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Interviewee: John “Jack” Van de Wetering
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David Brooks: All right, it’s September 25, 2006, and I’m David Brooks doing the interviews for the University of Montana’s Oral History Project. Today I’m talking with Jack Van de Wetering. Mr. Van de Wetering, I was hoping you could start out with just a little of your personal background and your educational background, what brought you to Missoula and the University of Montana.

John Van de Wetering: Well, I come from the Pacific Northwest. I grew up north of Seattle in a little town called Bellingham. But all three of my degrees are from the University of Washington. And like everyone who finishes a Ph.D., I needed a job. Actually, my first job was at the University of Idaho, filling in for a fill-in for one semester. Then I was offered what turned out to be a two-year stint as a replacement for my mentor at the University of Washington, which was very—a lot of fun. But after that I did have to find a permanent job somewhere at a time when the job markets were not, I have to confess, terribly strong. And The University of Montana became a place that I was offered a position, which I took. I was interviewed in Seattle by Jules Karlin. Jules and I hit it off right away and have been good friends ever since, I think. That’s how the whole thing started. There isn’t much in my background of particular interest. Like everybody that goes through college and graduate school, I had a lot of part-time jobs, many of them at the University of Washington. I even worked in a branch library at one time and worked as a reader—you know what a reader is I’m sure, you may have done that—and a grader, and a teaching assistant, finally, and a research assistant. I worked on a project that will interest you, I suspect, because it was a history of the University of Washington. The first thing I ever published was an article on the history of the University of Washington. In any case, that’s how I got to Missoula, Montana. Newly married, a new assistant professor, and have good, fond memories of the roughly 15 years I spent here.

DB: So you came into the History Department and your undergraduate and M.A. and Ph.D. are all in history?

JVW: Yes, that’s right.

DB: So talk a little bit about what your interest in history was and your interest in teaching it, as well as researching, as well as a little more about—you know, you said that the job market wasn’t all that great at the time. First, what years were you talking about there and what led to the difficult job market at the time?

JVW: Well, I came here I think it was ’59 or ’60. You’ll be able to find out more precisely. But the job market was so bad that a good friend, who became eventually the director of the

John Van de Wetering Interview, OH 408-002, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Massachusetts Historical Society, one of the most distinguished organizations in the country, couldn’t find a job when he graduated and ended up teaching high school for a little while. So it was a very tough market for people in the humanities. It is still a very tough market for the people in the humanities. I understand there are—I shouldn’t be telling you this, I’m sure you already know it—it’s tough to find a permanent job in the humanities. Philosophy is probably worse than history, but history is among the tough ones.

DB: And how about your interest in history. Facing this tough job market, what drew you to history?

JVW: Well, I suppose I was very idealistic. I started out with a real interest in political science but I discovered that the discipline of history gave me an opportunity to understand what had gone on better than political science, so I moved into history. And then elected a mentor, like so many people did, because I wanted to work with a particular person. That’s how I wound up as a colonial historian, really. I worked with Max Savelle, who in those days was very well known as a colonial historian.

DB: And so you were working with Max Savelle, and is that whose job you took over for two years at UW?

JVW: Yes, right.

DB: OK. So you had that experience at UW, which is certainly at the time a bigger campus, a bigger place than Missoula. What was it like coming here in the History Department, as well as on the campus, say compared to a larger university where you had been?

JVW: Well, it was certainly very different. The University of Montana at that time was probably a school of, what, 3,000 or 3,500, something like that. And it did seem like a very small, small place. And I brought with it all the condescension of youth. I do remember looking out the window of a classroom while the class was taking an exam one day in the fall and seeing the snow come and wondering when they were going to cancel classes because in Seattle when it snows, everything closes. We made some very good friends very quickly and really had a very warm and rich life here I think. Of course, my wife had many more years here than I.

DB: You mention Jules Karlin. Any other names that stand out from when you first came here, people you associated with?

JVW: Mort Borden became a very close friend. I don’t know whether you know about him or not. He went off to Santa Barbara. I don’t even know if he’s alive anymore. I haven’t had any contact with him for many years. But we were very close friends while he was here. I have good memories of a good many of my colleagues at that time. Paul Carter, who was a very productive historian who didn’t stay here for very long after I arrived. I trust there was no relationship. I think Mort was my closest friend in the department and Jules, for many, many
years, was a good, close friend. The department was run by a very strong personality: Mel Wren. But the university was run by strong personalities in those days. In fact, the faculty governance was really in the hands of a small cabal made up of, I think it was four or five, if I remember correctly, who operated the Policy and Purposes Committee, if I have that name right. Is that the correct name?

DB: That sounds familiar to me.

JWV: Policy and—but I was in another organization that had a similar name and I was involved in that, so the title may be wrong, but it’s Policy and something Committee. But it was the faculty governance part, out of which grew the Faculty Senate.

DB: Who were some of those strong personalities that ran that and eventually became the faculty government?

JWV: Well Burly Miller was one of that small group of strong personalities. Edmund Freeman, I think was part of that too, if I remember correctly. There was somebody, an old-timer, I think he was from physics and I frankly don’t remember his name anymore. Again, a very strong personality. That little group agreed that it was time for a Faculty Senate, if I remember correctly, and the faculty voted around a constitution that I assume some committee put together. I don’t remember how it came together. See, there’s the problem: the memory.

DB: Were you part of the Faculty Senate?

JWV: I became part of the Faculty Senate fairly early and for a time was the chair of the Faculty Senate. That was during the [President Robert] Pantzer years.

DB: What were issues of concern for the Faculty Senate at the time?

JWV: Well, we were very interested in securing all of the privileges of larger universities, faculties in larger universities. There was no sabbatical system, I believe, when I came. That came over time. Tenure was already strong. Tenure had been strong very early at the University of Montana. You probably know the story of the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] case that involved The University of Montana.

DB: No, I don’t.

JWV: Back in, oh, I think it was in the early ’20s. I can’t remember the name of who it was, somebody in the English Department. But it was a very dramatic case and sort of set the tone for Montana gaining early grip on tenure. Tenure started in 1917, if I remember correctly.

DB: So was the university at the time, besides the Faculty Senate, looking for privileges and sabbaticals and things like that that they were looking toward the model of larger universities?
JVW: Not just privileges, rights.

DB: Sure, rights. Towards larger universities for those things. Was there a sense of expected or hoped-for growth in the university, that the university as a whole would become more like larger universities?

JVW: Well, it became very quickly a period of growth and, you know, it was a period where the GI Bill was still very active. We had to take attendance. Terrible problem. But it was a period of national growth, so growth became the expectation.

DB: So it wasn’t something just cultivated within this university? It was university-system wide?

JVW: No, no. Actually it was a time, if I remember correctly, that there was no particular urge to recruit students, that they flowed.

DB: And how about the History Department in particular? What was the emphasis, if there was, in the department? What were its strong suits at the time?

JVW: Well, that’s a little hard to say. I’m not sure it had anything I would call a strong suit. It had some individual faculty members who I think were very strong personalities and successful teachers. Mort Borden was one of those very good teachers who were in the early national period of American history, and had had a very successful book and had a real following, I think, among his students. But he left fairly quickly. Same with Paul Carter. I suppose one would assume that American history was the strongest suit. I’m not sure that was true in those early years. Mel Wren was a Russian historian. Not a scholar, but he had written a fairly successful textbook in Russian history. But he had great ambition for the department, ruled the department with an iron hand, very much contrary to the spirit of collegiality that was part of the direction of the university. We would wake up in the morning and learn about a new faculty member who had been hired. It was not a committee venture in those days. And, let’s see, Oscar Hammond had also published well, as I recall, in German history. Bob Turner was popular with the students, not with the faculty, not with many of the faculty.

DB: But you had said earlier to me that there was a lot of factionalism in the History Department.

JVW: Oh my goodness, there was factionalism, and that got worse. It became really quite serious. It eased up after Mel left and I like to think that it eased up after Peterson left, who was something of a problem. I don’t remember how Peterson became chairman. In retrospect, the fact that he did is quite astonishing.
DB: So I did mention before we started that I had heard about factionalism in the History Department but I can’t say that I’ve heard about exactly what that meant in detail. What were the factions, what were the issues at hand? Was it just personalities?

JVW: Well, what you have to remember, first of all, is that factionalism within an academic department is not unusual. It’s almost S.O.P. And it was prevalent in a lot of other departments as well. I’m sure I remember that there were factions, sharp factions, in English, for example. Classically, English has factional problems, I suppose, and history too, very often. So it’s not unusual for that to happen. There have been a lot of bad jokes about that kind of factionalism in academic departments. One I remember vaguely—I can’t remember the punch-line any longer—but in effect was saying that factionalism is greatest the weaker the issue is, the less important the issue is. So it did become very personal. A lot of personality conflict. And I suppose that tends to emerge in an environment where you have more chiefs than Indians.

DB: And so for the History Department, was it over each little thing, as your joke indicated? Or were there distinct sides that you can categorize in any way?

JVW: Well I can certainly lump people together into groups representing one position or another, but candidly, I don’t remember much about the issues that we were fighting about. I suppose we fought some as we began to develop a Ph.D. program. There was a lot of division over the interest of whether we should engage in a Ph.D. program, but I don’t recall anything particularly bitter with regard to that. The bitter things were more personal. Petty, lots of pettiness.

DB: Where did the impetus for a Ph.D. program come from?

JVW: My guess is it was Mel Wren. Mel was terribly ambitious for the department. And the University of Montana was just beginning to enter into Ph.D. programs in those years. We followed the development of Ph.D. programs in our profession, in history, very carefully nationally. When we started talking about it there were years when the market was fairly decent. By the time we got rid of it, the market was terrible. Terrible again, I should say.

DB: Where did you fall in the Ph.D. program? Were you an advocate of doing it?

JVW: No, I wasn’t particularly, but I wasn’t a great opponent either. I certainly never would have been involved in creating a program that included a degree in colonial history. That would have been ridiculous in Montana. Of course it became a Western History degree. That revolves pretty much around Ross Toole, who of course had been hired by Mel in that inimitable fashion of his, and had a strong publication credential when he arrived.

DB: How was he accepted into the department, or how did he fit into the department, I suppose, ultimately?
JVW: Quickly, I think it’s fair to say. Ross was a very congenial, warm person with an excellent sense of humor. We were good friends, and sometimes opponents. He was a masterful manipulator. He knew the game of office politics as well as anybody I’ve ever known, and played it very hard. But despite all that, we were good friends, socialized together. In fact, one of the last calls I made in Montana as I left the state in ’81 was to Ross’s bedside when he was in the hospital. But he was not an easy person. Interesting guy. He wrote a newspaper article—you may have actually read it—that was picked up nationally. Have you seen that?

DB: No.

JVW: Well, you ought to find it because he was talking about his children and it was against the permissiveness of the current generation and it was picked up nationally and carried in newspapers all over the country. Ross, as a result, was to receive an award in the White House, a good, solid Republican White House. We teased him about that. He went to Washington, he checked into a hotel. Do you know Washington at all? Do you know the geography?

DB: I’ve been once and, of course, have been by the capitol and to the Smithsonian.

JVW: Well, right across from the White House is a park called Lafayette Square. Across the park is a hotel. That’s where Ross stayed. He had to walk across to the White House. This is an irrelevant story, incidentally, but it’s maybe one you won’t pick up anywhere else. So he was a little disturbed walking across this relatively dark park. Only a Westerner would think that park was dark, incidentally. So he took his wallet out of his pocket, and he tucked it under his mattress and went off to be feted at the White House. When he came back, his wallet was gone. But Ross, to his great credit, had a wonderful sense of humor about the whole thing.

DB: So what do you imagine or what could you say about the university at the time that would have prompted him to write an article about the permissiveness at the time? I assume he’s writing about young people?

JVW: He was writing about his own family. It didn’t really have anything to do with the university one way or another I think. All of us did live, of course, through the Vietnam demonstrations and had a very dramatic time when one group of the faculty, along with students, rallied to ban ROTC from the campus. And there was a very dramatic Faculty Senate meeting that was moved over to an auditorium because the normal meeting room couldn’t handle the huge crowd that came for the event, at which the Faculty Senate made a compromise. We moved ROTC off the campus, out to Fort Missoula. The ROTC had occupied an old, if I remember correctly, an old wooden structure which is no longer there. In fact, there was some fear that it was going to be burned down that day. It did not burn down, but again, we had a very dramatic time when a bunch of faculty members, along with these students, rallied outside and were threatening to burn the building. They were very exciting times, tough times, when the faculty did some very dumb things. For example, virtually eliminated all course requirements and permitted students to pretty much design their own programs through
school. That’s all changed now, as you know, having recently come through school, I assume. In any case, I’ve wandered from the topic you had me on, but wandering is all right.

DB: It is, and I think that is an interesting time during the university, all universities really.

JVW: Absolutely.

DB: This student voice comes about during that time and students having a say in their education perhaps more than before.

JVW: Very much so. I don’t remember exactly the sequence when this occurred, but it may have been the time when a student was put on the Board of Regents. There is a student on the Board of Regents, as you probably know, and the first one to be on the Board of Regents was a University of Montana law student whose name escapes me. He, appropriately enough, became a lawyer.

DB: We’ve been talking a lot about this factionalism and the personalities, and you’re using K. Ross Toole as an example of someone who, in your words, knew how to manipulate people and played office politics very well.

JVW: There were others who played the game, of course. Not as well as Ross.

DB: So it seemed that that was a common thing. But before that you said that the university as a whole had, or cultivated, a certain collegiality and you mention that as a strong suit of the university, or something that was very common at the time, is this sense of collegiality. So how do those two fit together, that you have this strong sense of collegiality—whether that’s in the department or between departments—as well as this kind of factionalism?

JVW: Well, I think that happens all the time at almost any school where there is a real, live faculty governance, where there is that kind of equality among faculty members. There’s very little hierarchical in the academic structure. So when faculty rally around the flag, which they did here as they do everywhere I suppose, it does not detract from their ability to maintain factionalism. That certainly was true of the University of Montana. The university had some very strong factions in other departments. It certainly wasn’t just history. In a sense, you could describe it college-wide or university-wide. There was a small cadre of the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) organization on the campus very early on that had some fine faculty, fine people on it, but they were certainly a faction that was very active in trying to organize the faculty to collective bargaining. And of course the collective bargaining movement in higher education among faculties is an important part of the story, and the University of Montana was not alone in that. In fact, the University of Montana may have even been a little late getting there.

DB: And were you supportive of those sorts of changes?
JVW: Well, I was supportive of the idea of organizing, but not through the AFT. My own interest was the AAUP. And we worked not together, not cooperatively. Finally, when the faculty did have an opportunity to vote, as one always does in organizing the union, as the labor board requires, the AAUP was one of the contenders against the AFT. I think the only contender. The AAUP lost. That was about the time I left Montana. Had I actually stayed here, I would certainly have joined the AFT. As it turned out, I never worked in a faculty that was collective bargaining and I never administered an institution that wasn’t collective bargaining.

DB: You know we’ve been talking a lot about faculty relationships. How did you relate with the administration in your time here?

JVW: Oh, I think very warmly, very warmly. Bob Pantzer I considered a friend. Saw him often, inevitably often, because I worked with the Senate. He was very—as I’m sure you’ve heard many times—he was a very successful president and had the support of the faculty pretty broadly because he supported, in turn, faculty governance in the best sense.

DB: In addition to supporting faculty governance and being present amongst the faculty, what do you think made him successful? Most people speak of Bob Pantzer as being a very successful and well-liked president.

JVW: What made him successful? Well, several things. One, he had very strong political contacts across the state. He’d been politically active. He’d been a prosecutor in a small county somewhere out here. So he had a good political base in working with the Board of Regents right from the beginning. In fact, before Bob was president, at the time that the university system was organized, after the new constitution was written, and he was really the lead president among all of the institutional presidents in the system. I think they always turned to Bob as the one to follow. And I believe that—I don’t have real evidence for this—but I believe you would find that he wasn’t very enthusiastic about the new constitutional structure when it got underway, but he certainly was a leader in it. And then he had a real commitment to faculty governance so that he gave the faculty a lot of room to organize, to do the things they felt were important, to organize the Faculty Senate and to make the Faculty Senate an avenue towards the improvement of conditions for faculty. Yeah, he was very good. He could show temper. He could shout, but it was always hard to keep a straight face when he did that. He was really a very nice man.

DB: So your time at the University of Montana certainly progressed. You eventually became the chair of the department for a time. Talk about your own progression in the department, if you consider it progress. [laughter]

JVW: Well, I was going to say, I think you’ll find it debatable as to whether or not becoming a chairperson is, in fact, progress.
DB: OK, ‘change,’ we’ll just use a neutral word.

JLVW: A lot of departments around the country, when I was here—less frequently here than most places—chairmanships were rotating, so a faculty member would take his turn, in effect, and become chair for a three-year stint. The school I left for when I retired as the president was operating that way and most departments [were]. The University of Montana didn’t do that. I stayed chairman for longer than that. Harry Fritz has been chairman for 11 years. I think that just about sets a record. Mel Wren had been chair for a long time. And I think Bill Farr was chair for longer than that. So there’s something of a tradition of not holding to that rotating notion. But the idea that any scholar wants to become an administrator is terrible. I was offered an opportunity when Bob Pantzer was president, as a matter of fact, to go off to a special program to train as an administrator at Michigan State, and I was absolutely disdainful. I wouldn’t have anything to do with it. I’m so pleased you offered it to me, but no, that isn’t for me. I’m a scholar. Well, that changed.

DB: What was the change for you? I mean, you did eventually become an administrator.

JLVW: That’s exactly what happened. But I became an administrator largely through the avenues of participation in the faculty governance process. I was, for a time, the president of a statewide organization of the AAUP. And through that organization I appeared quite often at Board of Regents meetings on behalf of faculty members at any campus that had an AAUP chapter. So I did administrative chores and I guess I must have liked them. I don’t think I really realized I liked them until I was offered the acting presidency of what was at that time Eastern [Montana College]. Once I was there, I just had a ball. I enjoyed it very much.

DB: Before we get to what you did after leaving the University of Montana, you also were pretty integral in starting a few other things here on campus. Before we started, you mentioned an overseas program, as well as the Montana Committee for the Humanities. Would you talk a little bit about what those were and how they got started?

JLVW: Yeah, the NICSA program, the overseas program, was a consortium of schools in the Pacific Northwest. It included the university—

[break in audio]

JLVW: Northwest Inter-Institutional Council on Study Abroad, it was called. I think Montana got involved in it through somebody in the foreign language department originally. But it was made up of the University of Washington, the University of Oregon, Portland State, Washington State University, and Montana. I don’t remember if there were any other schools. We ran programs in England and in France, Avignon, France. Those are the two big ones and there may have been another one or two that I don’t remember anymore. But the idea was to run a consortium of sorts so that we could offer overseas education to students at a school like The University of Montana. It was a very successful program. The faculty members who taught in the program
were selected out of the faculty from the participating schools and the council or board, or whatever we were called, made the selection of the faculty who were to go, based on applications that were submitted. And those submissions included a precis of the kind of course that he or she would want to offer, so it was not only a matter of selecting a successful faculty member, but also a particular kind of course that they—he or she—wanted to teach in an overseas location. And it was very, very successful for quite a long time. I think it probably—I was involved with it for years, almost until the time I left, I think, but I think it died finally because—this is a guess—the University of Montana faculty who were most interested in it, foreign language, for example, really wanted their own program and wanted to separate from the consortium idea. But it had been, I think, a very successful program.

DB: Was it just humanities or was it across the board?

JVW: No, just humanities. We sent a number of people from our own department over for it.

DB: Did it involve bringing students from other countries here as well?

JVW: No, no it didn’t. It was just a chance for an overseas experience. The program in England was very big and we had a hired gun, a director of the program who was selected, again, from within those schools. What I remember most particularly was a fellow at the University of Washington who was a full-time employee in overseas education. Most of the schools didn’t have such an animal in those days.

DB: And did professors go overseas as well to teach the courses?

JVW: Oh yes, absolutely, they put together the proposal and went overseas. It was a very attractive—I always thought, at least—a very attractive opportunity for faculty to go overseas.

DB: Did you ever go overseas? Did you ever take that opportunity?

JVW: Well, I went overseas but I didn’t—I went over to do research in London. I did, in fact, agree that I was going to teach in that program one summer and I prepared the course. It was to be a course on the American Revolution as seen from the British point of view. I was going to teach it someplace in England, but I got called and offered an acting presidency instead, so I went off to do that.

DB: How about the Montana Committee for the Humanities?

JVW: Oh, the Montana Committee for the Humanities. The Montana Committee for the Humanities was organized out of federal legislation that set up the National Committee on the Humanities. The national organization, of course, does a lot of other things: it grants scholarships and fellowships and sponsors programs of various sorts. But this program, called the state-based program, was to provide funds at the local level for the various states for the
organizations of humanities programs across the states. And the director, the staff member in Washington started that with a group of three states: The University of Wyoming, I think the University of Utah was one, and I frankly don’t remember the third one. But the man who was responsible for the development of the program at the University of Wyoming—this is how things happen—was a friend and a historian. So when the national organization wanted to expand into another three states, they decided Montana would be a good one and he called me and asked me if I would be willing to organize it, so I did. We had good representation. We had an American Indian who served with it, we had representatives from private education, we had representatives from Bozeman. Bob Pantzer and I were the representatives from here, and I have to confess, and this is a new confession, that I wanted very much to see the University of Montana stay as much in control of that program as I possibly could. I figured if we got Bob Pantzer involved, it would be hard for Bozeman to beat us. And indeed, Panzer became chairman of the statewide committee and remained chair for quite some time. We traveled to Washington periodically together to attend national meetings. It was a lot of fun, and it was also a very successful program, as you know, having interviewed Marvin (?), and lasted for many, many years.

DB: In time, the program was actually housed on the campus here, is that right?

JWV: Oh yes, right, absolutely. Yeah, that was part of my hope too.

DB: So you helping in the organization of these other things, it could be, well, the overseas program is definitely not extra-curricular, but the Montana Committee for the Humanities was outside of just your departmental job. It seems like you were here at a time when, really, research, teaching, as well as service were all three very important for faculty members.

JWV: Oh, I think that’s true and that’s true in most institutions. In most large research universities, that triumvirate is the basis upon which decisions are made with regard to personnel for faculty. That was true here too, but like it is across the country, there was less emphasis on research here, probably, than on other campuses. In fact, as chair, I was always a little frustrated that so many of our historians wandered away from the fields in which they were trained in order to concentrate on Montana history.

DB: Well that is certainly a legacy that you see now in the department, the emphasis, not totally, but I think one of the strengths of the department now is Western, if not Montana, history.

JWV: Oh yeah, there’s no question. You have people like Harry [Fritz], who was trained in early national period. Bill Farr, who was a medievalist, for crying out loud.

DB: And now he’s doing Blackfeet history and treaty history.
JVW: Yeah, he’s been doing that kind of stuff for years. And of course, his job at the institute is really Montana history. That people wander off to do that is not surprising. My frustration as a chair was always that—and they all knew I was frustrated, Bill’s heard me on this a million times—that they were hired for a different purpose and they were trained differently and they were really making a profession out of an avocation. Now that I’m old and tired, I think that’s not so bad.

DB: So what were your visions of guiding the department when you were the chair? Did you have such things? Did you have a purpose or an agenda that you were hoping to implement over the few years while you were the chair?

JVW: Well I don’t remember it ever being that narrow. We always had an interest in developing a strong department and having good academic offerings in the appropriate fields for a fairly small department, but we wanted enough breadth so that we could cover most of what a student needed to have in an undergraduate program. But we also had—and I, too—had a commitment to graduate education. George Dennison was my student and did his master’s with me, very well, and I got him persuaded to go to Washington and got him placed with a good faculty member there. So we all had that interest in developing some graduate education, even though the question of the Ph.D. program would become controversial. And I think we all had an interest in publication, to a point at least. We had a little history series for a while—you’ve probably run across that—and it was the responsibility of the chair to, from some distance, keep track of that and make sure it ran as it was supposed to. And I thought that was a good idea. I also thought developing an archive was a good idea. Ross Toole went out to some of these places around the state to gather material as we became aware of its availability, at the expense of the university.

DB: When was that happening? Of course now the Mansfield Library has the K. Ross Toole Archives. So when was that beginning to take place and, you know, were you just putting archival material in the office of the History Department?

JVW: Oh no, it went to the library. It always went to the library. There was always somebody in the library they designated as an archivist. Ross may have actually hired some students to do that. I don’t remember any more. But he had the Hammond fund, which provided some money that made it possible to do things that couldn’t have been done otherwise. Hammond’s Stool, he called it.

DB: You were in the department as the decision to take on a Ph.D. program evolved, and then of course by the time you left in ’81—

JVW: No, I went to New York in ’81. I left here in ’76.

DB: But by then definitely the Ph.D. had been in place for a while and, you know, was nearing its end. Did you see that coming? Was it just not working out?
JVW: Oh, yes. Well, to my mind, the real issue was the fact that we were training people in an area where there were no jobs. We were a lesser school among the graduate schools of the world and the graduate schools nationally were grinding out more than enough Ph.D.’s without any help from the University of Montana. So it seemed to me wrong for us to contribute more people who couldn’t get jobs to that whole picture. So I thought getting out of it was really good. And you know, we didn’t have the resources, really, for a Ph.D. program. We didn’t have the kind of library collection that a grown-up Ph.D. program really requires. Didn’t have the diversity of productive faculty. I think—I don’t know the faculty well now—but I think it’s probably a more productive faculty right now than it’s been at any time in my memory.

DB: So in your time you sort of saw the opening and closing of a Ph.D. program. As you mentioned, you sort of saw the evolution of a Montana-centric study in history in the History Department, people moving from other disciplines into Montana or Western history. Any other sort of large, overarching changes that happened?

JVW: Within the department?

DB: Or even on campus in general.

JVW: Gee, I don’t remember anything in particular any longer. Those little grey cells.

DB: So, of course part of the University of Montana’s legacy is where people go from the university and how it enriches this community was well as moves people out into other positions. So along those lines, why don’t you talk a little bit about what you’ve done since leaving the university, some of the highlights of that?

JVW: Well, I went first to Billings as an acting president. When the Commissioner of Education called and told me—actually, he had two vacancies, one in Billings and one at Dillon, and offered me either one. I said I wouldn’t go to Dillon but Billings sounded kind of interesting. But let’s say right now it’ll be one year, just an acting thing for one year and we should tell everybody it’s acting so that the faculty doesn’t expect that I’m after the job. He said, “Don’t do that. That would be a mistake.” So I didn’t, and he was right, because I enjoyed it enough so that I did become a candidate for the permanent job. I had no real academic administrative experience as a dean or a vice-president, so I hadn’t had the kind of background that presidents usually have. And as a result, I sort of learned as I went along. My vision of a president was pretty much the kind of life a vice-president leads, an academic vice-president. I quickly learned that wasn’t correct and I discovered I really enjoyed that part that was off-campus and political. So I got the permanent job at Billings and after five years there I said, “It’s time to leave. I’m either going to go on to another presidency somewhere or I’m going to go back to Missoula.” I had preserved my tenure in Missoula. The president at that time was not very happy about that, but the Commissioner liked the idea and the Board agreed to it. So I said, “I’m either going to go back to the department in Missoula or I’m going to move on to a presidency.” The
Commissioner at that time, I let him know that I wanted to make that kind of a move and I began to let my name get out nationally to places where I might be interested in going and I wound up in Rockport, New York, and I stayed there as president for 16 years. Had no intention of becoming a president to begin with, certainly no expectation that I would stay in Billings for five years, and not an expectation that I would last in Rockport, New York, for 16 years. New York is a very big system. I enjoyed that big system and enjoyed working in and with Albany, as well as on the campus. Then when I retired in ’78, I guess, yeah. Goodness. Not ’78, ’98. Then the president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in Washington called and asked if I would be willing to take a vice presidency on an acting basis. This time it was really going to be acting, and I did that and spent a year in Washington representing and working with the national organization. That was a lot of fun. I had never really had a job off of a university campus before. And when I retired from there, I retired altogether.

DB: And of course you spend at least part of your year back in Missoula. What has kept you coming back to Missoula?

JVW: A son and daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. So we bought this as a place we could come and have some privacy away from the pounding of little feet and big dogs.

DB: You know, when starting out, you said that you had fond memories of your time here, so I guess in closing I’d like you to just tell me what those fond memories are, what makes you say you had fond memories of this place? Any particular memories you want to share?

JVW: Yeah, I would say this, that I think I was always very, very well treated by the University of Montana. I had good support for the research I wanted to do. I had good support for the leaves I wanted to take. I have nothing but kind things to say from my experience here. And there are my good memories.

DB: Great. Anything else you want to add?

JVW: No, I think that pretty much covers it.

DB: All right. I appreciate your time.

JVW: Sure.

[End of Interview]