teachers then.

Vifian: It would help. And if they don’t have that, they won’t be as good a teacher, even if they published something on John Donne.

Smith: I know that you spent a lot of time working on, was it the General Education Committee? And I need you to comment on committees that you have served on and whether or not, what value you think they were.

Vifian: Well, I was Chair of the General Education Committee several times, and as Chair of that committee I was able to get a, I mean, actually my first real important thing I did was General Education. Because I had been on the General Education Committee and involved with it, and when I was Vice-chair of the Senate I persuaded Don Cummings to become head of the General Ed. Committee. And he managed to get a somewhat flawed, but a much better General Education program through the Senate, and a few years later, when I was Chair of the General Education Committee, I was able to get the committee to put in a third course in English Composition and a required course in English Literature, and to strengthen some of the other requirements. And that remained until very recently, when they took out the third course of English Composition.

Smith: So that has to be deflating to you, after all that work...

Vifian: There is nothing one does at a University that isn’t going to change. From one’s egotistical point of view, always for the worst.

Smith: What about other committees?

Vifian: I just don’t think I want to comment, the dozens of committees (?)
Smith: All those meetings going down the drain.

Vifian: I was on the, well, one committee I was on, I was on the University Library Committee for years. And when I was first here, there were virtually no books on English in the library, and I spent ten years building up a collection.

Smith: Well, that’s a worthy thing to be involved in, for heaven sake. Congratulations. We talked for ... I want to know what you feel, what specific contributions, and you have already mentioned some, that you made to your Department. You talked about some that you made to the school through the committees that you were on. What about your Department? New courses that you have touched on, curriculum divisions...

Vifian: That’s a difficult question. (?) I don’t, I mean, as chair of the Department for five years, my major goal was, sort of maintenance. The Department was very badly divided, and my first job was firing Dennis Thomas. I took over as Chair from Don Cummings who got angry and just resigned (?). I was supposed to be Chair for one year, as acting Chair, and before I even got to be acting Chair, (?) to be acting Chair while he was gone, and before I could become acting Chair, he got angry with several people in the Department and resigned. And that left me the only Chair the Department had. Which left me to finish the job he had started, which the Department didn’t know about, but was firing Dennis Thomas who had a terrible reputation as a teacher. The Dean and Cummings felt he had to go. It was after five years of just horrible reports about him. And so when I started, that caused a huge split. His friends in the Department became very angry, and so for two years that was the major focus. But I kept the Department functioning while we were going through this process. So, what wonderful things I did for the Department. I really can’t think of any.

Smith: Well, I think maintaining it was certainly admirable. Did they give you a gold statuette when you finished in honor of that?

Vifian: No. It was another rebellion, and in a complex election, I lost by one vote, and I was going to stay on another four years just, partly because I did not want the person whom some people wanted to elect as Chair. But he got into sexual harassment charges and was only Chair for a few years.

Smith: A very short time.

Vifian: So after Cioffi had left, the world became a little better.

Smith: Do you look back on that time as Chair with regret’?

Vifian: I’m a rather disorganized person, and I was worried that when I became chair that I would be able to do the daily crap that Chairs have to do. And I found I was able to do it,

Smith: Probably all your long time on the General Ed. Committee helped you prepare for that didn’t it?

Vifian: Nothing could prepare one for screaming people. If you’ve ever seen a wildly angry John Herum...

Smith: Don’t want to! Looking at the campus at large, for a minute, Building Committees and naming of buildings. Did you ever serve on a Building Committee for (?)?
Vifian: No.

Smith: Didn’t do that?

Vifian: I should have omitted that. I can’t think of anything to say, but who would care.

Smith: And, do you have any comment about the method of naming particular buildings?

Vifian: No. They get named.

Smith: Indeed they do.

Vifian: I think less so recently, but then nobody has ever asked the English Department what we would like to name the L and L Building. We’re the dominant group there, used to be.

Smith: And so it remains the L and L building.

Vifian: Right.

Smith: Many times and in certain periods on this campus there have been people that have felt there are certain subjects and areas that should not be on a University campus. I’m thinking, of course, of the academic skills center. Do you have feelings about certain parts of our campus that have been offered to help bring students up to speed? Do you think they have a place on the University campus?

Vifian: I would agree they ought not to have a place. I would also agree that ideally we should only let students in that can read and write.

Smith: Not teach them to read and write.

Vifian: Right. But that isn’t what we do, and so since we don’t do that, it would be a good idea to offer them some kind remediation. So I think that needs to be done. In fact, it is done, for those with really serious deficiencies, it tends not to make it effective. Skill centers do not tend to be able to make the necessary changes in the time allowed.

Smith: The length of time, yes. When I worked there. That’s what I noticed. It was almost impossible to accomplish anything real in the short length of time we had.

Vifian: For those who have slight mental capacity, they may not work well because they don’t enable; the reading problem is worse, I think, than the writing problem. If people can’t write, there’s hope of teaching them how. If they can’t read and write then they’re in real trouble.

Smith: What about English as a second language program?

Vifian: Oh, I don’t know. We don’t have any in essence. We teach Japanese, English. The people who need English as a second language can’t afford it, since it’s not a University program. It should be. The people who need it most are the Hispanic students, and none of them are involved. And they can’t be; they don’t have the money. Our current University ESL program works mostly with Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese students who come with large amounts of money, and there’s no remediation for regular students in University programs. It has nothing to do with it.

Smith: And so would this be a matter of financing, if we were to get it?
Vifian: Oh, it’s very expensive.

Smith: What about, tell us about any awards or honors that you’ve received while you’ve been here.

Vifian: I really haven’t that I can think of

Smith: Except appreciation from students, I’m sure.

Vifian: There has been that, but, oh, one of my student’s thesis received the best thesis of the year. I was at the award ceremony as director of that.

Smith: That has to be gratifying.

Vifian: Oh, that was. But I’ve never been in that limited group of best teachers of the year, or...

Smith: That is indeed a very limited group.

Vifian: Right

Smith: Were you ever, did you ever notice through your years here in Ellensburg about any Town-Gown problem?

Vifian: Yeah, I tend to buy stuff through catalogues, and the town doesn’t like it.

Smith: Beyond that?

Vifian: I may go to, I still go to Ostrander’s, but I may give it up. I’m beginning to feel that maybe the local people aren’t the best, even the druggists. There’s a lot of resentment to faculty that aren’t loyal to the local high-cost businesses. I manage never to go to a rodeo, and I think I’ll make it through my life without ever having been to one. And I think a University involved in a rodeo is idiotic.

Smith: Comment on that a little bit more.

Vifian: No.

Smith: I know that you indeed have a relative who attended Central, but maybe more than 1. Which of your family has ever attended Central?

Vifian: My family?

Smith: Your wife? Did not, did she?

Vifian: Oh, I do not consider my wife a relative. My second wife also attended Central.

Smith: And teaches in Yakima. Did she graduate from Central?

Vifian: She isn’t teaching in Yakima, she’s living in Oregon, and I don’t know at this point whether she’s teaching yet. She graduated from Central and taught in Selah for a number of years, then went to Japan for several years.

Smith: And I don’t know, do you have children? Did any of them attend here?
Vifian: I have one child. He went to Western Washington.

Smith: I see. I’m sure that you know, or sense, over the years, that you were considered to be by the average student, a difficult Prof., and by the really good student a demanding Prof. We need to have you comment before we close here about your philosophy of teaching, or philosophy of teaching. Talk about that for a minute.

Vifian: The important thing for teachers to know is that being liked is less important than people suppose. And that in certain areas, particularly general education courses, there’s a rather high correlation between being liked and people not learning. In fact I’ve never known an English Composition class in which the students were asked to do something that was difficult, particularly reading, and to write about the reading that they’ve done, and being graded with reasonably rigorous standards that that teacher or that class was popular. I’ve always tried, particularly in recent years, to kind of reach a moderate approach in which people learn more than they would like to, but they don’t, (!)are pressed so hard that they drop out. Sometimes I fail on both counts. This quarter I’ve lost (?) in a Humanities Class. The one I’m (?), I just gave out the assignment sheet and it dropped immediately from thirty-five to twenty the first day.

Smith: Well, that should have left you with a core of students.

Vifian: The ones who were dumb enough not to drop, and unfortunately that is true about four or five. But, so I have maybe ten or twelve people now who are beginning to realize they want to learn something and are beginning to profit by it. That’s too high a loss. But I’m not sure how to feel about it.

Smith: Well, I think we always start every quarter thinking we know how to do it, and end the quarter wondering if, indeed, we know anything at all about how to do it.

Vifian: You’ve always been more optimistic than I. I don’t start that way very often.

Smith: Would you say, generally, that your years at Central have been pleasant, challenging, collegial, what?

Vifian: The best relationships, I mean I’m going sailing, I think, unless he can’t arrange a ticket to Europe (?). I’m going sailing with a graduate student from the last two years. He’s going on for a Doctorate now at the university, and he’s anxious to go sailing with me. Last summer one of the people I sailed down the Oregon Coast with was a student, and so one of my students who’s teaching, a Ph.D. of Oregon, who’s in a small University in Arkansas, asked to be remembered to me. I’ve had several letters from him. So my relationships with good students over the years...are part of my memory as important. And I’ve had good friends among the faculty. In terms of the job itself, as Rhinehart once said, “That they would pay me for doing something I like to do, reading and thinking and talking about it, is remarkable, you can’t beat that.” And I got a lot of jobs before I was working. I quit school. I think this job beats working. I was a meter reader, and walking around looking at meters for four years didn’t please me. I drove a truck for four years, not a little truck, a newspaper truck. Taking papers (?!?) a kid. That didn’t seem like a profession I wanted to live in. I worked in warehouses. I’ve done a lot of jobs, besides what (?) be here now at seventy if I wanted to get out of here, but ironically most of the people I know have been trying to get out as quickly as possible.

Smith: Isn’t that amazing? So you leave, at least in the phased retirement with a good feeling.

Vifian: Not that much.

Smith: What have I omitted that you want to talk about? That you want on record?
Vifian: Well, maybe it is (?). I think that teaching English, as a Humanities program, basically a humanistic approach was important. I’ve enjoyed being a part of that. The stuff I teach makes a difference, has made a difference for, what, two or three thousand years.

Smith: Thank you very much for not only that parting comment, but thanks very much for agreeing to be with us. We really appreciate it.

Vifian: You’re welcome.