Oral History Number: 312-001, 002
Interviewee: Frank B. Bessac
Interviewer: Scott Woodruff
Date of Interview: November 7, 1993

Note: The interviewee refers to a number of place names in China and Inner Mongolia that could not be understood clearly enough to transcribe accurately. These have been marked with (?).

Scott Woodruff: This is an interview with Frank Bessac. Where were you born?

Frank Bessac: I was born in Lodi, California, 1922.

SW: What brought you about to your interest in Asian studies?

FB: A number of accidents. First of all, after graduating from high school there wasn’t much of anything else to do, but to go on to college. They had just started the junior college movement, so I started at Stockton JC the first two years and then to the...then college, now University of Pacific at Stockton, California. [I] was majoring in U.S. history. I’d started this in ’39 and in ’41 was Pearl Harbor. I joined the Enlisted Reserve Corp, which they wanted to have us get our B.A. degree and then enter the army and become Lieutenant Fuzzes.

Then there became some urgency about needing men, the army believed in March of ’43. I would have graduated in ’43. So they called us up in March. Presumably, we would have gone to boot camp and, if we’d done well enough, gone on to officers’ candidate school. In the North African Campaign, the Germans didn’t pick off the junior officers, didn’t snipe them, didn’t kill them as they had in World War One. I don’t know the reason; some change in uniform. So now they had an abundance of the 21-year olders all set to go to Officer Candidate School, and they didn’t need them. The Army thought of a program called the Army Specialized Training...ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program, where these kids could go for a while until they were needed to head back.

I had done my boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri with combat engineers. There was the possibility, if you had a proficiency in language or scored low enough on their tests, you could study a foreign language and I chose to study Chinese at Cornell. So I studied Chinese at Cornell for a year and then, just as I was about to leave Cornell for the final brief week or two leave before going to the next assignment, a captain or somebody came through. He talked to everybody and he said, “We have this wonderful opportunity for people doing cryptography in Hawaii. Who wants to join?”

Everybody said, “Fine, I’d join,” except for about three or four of us.

He said “Why don’t you want to go to Hawaii and study cryptography? Be a cryptographer?”
I said, “I want to go to China.”

He said, “Say no more.”

We went to Fort Riley, Kansas and we were one of the last to have earned our spurs in the horse cavalry, as they called it down there [laughs] in Kansas. Done our thing, almost. We were out on the final winter bivouac in the snow, tending our horses, and came orders to go to Canton for me and a couple other friends, couple others of us. We went in and here’s the same guy. So I pulled a Stanley Lennox (?). [laughs] He grinned and he didn’t admit that it had all been a ploy. None of those guys...there wasn’t cryptography school. None of our group was called for it; they just sat around waiting “When are we going to stop having to take care of these horses and go to Hawaii and look at the girls?” Never happened, but we who turned it down were...the lieutenant said, “Would you mind being shot in the stomach?”

I said, “Yes,” because that was logical.

He said, “Would you jump out of a plane?”

I said, “With a parachute.”

He said, “Okay. Do you want to join the Office of Strategic Services?”

I says, “I haven’t any idea. What is it?”

He says, “Well, you’ll find out.” [laughs]

I said “Okay!”

Within a week, I was in Washington D.C. To skip over a lot, about five months later...this is January of ’45. New Year’s Eve, I remember was in a hotel...we spent in a hotel, one of those beautiful classical hotels in Washington D.C. Anyway, four or five months later, with training on Catalina Island...survival training and all with the outfit and first being tested...They still have these sites going, I guess, for historic displays at the airfield outside of Fairfax outside of Washington D.C. They’re both testing you and training you.

Then a slow boat to China. We went by ourselves and had to zigzag across the Pacific; presumably, if it was a fairly intelligent Japanese submarine commander he would have known that we were zigging and zagging and gone the same way. [laughs] We went as a lone ship. We got off once in Western Australia, which was just wonderful, and then went up to Calcutta.

After a couple of weeks, there was a funny little incident. We had been privates going into the Aryan language program and we became Private First Classes. We got on this plane in
Northeastern India just north...just west of Burma, a bit in India. People were loading up and it was a four-star general...Stillwell or something like that. [laughs] Then three-stars and two-stars and one-stars and then a good number of full colonels and a few lesser ones. I don't know if they had any Lieutenants or not. Then they said, “PFC Bessac!” and everybody laughed and clapped. [laughs] The three of us flew [unintelligible] and landed in China.

First day there, I went in and reported to OSS headquarters. They said, “Do you want a typewriter or a parachute?” I could type, but I couldn’t parachute. For whatever reason, I chose parachute and earned my wings, although I never got a parachute because the Air Force stole them all before they got to us. At least that’s our story anyway.

I got half a dozen of the [unintelligible]. Then, fortunately, the war ended. The life expectancy of a parachute commander was not too long. If you lived, you tended to feel...we were getting increases of rank. I ended as a Sergeant, but we probably got field commissions too. Then they said, “Do you want to go to Beijing?”

I said, “Sure.”

After two days there, I was in Beijing, riding into the town from the airport and seeing these girls going by, with Chinese dress with the slit down the side. It’s a long dress, but it’s split down the side and they’re driving men’s bikes. Boy, that was a far cry from how I’d seen women dress in West China. I stayed there a couple years and continued as an OSS sort of thing, but they kept changing the name of it. I think I had a few months in which it was called the CIA reporting on the whole situation.

Then I went into the GI bill to study Chinese and Mongolian. When I was there, I went into these anti-Japanese...guerilla bases outside of Beijing. This is Chinese communism. That was during the peace, the truce period back in ’47. I managed to get to Mongolia. The contrast between China and Mongolia is so very sharp.

SW: Two different peoples?

FB: Two different peoples, two different languages, two different ways of life, two different attitudes towards everything; not everything, but a lot of things. Most things. Just amazing. In the fall of ’47, I was by myself in a Chinese house, with a courtyard with a cook...That didn’t leave me much of anything else with the GI bill [unintelligible]. I attended a Chinese university with the special supervision of...I was studying classical Chinese, written language, and spoken Mongolian. I had supervisors in both of these endeavors.

Then, in the spring of ’48, May of ’48 or something like that, I was recruited to join the China relief mission. After World War Two, we had a United Nations Relief rehabilitate. This ended and later we had the A.I.D. pick up. In the interim, there were sort of makeshift aid programs. In North China and Inner Mongolia, there had been a semi-drought for about three years. The
harvest had been very poor. I became an administrative officer for essentially the Inner Mongolian relief project, which lasted through that summer.

Then I received a Fulbright Student Award. I was going to go to the area north of Beijing and study a community...one of these mixed Mongolian-Chinese communities, or two communities very close to each other.

SW: What was the purpose of the study?

FB: Just to note the different ways of life, to easily contrast and also how they both adjusted to each other. Owen Lattimore was the person whose writing had been the most inspiring at this time.

SW: Were you working through Cornell University?

FB: Oh no.

SW: This is all under the Army?

FB: No, I got out of the Army years ago. I got out of the army in March of ‘46 in Shanghai. The last thing somebody said in an official capacity was, “Stay in the Reserve Corp and keep your rank.” I restrained myself and just walked off.

SW: You’d had enough of that.

FB: In O.S.S., they didn’t give a damn what your rank was. You do the job. I was a sergeant and could have been a major. This guy was doing his thing. Anyway, no, in Beijing, I was studying at a university in Beijing. Then I went to the China Relief Mission, which is out of the State Department. Then I got the Fulbright Student Award and I was all set to do this, but there was a friend of mine who had gone from Beijing to Nanking and I wanted to see how she was.

SW: Was this a love interest?

FB: An affectionate interest. I got a flight to Nanking and, several weeks later, I went back to the airport to fly back to Beijing. There was a Marine there. He said, “No Americans are allowed back to Beijing.” I don’t know what this is all about. Some people said it wasn’t enforced.

I said, “Why not let me go?”

They said, “No, you can’t go.”

Meanwhile I had developed infectious glaucoma. Cutting out a little bit, I went from Nanking to West China. At a medical university, I had an operation for glaucoma and then went north of
there to the Alashan Bayannur in western Inner Mongolia. Then did a by now half year...put in several months of trying to study this inter-relationship of the Chinese Mongols in this region. Then the Chinese Communists were winning and the town was going to be occupied by other defeated Nationalists or triumphant Communists or first one and then the other. Either could have been unpleasant. So a friend and I and a couple of kids were escorted to this school in Shandan (?). [laughs] The Alashan is here and then you go across the Alashan Gobi. This is a semi-desert: sometimes real, sometimes grass.

Three or four weeks later—by camel, we went by camel—we came out at the town of Shandan, which was the place of residence for the headquarters of the Chaplain Rudy Ellie (?), who was an Australian who had been working with the Guak (?) people in China. He later became, I think it’s safe to say, a strong apologist for the Chinese communists, but not at that time. He was doing his own thing.

My friend stayed there. As far as I know, he’s still in China. I went westward. I rode what the Chinese call...I became a yellow fish. Yellow means for the Yellow River. Which the Chinese say in order to escape the water jumped in the boat. That’s how they describe people who give a little bit of extra money to a fellow, to a trucker who has a load, and you sit on top of the load. If you live, that’s good. This is a pulsing (?) truck [unintelligible], whipping along to the first town in Chinese Turkistan.

There I ordered a Sino-Soviet friendship plane, which was interesting because the door of the plane kept opening while in flight. I had to go up and tell the flight attendant that the door was open. That made things even more interesting. When I arrived in Urumqi, which is the capital of Chinese Turkistan. The Chinese call it Xinjiang, which means it’s a province. It’s a very imperialistic colonial term. I don’t approve of Chinese imperialism.

SW: Did that ever get you in trouble?

FB: At this time, the western part of it had just finished a revolution in the valley which drained towards what is now Kazakhstan. I was...back up a little bit to answer your question...arrived in Urumqi and planned to go from there over the mountains to the south of town called the Tian Shan, in Chinese, which means the “Heavenly Mountain”, and visit the Mongolian encampments on the southern slopes and work my way around to the southern oasis of Chinese Turkistan, over the main passes, one of the main passes, from China over the Hindu Kush and down into India.

But when I arrived in Urumqi, somebody stopped me and they said, “Do you want to go to the American Consulate?” I said “I guess so!” [laughs] I thought I was the only American within five hundred miles. I went to the Consulate and here was this chap Douglas MacKiernan. He said, “Stick around a couple days. I have a load of stuff and you will pack it up for me and you can help me pack it to get over the Kindu Pass (?) and the Karakong Pass (?) and to Hindu Kush.” I wonder if that’s recording—
SW: I hope so. [laughs] Is the Hindu Kush part of Tibet?

FB: It starts...it’s just to the west of Tibet.

SW: Is your purpose for this trip academic or pure adventure of a young man?

FB: Both! Lattimore took trips across the Mongolian Gobi, wrote a book about it. He went to Turkestan and wrote a book about it. Went over [unintelligible] and came out, then wrote good scholarly work. I could do it too! As long as I don’t have to apologize for having been there.

I said okay. He would pay for his stuff’s and my passage into [unintelligible]. Within a couple days, the government changed hands and it became communist, which didn’t mean much to me, but it turned out Doug MacKiernan had close relationships with the local Kazakhs and they didn’t like any Chinese government. The Nationalists had left them alone. They didn’t want to join the Soviet Union as the Ehli (?) Rebellion had seemed to indicate was going to happen. As I say, the Nationalists were leaving them alone. They didn’t know about the Communists.

I guess they asked Doug, “Come along with us! Won’t hurt. Might help.” Doug said “Okay!” There were three white Russians there who could speak Kazakh and Russian and Chinese, fortunate for me [laughs]. Doug said “Frank, want to join the Kazakhs?” If you can’t join the Mongols, join the Kazakhs! So we traveled from where we were, which was more or less at the western extent of this northern valley. If you look at the map, you see the Tian Shan divides Chinese Turkestan into a big valley to the south, the Tarim Basin or the Taklamakan and, to the north, the Dzungaria which means “right-hand,” named after the Western Mongols.

This is where the Kazakhs were. They were moving eastward, so we went the next day after the government changed hands. We managed to squeak through. Obviously, no policy had come about how to handle Americans, so we drove on out and, after a while, abandoned the Jeep. Some Kazakhs came along and provided us with horses. For the next month, we rode eastward. The Kazakhs, as far as I could understand, were going to probably seek asylum...try to see how they could negotiate autonomy with the Chinese Communists and, if that wasn’t going to work, join the Mongolian peoples. Seek asylum with the Mongolian peoples. Neither of these worked, by the way; and the leader, a chap named Osman Bator [Ospan Batyr]. Bator means hero, a title given...

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
FB: This is not an inherited title. To be called a Bator, a hero, means you’ve done something heroic. When you earn it, when people say you are now a Bator, then you have an owl feather pinned to the top of your head or to the top of your hat, your talma (?), by your sweetheart or your daughter; a pretty young girl! Have you read the *Iliad*?

SW: No, I haven’t.

FB: To my mind, mainly because I lived with the Kazakhs, the big point of tension is between Agamemnon, who was just becoming one of those inherited princes or something, as an inherited status, head of the expedition against Troy...and Achilles, who is a heroic figure on the Greek side, who earned his status! On the Trojan side, Paris, who is the heir apparent who started the whole thing and Hector, who is his brother, but who dies in the advance of the city, killed by Achilles. Paris and Agamemnon, obviously not titled hero. That’s what Osman Bator was. He was leader of the group, but, for some reason...I think the Mongolian people and the Soviet Union whose lead they were following didn’t accept...and I don’t have this in writing from anybody...

It began snowing where we were. We were in the northeast corner of Chinese Turkestan, just a few miles south of the Mongolian People’s Republic border. It began snowing and I thought, “What are we doing here? We certainly aren’t going to be able to help the Kazakhs anymore in negotiating with the Mongolian People’s Republic.” I hated to leave because of some personal ties, but we did.

We went across the mountains. For a Montanan it seems silly, but I was a Californian and, in the Sierras, we don’t have larches and larches drop their leaves in winter. We were driving along and I was going to make a fire. I saw these dead trees, good kindling, and I went to break off some and it sprung and the Kazakhs laughed [laughs]. They explained to me that this is a coniferous tree which lost its leaves in winter. Anyway, we made our fire across the road, which was a dangerous thing. We passed very close to the town where I had gotten on that Sino-Soviet friendship plane. Crossed it to the west, went to the Khara Gobi, the Black Desert.

To make it short, it took us about a week and a half at least riding through the Khara-Gobi. After crossing the road, the only time we really worried, as a group, was when we had to go one night without water. We had water in the morning, but there would be no spring in between. We had water at the next night, or the next late afternoon. A little saline and I promised myself if I ever got out, one of the first things I would do when I got home in Lodi was sit down and have a glass of non-salt...sip at non-salt water and a glass of cold milk.

The five of us...the seven because we had two Kazakh guides, went southward through the Khara Gobi, and then cutting across to an area called Gazkol (?). I don’t know what the Chinese have done to it now. The Chinese find it very difficult to...because of the character system,
they’d write it into the phonemics, which they have, but most all these things are put into characters. Sort of strange.

In that area, were also three Kazakh...a federation of Kazakh communities called Al-Nehru (?), each one. There were three of these closely incorporated units for the federation. Al means community, Nehru means lineage. I could go into a two week discussion of social organization. This is the old, classical type of social organization for not just Mongolia, but right across through the Ukraine. Indo-European speaking ancestors once lived very closely the life that I lived.

I arrived in December the first and left March the fifteenth, about three and a half months in the Kazakh Al-Nehru (?). The only houses in it were abandoned. The Kazakhs had taken over from the Mongols and the Mongols had some semi-subterranean houses. There was a stream running through and we used to overflow the water and some ditches for grain, probably oats and barley. This is at ten-thousand feet, which was good training. This is planted before...this is their winter encampment. In the spring, they would plant this and somebody would stay and shoo the birds out. Then they’d come back and harvest it. Everybody else’s had plots, largely sheep not many goats. Some tame donkey, lots of camels and horses. Horses were the prestige, ride a fast horse.

SW: Were they using dogs too?

FB: Oh yes. Mastiffs. You don’t have shepherd type of dogs in Central Asia, which is interesting. Matter of fact, you hardly have them east of the Pyrenees. You had these big protecting dogs; toy Pekingese and the Chow, which is the Chinese rendition. These dogs protected the sheep and protected the plots. When a Mongolian or Kazakh would come into a yurt they’d make terrific racket, could be dangerous. Then they were called off when you were accepted. But they didn’t herd or take care of the livestock in the way that a collie or a shepherd does.

SW: They’re more protectors.

FB: They’re more protectors. They weren’t herders, herd-dogs, in a true sense of the term.

In this encampment...we went to an encampment that was called Taji (?). Taji (?) is a hereditary title and I didn’t know how far back this fellow’s ancestors had the term. It comes from the Chinese heir apparent to the throne, what was then given to the Bayannur (?) heads in Mongolia. A lot of the Mongolian [unintelligible]... to the Kazakhs too. We settled down next to the Taji, very close. Close by was a trader, a non-combat trader, a Chinese Moslem trader. They never know whether they’re Chinese or something...Wei Wei (?) the Chinese call them—

The local priest, the Mullah, or said properly in Arabic, the Mullah-Kala (?). I stayed there for a very pleasant couple months, at least for me, because I was very interested in what they were doing. I’d get one of the Russians to go with me and translate. There were not many people
there who spoke Chinese. The religious...the Mullah, they’d speak Mongolian so I could talk to
them, but my Chinese was not much use [unintelligible]. I watched and learned their way of life.
They enjoyed it.

SW: Did they? Did they welcome you?

FB: Oh yes! Came into it. They had the two-handed handshake, which they taught to me
[unintelligible]. Sitting in the back of the yurt [unintelligible]. Being there, in that sort of core
area...the rest of the people were spreading around. They couldn’t all live together and herd
sheep. They had to fan out. In summer, they went southward over...it’s a sort of a spur of the
Kunlun Mountains, which is the mountainous northern border of Tibet. This is a spur coming
out of it at close to 15,000. Then they went down to the valley on the other side and there were
a couple lakes and they’d spend the summer there. Lots of good grass. Come back in the fall
again. Meanwhile, the grass had grown for their winter pasture.

I enjoyed myself a lot. Meanwhile, I read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. I didn’t have stuff to take
notes in. I didn’t come prepared to do an ethnography. So I read Tolstoy, which I picked up in
Shandan. Remember that place where we came out of the Alashan Gobi?

SW: Is this translated into Chinese?

FB: No this is in English, not the Russian.

SW: You spent three months in this encampment?

FB: December, January, February, half of March. Then we left possibly on the Ides of March.

SW: Did you travel with them to the summer pastures?

FB: No, they hadn’t gone. We left before. They wouldn’t go until the grass began to turn and we
left in the middle of March. We went to go over the Changtang, the high area of Tibet. It
doesn’t have peaks as high as the Himalayas, but a broad area: largest high area in the world.

SW: It’s a huge plateau?

FB: Yes, with mountains. There’s a National Geographic that describes it. He says the valley is
15...The first valley...we cross over this low pass of 15,000. We came down to about 12,000.
That’s where the Kazakh encampments would be, somewhere to the west. There was a
westward flowing river and they were a couple of leagues to the west. We crossed the river on
ice. Solid. No problem there.

SW: What were the temperatures?
FB: I don’t know.

SW: Very cold?

FB: Yes, very much.

SW: What were you mainly consisting on? Eating?

FB: Dried, salted wild-ass meat. There was lots of game. After we crossed the river, we went along a while; then we cross the Culong (?) itself, which were about 18,000. Then we dropped down to the next valley, which was about sixteen. We kept doing that for a month and a half before we saw any Tibetans.

SW: Did you suffer any hypoxia going up these high passes?

FB: Not going up. Remember, we were living at ten thousand for three and a half months. But suddenly, in doing your work...I remember I would...we all had some jobs and mine was packing our little tent and getting it onto a camel. We were cautious. We planned. You couldn’t just [unintelligible]. Even, I remember, coming into a tent which had a cover over the door to keep the cold out, you didn’t just drop down, scoot down and pick up things at the bottom. You couldn’t bend over quickly and come up again quickly.

SW: What was your progress every day? How many miles?

FB: Oh gee, I don’t know. We’d get up; we’d start early, but quit early because every afternoon there was a wind that would start [unintelligible] and we wanted to have our tent up before the wind became too harsh. It was blowing eastward. The ground was higher to the west than to the east. This allowed for somewhat lower...warmer temperatures to the east, a slight low pressure. I don’t know if that’s true, but that’s the way I figured it out. These heavier winds would flow down day after day. We spent...probably riding eight to ten hours. Probably put in twenty miles a day.

SW: Wow. Were you riding or walking?

FB: Riding. We saw lots of game walking along. Little foxes, little rabbits, little...do you have them in Montana, picas? [makes whistling call] The wild ass loved to circle us. We were sort of strange. We only shot one once. The animals we were eating, the maggots...They had been killed in the fall. The maggots had become flies, left their eggs in there. [unintelligible] The salt that we had salted our ass meat with had some [unintelligible]. Then the antelope, also, sometimes would circle, but not as much. They’d run along next to us. There were two types of antelope and, once in a while, we’d see wild yak and we’d go around them. We didn’t want to shoot them.
SW: Get a little territorial. [laughs] Did you run into any grizzly bears?

FB: No. They have a Tibetan bear. I don’t remember see any. I didn’t have binoculars. I think Mac saw some leopard. Going over the mountain passes, we saw some leopards. One very obvious resident were the [unintelligible], the big vultures. They’d look at us and scream. Luckily, we began to drop elevations and made it to Tibet.

We came down to this Tibetan encampment. We went along ahead of the rest and they sent a mule out and we settled down next to them. They were very nice. Then we saw some men on horseback coming in, who looked like soldiers or something. So I went over to the encampment again, to this black tent. Tibetans live in black tents. Kazakhs live in yurts. The Tibetan black tent is essentially Middle Eastern. I went over to them and then they pointed their guns at me [unintelligible]. I showed them my back and I turned around and walked away. Then I heard shots and they were very heavy. I went back. They had shot my poor companions; three were killed, the fourth was wounded and ran from the scene.

[Unintelligible section]

I walked back and forth. They began to laugh. They told me to turn around. They bound my hands and immediately unbound them as they wanted me back in the tent...to pack the tent. Apparently, the Kazakhs agreed [unintelligible].

SW: Oh. So there was some animosity between these Tibetan militia men and the Kazakhs with which you were traveling?

FB: Well no, the Kazakhs had stopped traveling with us.

SW: You had no guides?

FB: No, we hadn’t had guides.

SW: So the Russians were killed? The white Russians?

FB: Two white Russians and Doug MacKiernan were both killed. Another white Russian was shot in the leg. Last I heard...I went to his wedding in San Francisco. Cossack (?) Don Cossack [unintelligible] down in San Francisco.

SW: Did you believe you were going to die that day?

FB: Oh no. There was one time when I not only believed it but I had [unintelligible]. I told them in several languages, but I couldn’t speak to them [unintelligible]. They could tell I wasn’t a marauder, so they weren’t afraid of me. I had no arms going to these places as the other four
had when they went to see the Tibetans. [unintelligible] They left their arms behind, went out with their hands up. [unintelligible].

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
FB: Anyway, they were nice to us. Took us into the encampment; fed us.

SW: How were your feelings toward them at this point?

FB: On the one hand, I felt they anticipated trouble also. They were interested in the fact [unintelligible]. So I was ambivalent. But then...[sighs]...that’s the way in which astral (?) nomads and people like this, including the Indo-Europeans who came across in the Bronze Age, have acted for a long, long time: very good within the group and once they recognize you. Part of it was fun. They don’t have to go shoot up the random killings we have here; they could go attack their neighbors, if they fit in the right classification [laughs]. They have to make it so they can’t be raided. If you run out of legitimate groups to raid then you fake raid [laughs], but that’s a background for knighthood.

SW: Did you have to bury your friends that day?

FB: I couldn’t. [long pause] I couldn’t bury my friends. In the world where we were living, Tibetans thought that people should not be buried. The ultimate sacrifice of man to nature was to give his body, which is unimportant and material according to...Genghis Khan I am certain was never buried, although there’s several sites [unintelligible].

SW: Do these people practice some form of religion? Are they Buddhists?

FB: They’re Buddhists, sure. That night I thought I was...they’d been treated very nicely...I bedded down, laid down myself, about ready to go to sleep. Meanwhile they were going through our luggage and having a wonderful time. Somebody came across an old World War One grenade. Some poor guy had took that, pulled the trigger, and fortunately tossed it away and it exploded. I thought it exploded next to us [unintelligible] I woke up the next morning.

After about two or three days, we met a delegation, which represented the government of Bhutan. They took me to the nearest town, three or four days [unintelligible]. Remember when the Tibetan monks came: one of those monk’s brother was there at the time.

We rode out. We got on the boat. You go from Lhasa down the Kyi River [Lhasa River]. That goes into the, what they call in Tibetan, the Tsangpo. I didn’t want to go right across the river. I wanted to go down to a monastery...[unintelligible] Then across the Brahmaputra, which if you don’t have an eye on a map you can’t quite follow; going first, more or less, south south-west and finally down to the low valley the Yatoh (?), at about ten thousand. Lhasa is 12,000.

SW: This is where the Dalai Lama was living?
FB: Yes, yes.

SW: He was still around at this point?

FB: Oh yes. Tibet was still independent at this point. [unintelligible]

SW: Did you have a conversation with the Dalai Lama?

FB: I couldn’t converse. He was too young. He hadn’t come of age, so they had a...what is the proper term...I have no idea. We met. I received his blessing. I think he was fifteen. He was just too young to become the Dalai Lama [unintelligible]

Then we went in the Assam valley, after resting there for a few days. Oh, I remember this Tibet garrison waiting for us at the head of the Assam valley, going south now on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. At the head of the valley were these sunny slopes, at the top of the plateau, at the top of the pass, and started going down. Going down, we see these trees and I thought, oh how joyful! It had been a long time since I had seen anything like that. We spent several days at Rata (?) and then it was up and over the last pass, not too long, between Tibet and what was then Sikkim, which was then an independent state. (Several unintelligible sentences).

Then I decided [unintelligible] so I went to Berkley. I went to grad school to become an anthropologist, which was a bit of a challenge because I hadn’t had any anthropology!

SW: When you were going through Tibet and meeting these people, were you one of the first Westerners they’d ever seen?

FB: For many, I was the only Westerner they’d ever seen.

SW: Did you experience any physical hardships like frostbite?

FB: Yes, I had third-degree frostbite. First degree is when the outer skin comes off and second is the second layer and third degree is when it gets down to the meat. It left me alone, but now it’s coming back in the last five years.

[Unintelligible section]

—and now I thought well, so what?

SW: It was worth it? You said you are going to be publishing a paper on this experience?

FB: It’s complicated. I gave a talk on life in the Kazakh camp, but it was taken from classes I used to teach and my dissertation. It wasn’t ready for publication [unintelligible]. The general topic
was the evolution of society—political, economic, social society—in Central Asia and so-called Inner Asia. I’ve been rewriting this until it can get to a good point, which meant, for me, that I had to learn to use a computer. My boys helped a lot with that. They aren’t here to counsel right now. I wanted to get that out of the way. Then a chap who was here several years ago, a chap named Leo Moser (?), was urging me, along with him, as joint authors, to essentially rewrite my dissertation for a book I have used for my Inner Asia (?) course. He named it *Beyond the Wall*.

SW: That’s an appropriate title.

FB: I’m going over and learning how to use the computers in the library to get titles and so forth. I’m busy! Then I’ve got to write about my Taiwanese...when I came to the States and was working and finished my doctorate, I went to the Agricultural Development Consul [ADC] invitation...and a grant also from Lawrence University for teaching. It’s a freshwater Ivy League. This is in Wisconsin. ADC gave a research grant. I went to study the social effects of the language of Taiwan. I did that for a year. I went back in about four years. Did some writing. Then, four years ago, I went back and did a lot of publications on that. I want a book on that.

SW: You are a busy man! Thank you for taking this time. Maybe we can make another date sometime and continue this.

FB: Maybe you can take a look at that, find out what’s wrong. See if it—

SW: —picked up? [laughs]

[End of Interview]