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Interviewee: David Thomas

Interviewer: Mark Gibbons

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Project: Ed Lahey Oral History Project

MG: This is Mark Gibbons. It is November 7, 2012. I am conducting an interview with David Thomas, a poet from Missoula, Montana, in regard to Ed Lahey. When you first encountered Ed, or his work...How did you first come across Ed Lahey?

DT: Like I mentioned in that elegy, the first time I ever had any inkling that Ed was in the world was when I was taking English comp over at the university, when I was a junior I think. We were studying T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." She handed out some mimeographed copies of Ed's poems.

I didn't know who Ed was, but he wrote...among them was "Confederate Shacks," or an early version of it. I bet it's pretty much the same poem through the years. I had kind of forgotten all about that, until I had been working on this memoir project and digging through all my old records and whatever I managed to salvage from my university career. I happened to come across these mimeographed copies of poems of Lahey's and I thought, Jesus Christ! (Laughs)

MG: Wow, mimeographed!

DT: Yeah.

MG: Who was the teacher? Do you know?

DT: No, not right off hand—

MG: Some woman?

DT: Some woman, some gal. She had kind of a rough complexion, dark hair, but a nice gal. I didn't think I knew anything about poetry at that point.

MG: What year, Dave? Do you remember?

DT: It would have been probably fall of '68, I suppose.

MG: Ed was still teaching at the university at that time? Maybe?

DT: Yeah, he may have been. He was either teaching or he might have been a TA or he might have been still in the graduate program. I don't know. I mean all those guys were around. That's

when I got to know Warwick, and Bluen, and all these guys. They just showed up around the same time. The Vietnam War was going on. I was in ROTC at the time and figuring I would end up being an army officer and not any kind of poet or anything like that.

I just tucked those poems of Ed's away. I don't know if they came up in a writing assignment or anything. I remember writing a paper about "Prufrock," and I managed to come out of it with an A-, which kind of surprised me because I didn't think I had any ability to analyze a poem at all.

MG: So that was kind of your first literature class?

DT: You had to take comp classes in order to graduate and to get your B.A. I struggled through...I used to think I was pretty good in English because in high school in Chinook, if you could write anything resembling a sentence, they usually would pat you on the head and send you on your way. At the university, they were a little more demanding. So I started getting an education. Freshman comp was more of an eye-opener than anything. I think I struggled through there with a C. I did better as a sophomore and I think as a junior I did fairly well. I hadn't quite caught the writing bug yet.

MG: When did Ed come back into the picture for you after that then?

DT: Well...

MG: That was '68 you said.

DT: Yeah, I'd been kind of flirting with the edges of the radical scene because most of my friends were artists or goofballs of one kind or another. (Laughs)

MG: (Laughs) Radicals!

DT: Yeah. I knew a lot of those people, but at the same time, I was still intent on a military career, so I was trying to sort of keep my nose clean. But the Vietnam War was getting to be more and more of an ugly mess and harder to support on any level. I started taking notice of the people who were protesting the war. I knew Barclay Kuhn. I had taken classes from him and he was my advisor. (Laughs) I should have known things weren't going to turn out the way I figured just when Barclay turned out to be my advisor.

Anyway, the first...their realty demonstration, I was in the thick of that, which was the spring of '68 when Martin Luther King was assassinated. We had this little meeting. Frank Sonnenberg was involved and Bob Bowlitt; Danny Bluen, he was there. I don't know if Ed was at that meeting or not. The next day...I have trouble with this stuff because I don't talk that much.

MG: Yeah. Do you need something to drink? Here let me pause this.

DT: Anyway, when King got shot down there in Memphis, it was one of those shots that was heard around the world. Everything was sort of just teetering on the edge and that sort of just tipped it over. The university went along with having a memorial service on the Oval. Ulysses Doss spoke and quite a few...Clivers spoke, Father Ferguson probably spoke, and probably some black students.

After the service was over, it was announced that there was an unflattering sign featuring Dr. King in the window of a local realty across the river. We were going to go down and march across there and ask them to remove the sign. We thought there would be maybe ten, fifteen, twenty of us on this. We head out, marching across Madison Street Bridge. At one point, I think maybe I was walking with Sonnenberg or something, and I turn around, and Jesus Christ: there's like 300 people following me! (Laughs) Holy moly! What's all this?

This was kind of more or less spontaneous. Nobody planned on this. Of course, by the time we got to the old Arrow Realty there on East Main Street, they'd had enough sense to take the sign down. The point of our protest had largely been removed. By the time we got there, Wally Clark was there with a squad of cops. He told us, "You guys got to disperse." Barclay said, "We just want to talk to this guy for a bit." Wally said, "Barclay, I know you're a Quaker, you have to be like this, but the rest of these people don't have any excuse." (Laughs) Here we all are and somebody yells, "Sit down!" We sit down and everybody locks...like the old tactic goes. We sit down and lock arms. We sit there. Things goes back and forth between several different people. Finally, they break out the mace and start pulling people up and hauling people off. I was just peripherally involved in all this. I just kind of stared in a daze, more or less. Ed got arrested and then later the charges were dropped against him. Then somebody threw a rock through his window with a "Nigger Lover" note attached to it. I remember that being in the paper or something, too. Anyway, we just kind of all got thrown together there and we got up a bunch of money and got everyone bailed out of jail.

Bob Campbell came to the fore and I think Milt Datsopoulos was involved in the defense of the protesters as well. Back in those days, Milt was just a young guy starting out, too. Bob Campbell later served on the Constitutional Convention. All of this, of course, is incidental to add. I got more and more thrown in with the radical elements, so to speak. Paul Warwick and Jenny, Bluen, and all of my friends, Mike Hennessey and Bob Giselle, John W. Anderson...Over the course of the next year, we got to know each other better.

My first real strong memory of Ed was in fall, probably of '68. I had come back from hanging around in Seattle for my senior year at the university. I was hanging around with Hennessey and Giselle, and we had probably eaten a little bit of mescaline or something, and we kind had a little bit of a buzz going. We just decided we go up and see Jenny and hang out with her for a while up on Wiley Street.

MG: Jenny?

DT: Jenny Warwick. The Warwicks—

MG: In Missoula, on Wiley Street?

DT: Yeah, up the Rattlesnake there. We're just sitting around there just kind of goofing. I'm leafing through a book of Andy Wyeth paintings, just kind of tripping on that because I knew a guy out in Seattle that had a talent similar to Wyeth's and could paint with that kind of realism. All of the sudden, I hear this voice in the kitchen, this booming voice, reading...I know that it's poetry, but I don't really know any more than that. There's this big old guy in the kitchen, and it turns out to be Lahey, and he's reading from Roethke's "The Lost Son." That's the first direct exposure I ever had to Ed. Again, I was sort of on the periphery of the radical movement around here. I ended up dropping out of ROTC to protest the war. Also, I realized I didn't really have any...being an army officer wasn't really what I wanted to do.

MG: Were you writing at that time? Did you start writing poetry yet?

DT: No, I was...I had kind of started writing a little bit, I guess, that summer in Seattle.
(pause) I got all this written down in a fair amount of detail in this memoir.

MG: After that...you were a friend of Ed's, but not yet at that juncture, is what you're saying. You were much younger...

DT: Yeah, I was a lot younger than he was. Our paths had crossed. We knew a lot of the same people, and we were involved in some of the same demonstrations. I eventually graduated and went down to San Francisco and spent nearly a year down there before I came back up here. Then I had to deal with the draft and eventually became a conscientious objector. Things just kind of moved along. The Warwicks left town and went over to England for a while and they moved around quite a bit, too. Things kind of just dispersed. The war kind of started fading away into oblivion. Well, it took a long time for it to fade away for most of us.

MG: What year did the Warwicks leave? Do you remember? Early '70s?

DT: I think the last year that Paul taught here was '70. Yeah, '70 was the last year he taught here. He and Bluen left at the same time. Ed was around and he was still married then I think. Dexter was around. Barclay left a year before because his contract was up. He hadn't been able to finish his dissertation, so they didn't renew his contract. He went to Minnesota. I didn't probably get to know Ed really well until later on. I first knew of him in those days. I bounced around, worked on the railroad, traveled to Mexico, and did all this stuff. I probably didn't really even—

MG: Were you around with the publication of his first book, *The Blind Horses* publication?

DT: Yeah.

MG: That was '79 or something, I think.

DT: '79 or '80 probably. '79 sounds about right. He'd do readings and stuff every once in a while.

MG: Prior to that?

DT: Yeah, I remember there used to be this little bookstore over there on East Broadway in that building where Bell Pipe Shop is. I think it was in that space where that computer outfit is, or maybe Bell was in that space, and she was in... Anyway, this gal had this bookstore, which is kind of along the lines of Fact & Fiction or the Shakespeare downstairs. She would hold readings in there, and I remember Ed giving a reading in there one time. He had his leather jacket on and he was all slicked up. He told us this hilarious story about getting in trouble flying this airplane. I think he's probably told this story quite a few times, but it was funnier than hell the way he told it. I can't even begin to approach it. I can just barely remember that he told it at all. He was always an impressive reader and performer. When he gave a reading, you got your money's worth out of the deal. We knew about each other. [Peter] Koch was doing *Montana Gothic*, and I was involved in that.

MG: That was what year?

DT: We started that in '74 and the last issue came out in '77. Then Peter moved down to San Francisco and I went down there. I put out my little book: *Fossil Fuel* came out the spring of '77. Peter moved down to San Francisco in the fall and I went down there with him...a couple weeks behind him. I spent the winter down there, goofing around, and decided to come back up here. Ed had moved over to Butte, and he was living over in Butte. I don't think I really got to know Ed until he survived Warm Springs and came over here, moved over. Then we got to hanging out together some.

MG: Roughly...mid '80s? What timeframe would you say when he moved back?

DT: I would say probably late '80s, early '90s. He was living over there in the old Worden house upstairs for a while, holed up there and writing. We'd show each other stuff and I'd get letters from him with poems in them and stuff like that. That was a trip to have that kind of communication going on. We had each been, in our own way, through a lot of stuff by that time. He had probably been through a lot more intense stuff than me, but nonetheless...We traveled around some and had done some writing.

MG: You had this once you became better friends in the early '90s, whenever he moved back here. Then you had this shared past or people—

DT: Yeah.

MG: —like the Warwicks and the—

DT: Yeah, we had a prior history that we could relate to each other. He had become more of a presence though in my life in those days, and he was an encouraging presence...more so than other people were at that time.

MG: He respected your poetry.

DT: Yeah, whatever I tried to do, he always gave me the encouragement, a nod, and that helps. Roger, of course, I had always been in contact with Roger.

MG: Roger?

DT: Dunsmore. Between Roger and Ed, we kind of all just knew each other through...it was Roger really who opened my eyes to the possibilities of writing more than anybody I think. He got me to start keeping a journal in kind of a semi-conscientious way during these seminars I took from him when I was a senior at the university. That's where I kind of established my writing practice there. He and Ed were always pretty close. It was just sort of hanging around with each other.

MG: Do you have any stories or recollections...How did the whole Garden City Reading Series...Ed was involved in that, right? Or was he?

DT: That was primarily John and Judy Holbrook, me, Pat Todd and...who else? I forget who all else was with me.

MG: Was Roger?

DT: Roger was involved in that, too. Helen, she was involved for a while. She's a pain in the ass... (Laughs) Well, she was.

MG: (Laughs) Not to pour salt on the wound, but clarify that name again?

DT: She was around, but her presence wasn't what she thought it was. I'll tell you that. The Garden City Reading Series there was primarily Holbrook—John and Judy Holbrook—Roger, and I helped a little bit. Ed read, I think several times; came over from Butte and read. When he came back here, we kept that going for three or four years, I think.

MG: Mainly as a guest, he was?

DT: I don't think he was involved in the day to day organization of it, which finally just pretty much became me and Holbrook heading toward the end. But that's how those things go.

They're interesting for a while and everybody gets a shot at it. Then suddenly, after a couple of years, people go, "I think I'll go fishing." (Laughs) Or whatever else comes to mind as being more interesting to do.

MG: We talked about Ed, politics, and war; and you mentioned his time in Warm Springs. Any other things connected with any of those activities that come to mind that are worth mentioning from your point of view?

DT: Again, I didn't know Ed on a real intimate day to day basis. Our paths would cross every once in a while. When he moved here, we got to know each other; we saw each other with more frequency. He'd come into...Charlie's was going full bore by then, so he would come into Charlie's every once in a while. Sometimes, he would come in with Roger, and we'd sit around and bullshit some. Then they'd move on. Like I said, every once in a while, I'd go over and see him when he was living over there in the old Worden house on East Pine Street. He was working on probably early versions of *The [Thin] Air Gang*. I know he was working on that story "Queen Wilhelmina's Mines." He read me a version of that, which I thought was hilarious. I thought he should publish that right away, but it didn't get published until you guys put it in *Cedilla*.

MG: I saw several different kinds of variations and versions of that thing. He must have worked that thing for a long time in part...I've seen versions where part was just the dream: the mule, the talking mule. Later on, how he opens that thing with the psychiatrist, that whole discussion with the psychiatrist...that's a masterful scene.

DT: (Laughs) Yeah.

MG: That's a study in mental health right there: the patient and the doctor. When we're done here, I'm going to ask you to read a couple things just because I know you have a couple of things where Ed shows up in poems that you've written. Do you have any sort of memorable or comic...any story with Ed that sticks in mind that maybe people haven't possibly heard or anything that...discussion or anything? One of the things that I know you said in a quote on Ed's book, the one that the university did, was that "Ed Lahey is the chief of us old Montana poets."

DT: Yeah, that was kind of...by that time, we'd done a few readings together. He was kind of...you always like to buff up your buddies, but he was the old chief, kind of. He had written some really strong stuff. I always tried...whenever we read together, I always wanted to go first if possible! (Laughs)

MG: (Laughs) He was a strong reading voice. He also had that strong presence, even when he wasn't reading poetry.

DT: Yeah, you always knew he was around. I finally got *Buck's Last Wreck* together and it was about to come out. It hadn't come out yet. He came up here and knocked on the door and he

says, "Where's my copy of *Buck's Last Wreck*?!" I said, "Well, man, we haven't gotten them from the printer yet." He said, "Well, be sure to bring me one!"

I said, "Oh, all right." So I made sure he got one. He was involved. He always...he wrote that little thing that's in the back of *Hellgate Wind*. To have a guy like Ed take notice of your work and give it an appreciative comment: that always makes you feel good.

MG: Yeah, that's pretty important.

DT: It makes you feel like you're not completely wasting your time, anyway.

MG: Yeah...as I've heard it almost from anybody who's had any kind of encounters with Ed over the years...other than some kind of crazier encounters and maybe alcohol over the edge kind of things...just the impressive nature of the intensity, and the generosity, to all those people who were in the same boat, kind of, or trying to do the same thing.

DT: Yeah, we had all been kind of cast aside by the university at one point or another. Of course, I was never involved in there anyway. Ed would have been happy to teach a couple of seconds of comp at certain points just for the income if nothing else! (Laughs)

MG: Exactly.

DT: By then, of course, they had other people. That's just how that goes.

[Break in audio]

MG: All right, it must be back on. Yes, it is. Just in conclusion, anything you want to say about Ed's place in literature, or as a human being, or in conclusion or anything?

DT: I don't have any idea where any of us will end up in terms of the literary history of the United States or Montana, but I would suspect that Ed would loom fairly large at least in the literary history of Montana. He's written poems that I don't think anybody will ever equal. He had a unique voice and he had some deep history behind that voice. It was an honor just to hang out with him and to learn a few licks from him. I'm just glad to have been his friend, finally.

MG: Right. Is that good?

DT: I think so.

MG: Thanks.

[End of Interview]