David Brooks: Ok, it’s June 29, 2006, and I’m David Brooks, the interviewer for the University of Montana’s Oral History Project. This afternoon I’m speaking with James Cox. Mr. Cox, I was hoping you could start by just talking a little bit your personal background, and your educational background and your road to the University of Montana?

James Cox: Yes, circuitous road. My wife and I were born in Bayonne, New Jersey; we are both 77 years old. We married at an early age. I was drafted right after we were married. I spent two years in the Army during the Korean War, but it was all spent at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where I wound up as editor of the Army newspaper. I began as a telephone lineman and wound up as the editor of the Army newspaper and our daughter was born in the Army hospital there. My education background is mixed. I was part of the Catholic school system for 16 years, and eight of those years were with the Jesuits in high school and college. I received what I think was a good classical education to the point where I was even allowed to read as one of the two languages for the Ph.D. in Latin. I could still read Latin, and I did get an introduction at that time in chemistry that interested me, but I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English with this secondary interest in science.

When I got out of the Army, I always wanted to come to Montana, probably from reading western novels, so we set out in our 1952 Chevrolet with a six-month old child and headed for, would you believe, Jordan, Montana. They said they had a semester opening in Jordan, Montana, for a teacher of English. So we arrived in Jordan, Montana, at 15 degrees below zero and I was thinking on the way up from Miles City, that if the car ran out of gas or malfunctioned we would have frozen to death. Anyway, I stayed at Jordan for just that semester. I found Jordan absolutely fascinating. We had good friends there, who were our hosts and we decided we were going to have to make the break right away or we were going to be there for the rest of our lives. At that time, Jordan, Montana, had no paved main street and as you probably recall from reading the recent Missoulian it was one of the last high schools in the United States with a dormitory. The distances were so tremendously great that kids had to stay in the dormitory. There was a popular folk tale that half of the population of Garfield County was conceived in that dormitory. I don’t believe it; it couldn’t have been that high. Anyway, we left Jordan and then I made a beginning of graduate education that summer at MSU and took some more courses that had to do with school law and school finance and so forth. We then went to Ryegate, Montana which is the capitol of Golden Valley County, probably about 80 miles north. Can you place it?

DB: No, I can’t say I’ve been in Golden Valley.
JC: Eighty miles northwest of Billings. We used to have to go back and forth for groceries every week. I liked Ryegate; those kids were very good, very sharp and very conscientious, pleasant to deal with farm kids. I stayed there for six years with one-year break to do a master’s degree in, would you believe, physical sciences, under the auspices of the National Science Foundation. At that time there was simply a lot of money in science education, post-Sputnik era, and I had enough science background so I could do that. After probably about five academic quarters at Arizona State University, I did the degree in teaching of physical sciences. I went back to Ryegate, became superintendent at age 30 or something, superintendent of schools, and disliked it thoroughly. Then all of the sudden the faculty at MSU, in teacher education, asked me to come down there and do a Ph.D. and to be their person in science education. I went down and spent another five semesters there, finished the course work for the Ph.D. in science education and was about ready to settle in there, when at that time the dean of Education here, Linus Carleton, and the head of physics, Rulon Jeppesen, and head of chemistry, John Stewart, were looking for someone here in science education and they called me and asked me if I would be interested, and I said yes. A week later I began a career here.

DB: What year was that?

JC: 1964. But those were three really great names. John Stewart died just this past year, head of chemistry. Rulon Jeppesen was a fabulous old guy and Linus Carleton was a distinguished gentleman. Anyway those were years when, here at the University, if the administrators would just arbitrarily settle on somebody, they would just hire them. It was not this process that is so rigorous and involved for hiring. When I arrived in 1964, I’m trying to continue the thread of my own education, I had not finished my dissertation. Nevertheless they were willing to offer me an assistant professorship, which was nice, and then I had five years to finish the degree before I would come up for promotion again. I did finish the thesis in time. When I arrived in ‘64 it was a time of great growth on campus; there was simply more money and students and actually there was no room in the old Chemistry department. I was listed as a joint appointment in Chemistry and the School of Education. I was the only one on campus that was a double appointment, and curiously enough I didn’t know the chemists as well as I knew the biologists, because I had spent one summer up at the Biological Station. That was the summer of ’59, where I met Reuben Diettert, who was the chairman of Botany and Sherman Preece. Anyway, when I arrived on campus they had no room in Chemistry they said, come over to Botany; we have a place in botany there. So I spent 17 years as professor of chemistry in the Botany Department. As a result of my location there, I did a number of publications with the botanists, particularly Sherman Preece and Charles Miller, who retired about the same time as I did and who was paleo-botanist across the hall. It just shows that proximity is important in terms of what it is that you get involved with.

DB: You mentioned that there was this very open and easy hiring process still in place at the time. I guess along those lines, talk about some other things that characterized the University at that time, or perhaps changed, or that you found unique. I mean you are coming from a
background of Catholic Schools, rural Montana, secondary school education, the Army, MSU, so
discuss some of the unique things about the University of Montana at the time.

JC: Yes, that’s a delightful topic for me because I was aware of these strange changes. One
difference that was immediately apparent to me when I arrived at Missoula was the difference
between MSU at the time and the University of Montana. Down there it was rather like the
military where there was a kind of a top-down sort of structure that was in place and that was
assumed to be the proper way of doing business. I remember, for example, wanting some
supplies when I arrived here on campus. I went to the chairman and I said, I need some of
these; would you give me an ok to get these materials? And he said, What? What do you need?
and I said, Well paper, and paper clips and a stapler. That’s not my business; go get them. At
the little bookstore I just went and got the stuff. I also learned very quickly, at that time at least,
it was the early ’60s, there was a kind of delightful anarchism about the faculty. It seemed to
me like the president better look out, the assistant professors are in charge here and the
Faculty Senate was a blast. I mean the president, by convention I guess, had to appear, but he
was always ready to get slammed around, even though everyone seemed to be delighted with
Mr. Pantzer.

DB: Who are some of the people in particular that you remember at the time that fall under
that characterization?

JC: Yes, well particularly the characters of the Faculty Senate, I mean the ones that made the
meetings most lively. There was an old boy from the School of Education who was an expert in
public-school finance and in fact himself had written up at that time what was the method of
distributing funds to the public schools in Montana. His name was Vern Sletten and he died
maybe a few years ago, and another was Bob Fields, who was a chairman of Geology. Another
was—oh, what was his name, in Philosophy? Oh, Henry Bugbee, who was chairman of
Philosophy was very aggressive, and very vocal and well spoken. John Lawry, who left, I think,
about half way through his career for California. These people, many of them were, I don’t want
to say wild, they were just asserting what they felt to be the prerogatives of the faculty in
University governance. This is a delightful, I said to myself, this is the way it should be and that
was a great contrast. It was not true down at MSU. I heard later there was a Senate, but I think
it was some kind of a closet organization that met in the middle of the night and were
considered, I’m sure, subversive. But that was not the case here.

Now if you want me to continue on that theme, I’d be delighted. In 1974, perhaps, the
financing of the University began to come apart and things began to get very, very tight. The
number of faculty who were being hired went down. There were salary caps and all kinds of
austerity programs that were taking place. Dick Bowers, who I think had become president at
about that time, instituted a retrenchment program. Well, that was not going to be done by
Main Hall so the faculty decided, well, we’re going to do retrenchment ourselves, we are going
to see if there’s any fat here that can be separated from the bone. And they put together a
retrenchment program of five different committees, five different retrenchment committees.
Two of them were in the humanities and two of them were in the sciences and one in the schools. At that time the schools were kind of the tail end of the University; the School of Education and the Business School. The Business School has proliferated since; it was nothing like what it is now. Anyway they had those five committees, and I was chairman of one of the ones in the humanities. The job was to decide where we might make some cuts. We made very few cuts, we made one in journalism and we made one in foreign language. It was when I was chairman of that committee that I met Gerald Fetz. Do you know Jerry?

DB: I don’t know him.

JC: He used to be the head of the Department of Foreign Language. He is now the academic dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He and I got along well and he convinced me that the Foreign Language Department ought to be invulnerable on this. Because of the fact that we had this giant humanities program, everyone was required to do a certain number of group requirements in science and group requirements in humanities. We had a beautiful program in humanities, a three-quarter sequence: ancient, medieval, and modern humanities. Jerry was telling me when he and I were interviewing, with the respect to the business of this committee, that the background of Ph.D.s in foreign language is exactly right for a humanities program, because it’s not only language. They studied history, and the art and the culture of a particular location, usually European, and they have the package that fits the humanities program. I was impressed at that and they got off very easily.

Anyway, something else that took place at that time: I had gone on sabbatical and I was interested in educational television. I spent the year at KTCA, Minneapolis/St Paul, which is their PBS affiliate. As a kind of side-bar here I did write a proposal for the national documentary on world water problems, which we then produced over the years. But when I got back the union had been invented and had kind of taken over the place. You know I’m politically liberal, I come from blue-collar union folks back in New Jersey, but I said to myself, well that’s ok for a shoe factory but I don’t think it’s ok for the University. I think my misgivings have been borne out because when I got back and saw things begin to change it seemed like it was all union-related. There were quite different assumptions pervasive through the faculty. As soon you unionize you say to yourself, we’re labor and they’re management. That is the fundamental postulate of unionization. What it did then was kind of take the administration off the hook for salaries. Oh, we’ll get in there and we’ll negotiate—yeah right. It also began to lead to a kind of an abandonment of the proposition that a university should be governed by its faculty. These are educated people and this is an educational institution. We’re not really concerned with bookkeeping, we’re concerned principally with education and we need to decide what that is and we need to go about purveying that. Since that time I think there has been a degeneration in the sense of collegiality. I know there’s been disintegration in what would we say, the “handbook” of the University? Most of the committees now are kind of functionary committees: nothing that has to do with the goals of the University.
When we first came to the University I got dragged kicking and screaming—I think it was because of my joint appointment—into the political scene. You know I’m not a public guy, nevertheless I found it quite fascinating. The Faculty Senate decided that they needed to formalize the notion that the faculty is really the thought behind the University. The Budget and Policy Committee, it used to be called, of the Faculty Senate, decided to invent a committee specifically designed to consider and further perceptions of the goals of the university; it was called the Goals Council. I wound up chairman of Goals Council. Then there were Tom Huff, from Philosophy, John Tibbs in Zoology—oh gosh, who else—Les Rusoff from the School of Law, a precious guy. We wrote a whole bunch of papers about this and that. Les did a wonderful one having to do with University athletics and Tom Huff did one on teaching. I did one on the importance of the media in education.

Mr. Pantzer gave us short shrift. I mean we worked on these. We presented these. I think the one having to do with athletics kind of irked him; he dismissed that out of hand. It started a kind of adversarial relationship where he simply wasn’t paying any attention. I knew Mr. Pantzer very well in that context and he was absolutely wonderful with respect to the controversies at the end of the ’60s as every one will attest. But I would not further his name for sainthood because he did not look ahead. He was a good manager, he came from the School of Business. I didn’t feel as if he was visionary. I felt as if if he were on the ball he would have pushed the Rocky Mountain Museum for this campus because it was here that the classic collections in paleontology were located over there in the old Geology building that was torn down. Our departments of Zoology and Botany were considerably larger and more able I think. I can make those comparisons.

Also not only should the Rocky Mountain Museum have been on this campus but PBS ought to have been on this campus, not down there at Bozeman. He did not get the jump on that, even though we were telling him that something is coming down the road that you better be prepared for. And in fact they had kind of pro-forma meetings on where to put PBS, but the meetings were organized down there at MSU. Patricia Douglas, who at that time was financial vice president, and I were representatives to the committee to make that decision. I made an impassioned plea, I said, PBS belongs here; this is the home of radio and television, this is where the School of Journalism is, this is where the Graduate School of Education is, this is the campus that has the Fine Arts, this is where PBS belongs. But it didn’t get the job done, for lack of vision.

DB: I want you to talk a little bit more about something you mentioned before, which is the demise of faculty, or the degeneration of faculty congeniality, I think is how you put it. And in the context of that, you know you associate it with unionization, what was the face of that congeniality and how did it change? What did faculty do together, on campus and off campus? Maybe also talk about the face of faculty-student relationships as well?

JC: Well, I think that the main focus of the congeniality that I was talking about was everyone’s participation in University governance in the Senate. The Senate was quite big at that time.
People used to go to the Senate as if they were going to go to some kind of rock concert; they were just that much fun.

DB: Where was it held?

JC: It was held, well different places, mostly in LA11, a kind of a campus theater. I used that as a classroom a couple years and it was a nice venue. But also there was a lot of sociability and interaction among the faculty. Everyone was giving parties and attending parties and there was Christmas dinner with an ice sculpture and so forth. Also there was a lot more participation by faculty in student affairs. This may sound funny, but when I first arrived for charity dances, the sorority dances had faculty chaperones. Would you believe it? Earl Lory, who wound up as academic vice president for a while, and his wife and Cecelia and I were constantly being called as chaperones for sorority dances.

DB: Were there still, was it the dean of men and the dean of women at the time?

JC: Dean of men, dean of women, yes. And Maureen Clow was the dean of women; she was very protective of her brood to the point where there were rumors that she wanted to take the Coke machines out of the women’s dormitory because there was something in the Coke that was “turning on” these young ladies. Now I’m sure that’s apocryphal but maybe it was just summed up to characterize her perspectives on the problem.

DB: That is funny because Coca-Cola still is still, of course, quite an issue on campus, for different reasons.

JC: Right, right, the single most pervasive educational issue. Yeah, well the faculty was smaller and one aspect of it that I thought of at the time, that may have been largely responsible too, was the competition for money. Up until that time the University would say, You need this? or You need this faculty member? You need this laboratory? Ok, you got it. But then it began to get a little dicey when different departments were competing for a single faculty opening and when departments began to compete for courses, because they had to have the student credit hours to justify the size of the faculty. I was privy to a lot of that unpleasantness since I was living in the Department of Botany. Botany and Forestry were competing for bucks over who was going to teach Forest Ecology and who was going to teach Mycology, which has immediate applications in Forestry. Botany was losing some of those fights and the chairman was being blamed. I think because he wouldn’t participate in this low-life competition. But that caused, I think, fragmentation and alienation. But to talk to the guys here now and they think of it as a job and very often they are doing wonderful jobs, rather than as a part of a consortium of scholars. Do you know Mike Chessin?

DB: I don’t.
JC: He’s one that would be fun to talk to. Meyer Chessin, he and I play pool every Tuesday. He’s been here since the end of the war, World War II that is. He was heavily involved in campus affairs. But symptomatic of what you are asking me, and what I remember, there was an organization on campus called Sigma Phi, it was the science honorary. Not any particular science, but a general science honorary. There are societies for zoologists, there are societies for chemists but this was overall and it was wonderful. There was also a Montana Academy of the Sciences that was very active. I was president at one time of the Montana Academy when it was kind of in its heyday and there were very nice meetings all over the state, sometimes up at Canada in cooperation with the Alberta Academy of Sciences. All that has come apart and it’s come apart because people who are in chemistry don’t really give a damn about someone who is involved with identification of plants or whatever, because there’s nothing in it for them. They’re no longer interested in sitting back and saying, That’s interesting for itself. They don’t have the time. They are heavily involved in what is really some wonderful research going on now. So that too was a change of university environment. Mike Chessin, I brought him into the conversation because he and I tried desperately to revive, or give resuscitation to the Sigma Phi but the number of people who would attend would keep falling off and falling off and the weekly meeting continued to lose popularity. Mike and I did this in retirement just as kind of what we thought was a worthwhile effort but it didn’t work and both of those organizations are moribund now. So that’s my perspective on changes.

You talked about changes that occurred in the student body; a similar kind of attitude I think infected the student body. I don’t know which the vector was but the students began to take a very, very pragmatic and commercial view of education. They began to develop the idea that—how do I say this—that they were in a supermarket and this was their sack and you were to fill the sack and if somehow they didn’t receive your parcel that was the fault of the purveyor not the fault of the customer, because the customer, as we know, is always right. That attitude really carried the day and from talking with faculty members over the years they all agree that that happened. Just as the faculty itself began to develop this view of the University as a business, the students began to develop the idea and if the students did not do well on the examination that was your fault: you simple didn’t succeed conveying this well enough so that they got the expected A. That also, I think, may have had to do with being an outgrowth of the student evaluation procedures. Which I thought was wonderful. I was here during the David Rorvik era when he was editor of the Kaimin—a wild man. He was the one who exposed Colonel Angwin. Do you know that story?

DB: No, I don’t. Tell me.

JC: Ok, it’s a good one. There was an old boy by the name of—I should be able to remember his first name, anyway, [Lt.] Colonel[Keith] Angwin. And Colonel Angwin was raising hell on campus about an English professor. He wasn’t actually an English professor, he was an English instructor, [Denny Blouin] kind of a wild man, who was asking the students to read something called Student as Nigger. There were obscenities and so forth and he, Colonel Angwin, was going to cleanse the University. He blew the whistle on Denny Blouin, and everything was in an

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uproar here on campus for about a week. [Angwin vigorously campaigned against the statewide mill levy to fund the university system, claiming the reading of the essay for class was a symptom of the “moral decadence” that pervaded the university system. Angwin was in charge of the UM ROTC program.] All of the sudden David Rorvik—how he managed to do this I don’t know, there was no Internet at the time to dial up Colonel Angwin. He learned that Colonel Angwin had propositioned a streetwalker down in Salt Lake City when he was on one of his convention visits and David Rorvik even learned the price of the offer, which was very modest. [Angwin was given a $50 fine and a 30-day suspended sentence.] All of this came out in the *Kaimin*. I’m sure that someone has a copy of that *Kaimin* somewhere.

DB: So the Colonel’s moral high ground was somewhat diminished.

JC: Right, that’s right. He lost that battle with Denny Blouin and he left the University in disgrace and the poor wife stayed. That was the same guy [David Rorvik] who invented student evaluations. His first attempt was very, very crude but very, very funny. Some of the write-ups for the faculty were classic. But anyway, that was a beginning of kind of an attitude of consumerism among the students, that it was all a big shopping spree and contributed to that general evolution.

DB: So make an assessment of what happened in terms of quality of education here at the University, in light of those two changes. Faculty changing the direction toward being more competitive over salaries, somewhat fragmented socially on campus, as well as the students, as you described, becoming more pragmatic, commercial, looking to just pile up the necessary parts of education, instead of a more holistic view of education. And if you can, assign some indicators of your evaluation. Because at the time, you know, the student body has grown by then, after the mid- and late-’70s, there was growth on the campus, in departments as well as enrollment.

JC: Well I’ve got to believe, in summary, that both the students and the faculty are better, smarter, better prepared, maybe even more conscientious, hitting the ball harder because of the competitive environment, both in terms of the students’ view of their preparation and the faculty awareness of the competition for funding. So many of the faculty are simply working very hard on research, simply to survive, because soft money will keep them in touch for five years, eight years and also such grants are the stuff of which promotions are made. No research, no publications, then no promotions, it is that simple. I read that accurately when I arrived in 1964. I published a lot, I wrote a lot of grants. When I became a full professor I said well, I’ve got nothing to prove here now, I can find money and I can write in the field, successfully. I’ve done it both through the literature but also through television. I stopped that. I don’t need to do this anymore. Now I am going to do some of the things that I find personally satisfying, personally important, even though they may not be what those who adjudicate grants would want me to do. But anyway with respect to your question, all this competition has made both students and faculty better. I go to some seminars now, occasionally on topics of interest to me and I find them very, very sophisticated, very sophisticated. A part of that may

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have to do with the availability of the knowledge of the world at your fingertips with the computer. In 1960, everything was mellow, leisurely, “the hallowed halls of ivy” kind of image but people weren’t as challenged. Things were easier. The students were, I think, themselves, kind of at leisure. As you may be aware, schole, which is the Greek word from which school is derived is leisure. It was leisurely. It’s not leisurely now. If you talk to the faculty they are not very happy. While they are doing wonderfully sophisticated stuff, the environment in which they are doing it seems to be more like a factory.

DB: A result of unionization?

JC: Yes, yes. I’m glad you picked up on that. But yeah, I don’t blame the union. I am just saying that these several things that took place, beginning in about ’74, if I had to give a date to it, co-evolved like some species co-evolve into some ecological niche.

DB: So one common criticism I think I have heard about that change, faculty and students becoming more sophisticated, to use your words for it, is that they also become far more specific and that somebody like yourself who is hired in departments that are pretty different, chemistry and education, plus you really had your hand in botany. That’s just hardly possible anymore at this size university.

JC: I agree with that and the person who would arrive now and be offered a joint appointment would be a damn fool to accept. At that time I could make it work. I could go to two different weekly departmental meetings and carry the torch of one or the other and expect that if you did good work that both would recognize it and that you would receive fair treatment. But nowadays I think that would be suspect.

DB: So you still live in Missoula, obviously. Do you keep up on the University or your peers?

JC: I swim every morning and on the way back and forth I meet this one and that one. I may have mentioned that Mike Chessin and I play pool together. There’s a group of six of us, one guy in American literature, one guy in linguistics, one guy in botany, one guy in biochemistry and one guy in accounting and we have lunch at the Mo-Club [Missoula Club] and discuss these kinds of things.

DB: That seems unique in that I, maybe I’m wrong about this, but it would be hard to go out on campus and find younger faculty working right now who have that broad of association with other faculty.

JC: I agree with that. This may be taking place but if it is taking place it is probably taking place as a function of where they live, up this canyon or that canyon, rather than as a result of any kind of collegial intercourse here on campus.
DB: So I guess what I was getting at in terms of you still being very active in the University community: give me an assessment of the University today. Where do you think it is going?

JC: Well, I myself, there is a lot of unhappiness with George Dennison, as if he were some tyrant. I don’t think of him that way. I think of him as a sharp, sharp guy, who is very dedicated to the campus. His tenure and mine just overlap very briefly because I retired at age 56. But the times I did talk with him, he is a quick study and decisive. I think when he arrived he said, well, there’s not going to be a lot of money for academics, but the people who run the University system over there in Helena warm up to talking about roofing and sidewalks and building laboratories and so forth, so that’s what I’ll do. He has done a masterful job of transforming the campus. George, too, said, well, we are having a hell of a time supporting students with tuition. For that reason but also for the broadening of the University, I want to get some foreign students in here. He packed the campus with foreign students and I have got to believe that was a wonderful idea, because many departments now have sprung up that have embraced the aspects of their programs that emphasize overseas ties and the fellow campuses in New Zealand and in Japan and so forth. I spent a lot of time in Indonesia. I speak Indonesian and there was a time, hell there must have been 30 Indonesian students here on campus and Gamelan orchestra and Indonesian classic dance: that was amazing. You think of Montana as some sort of backwater and it isn’t. That is one of the reasons. This attempt to reach out and bring these Saudi students here is just enlightened, I think. So I don’t know whether that is the future of the University but that’s certainly George Dennison’s view of it and I thoroughly agree. But, if the issue is growth I don’t think there is going to be a lot of that. I think Montana is pretty much a steady state and if there is to be growth it is going to be people from the coasts and overseas and that is also good.

DB: So I guess I would like you to finish with whatever your last words for this would be, whether it’s memories, another good story, or assessment of your own time, or your own success here.

JC: Oh, I see what you mean, my own involvement? I have been delighted. I have been delighted ever since I arrived as of September the 5th in 1964. I felt as if I died and gone to heaven here on this campus: lots of wonderful guys and lots of wonderful conversations and people sincerely interested in doing what they can for our common humanity. I don’t think if I had it to do over again I would do much that was different. At first I was reluctant to get involved in anything except for my own work but I am pleased though that I did it now. I was heavily involved there for some time. Strangely enough, in spite of the fact that I was enjoying work, I was chairman of the Faculty Senate in ’81, ’82 and I did write some drastic changes in retirement policy that made retirement very attractive. At that time the union, I didn’t get much help from them, it was as if they weren’t really interested in retirees. They were interested in the people who weren’t retired. Then I worked on getting it done during the legislative session, during an odd year, which would have been 1983, and we made it work. So there were a lot of us who were on one-third time contracts for a number of years and I felt that a pleasant way to go out because you could be here for which ever quarter you enjoyed.

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the most, when the courses that you liked best were being offered; you knew you could
continue with that. For the rest of the year you could be anywhere else. In fact I was in Bahrain,
I was in Indonesia, as I told you, and I was in Thailand during those parts of the year. That was
very pleasant, a very nice way to sign off. So that is my peroration.

DB: Great. Well thank you.

JC: Yeah, nice talk with you. It’s nice that you are doing this because there are going to be a lot
of guys who have fun tales to tell.

DB: Yeah, there have been already.

[End of Interview]