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Interviewee: Meyer Chessin

Interviewer: David Brooks

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David Brooks: Dr. Chessin, I'd like, if you could, to start out with just a little of your personal background, your educational background, what brought you to The University of Montana.

Meyer Chessin: Well, I think it might take a few hours to do justice to it, but I'll try to be succinct. I was born in New York in 1921 of immigrant parents. They both came from the Russian Empire, my dad from White Russia and my mother from the Ukraine. They came over in 1910, or very close to that. They met here actually. Of course this is one of the huge immigrations in that part of the world, especially Russian Jewish immigrations, because of what was happening. In fact, my dad, in a sense, was escaping the czar, who was looking for all the people who were involved in the 1905 Revolution. And he was one. So that was one reason that they came. Of course, many other conditions were driving them here. They settled in New York, although my dad had spent some years in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with an uncle of his, and I believe he worked in the steel mills in Bethlehem for a while before he actually came to New York. My mother came to family in Rhode Island and then they met in New York. He became a furrier in the garment industry before he bought a grocery store in the Bronx, and that's where I grew up, basically. So it was, I suspect, one of the more formative parts of my existence.

I went to public schools there and I think I received quite a good education. Informal education, of course, the diversity of peoples from all over Europe, mostly, where we were living. And we were living in a fairly dense neighborhood. So I got to know people of all kinds, and I treasure that part of my background a great deal. Also, at that time, the Bronx had a lot of parks and one of them was a rather large one, just a block away from where we were living. I ran off to the park whenever I could. When people ask me, "How did you end up in botany, teaching botany?" I say, "Well, I really got out to the park very often and I always had a yen for the out-of-doors." In any event, I attended a great school close to home and then I went to a junior high school, which was a special program, a rapid advance program they called it, where you made three years in two. So after those two years—that included a year of high school—then I started high school as a sophomore, still in knickers. That was also quite an experience because it was in a poorer neighborhood than ours. Mainly it was Italian immigrants, whereas ours was more diverse; a large percentage of Jews, but also people from all over Europe. I'm not sure whether they put us kids in a venue like that, in that kind of a neighborhood...I often wondered about that. The principal was a very famous educator by the name of Angelo Patri. I remember he had a weekly column [Our Children] in *The New York Times*. I guess it was the *Sunday Times*, I'm not sure, in which he discussed educational issues. He was the principal of that junior high [P.S. 45] school, and we all looked up to him, all the kids there. Here were these rapid advancers, who tended to be somewhat younger than the average because they would skip grades, and then we were placed in amongst the kids of the neighborhood, who tended to be

somewhat behind on the average because of family background. They didn't have much of a bookish type of existence. And so there we were, you know. And sometimes I thought it was a deliberate thing on their part to try to get us, and maybe them, you know, to see what the other part of the city looked like. They could see these little kids so far ahead because they studied and so on and so forth. You know, I'm not sure that was the case, but it was a memorable part of my experience. Sometimes it was a little scary, because here were these big 17-year-old kids and there we were these little knickerbocker-wearing boys on the playground. Sometimes it was a bit of a problem there. But we had a wonderful education there.

After finishing high school, well, we went through the Depression. Since I was born in 1921, when I was about 8 years old it really hit and continued for all through my high school years, certainly. It particularly impacted our little grocery store because, again, it was a neighborhood store and there were a lot of people that were affected by the economic effects of the Depression. They lost their jobs and sometimes they had to be provided with food. We personally never suffered that way because we had a grocery store, but a lot of my friends did and that whole experience was another formative part of my upbringing and my outlook on life because I saw some of my friends out on the street in the middle of winter with all their furniture because they couldn't afford to pay the rent. That influenced me greatly and permanently, until this day.

After high school I was slated to go to a college in New York, but my dad had a friend who came to see him unannounced from Detroit. He was one of his buddies from the old days in the Revolution and he had a chicken farm in southern California. He had lived in Detroit but he was living in California. He had a chicken farm in the San Fernando Valley, which at that time was very rural. And he asked my dad to come along with him because my dad had to give up the store and he had developed a rather serious disease. It wasn't life-threatening but he was very slow in recovering. So he really had nothing to lose, but after a week or so he wrote and told us that if we wanted to see him we'd have to come to California, so we did. And since I was slated to start college, I just transferred to UCLA.

So I lived with him for six months before the rest of the family came over, which consisted of his mother, who maybe was in her 30s when she had come over, and she never really reconciled to this country. She knew some English, of course—she had to— but she didn't converse. So until we went to school, until us kids went to public school—I had two sisters—and since my mother had to be at the grocery store most of the time, she raised us, basically. So I spoke only Yiddish until I went to school. Of course I spoke in the streets, but our language mainly was Yiddish with my grandmother, and with my folks as well. That, too, became an important part of my being and psyche and I find that it's not that hard to remember the language.

But after two years at UCLA—it was kind of a pre-agriculture course—I transferred to Berkeley and finished up with a B.S. in plant pathology in the College of Agriculture. That was still '41, before we entered the war, and the economy was still not that great. We were living right at

the beach, in Venice, California, so it was very easy for me to become a beach bum. I just loved it.

Now I'm trying to create the exact chronology of what happened after that. I think what happened next was that on the beach I met some girl that I had known at school, I think at Berkeley. She was at the beach for the summer and one day she had some friends visiting her at the beach. It was a very interesting family. The father of that family was Philip Lovell, who was another one of these weekly columnists for the *LA Times*. I think he had a background as a chiropractor. But he was way ahead of his time in terms of health foods and healthy living styles. Of course, California was where it started. So he was there with his family and one of his sons, the younger son, was there too. He asked me if I was doing anything, working, and asked me if I'd be interested in coming along with him to sell watermelons. His dad had a farm in Hemet, California, which is out close to the desert. With water they could really grow a lot of crops, and they had a huge watermelon crop. I said, "Sure, I'll go along with you and try to peddle watermelons." We went to all the markets around southern California. I don't think we did too well but we did sell some. But that led to an opportunity. The doctor asked me if I'd be interested in coming to work on his ranch. It was really a farm, you know. They had some dairy cattle. Basically, the cash crop was avocados. But they had everything else there.

It was a place called Fallbrook, California, which was about 25, 30 miles inland from Oceanside, which is on the coast somewhat north of San Diego, between LA and San Diego. It was in the Santa Margarita Mountains, where Mount Palomar is, which is a well-known observatory. The most absolutely beautiful place in the world. What a dream, you know, the environment. The Santa Margaritas were just a beautiful coastal range and I remember for exercise I used to hike on Sundays, more or less my day off, because you know, the cows and the chickens and the pigs and everything else had to be fed. But it was just beautiful. The Santa Margarita Mountains, of course, were taken over by the U.S. Marine Corps, and that's where Camp Pendleton was. I think Camp Pendleton was further down on the coast near Oceanside, but that's where all the activities, the military activities were done, at Camp Pendleton. And that whole area has just burgeoned with all kinds of development. But I had my day in the sun there as, again, just a beautiful part of old California before it really was discovered. Because the war—December 7th I was still working on the ranch—in '41. Of course I knew immediately that life would be changed.

Then I got a little restless. I had worked there for about a year. I actually got a job offer from the California Department of Agriculture to be a junior plant quarantine inspector at one of their border stations. This one was in northern California, out of Reno, a little spot called Peavine on Highway 395, way out in the sagebrush. And again it was an eye-opener for me to see that kind of country, the isolation and the space. So that's what I did for some months and we were expected to inspect every car that came into the state and if they had certain contraband goods they had to be either eaten on the spot, which they couldn't always do, or we would have to take them and burn them. And I remember very vividly, again, an important episode. We had a lot of so-called Okies and Arkies coming through from the Middle West and

from the South because, you know, the Dust Bowl, the Depression. John Steinbeck describes it in *Grapes of Wrath*, I guess. That's what they looked like. These ramshackle trucks would come by with whole families piled high on these trucks. I remember one family had—I think they were sweet potatoes—and we had to take those sweet potatoes and I remember burning them. We weren't supposed to eat them ourselves. Burned them. Because, oh, they could be carrying some disease. And then movie stars would come up from LA, dashing along Highway 395 and many of them were in open roadsters. I remember Walter Brennan, but there were others too, so that was kind of interesting.

Then I thought I should be doing something a little more directly connected to the war effort, so I got a job in the Richmond Shipyards and worked as a junior machine welder for the Liberty ships. That's what they were putting together, those tankers, freighters, that they could put together very quickly. I guess they mostly carried cargo, but they could carry people as well. I was involved in welding some of the steel plates and, again, it was an experience, since I'd led a rather isolated life in many ways. There were guys from all over the country, different backgrounds. I developed a real admiration for Yankee ingenuity. These were guys from every walk of life. They just seemed to pick up the kind of work that they had to do as if it was natural for them. And you got to know them as real people too. That was great.

I guess I was visiting home when I decided to, well, my friends had been going off to the war. I hadn't been drafted so I thought I'd enlist in the Marines because, for one reason, they had a deal where if you were a college graduate you could go directly to OCS, to Officer Candidate School. I thought that might be a good deal. I recognized that maybe that wouldn't make me part of the shock troops, but you know, after all... So I applied for that and while I was waiting to hear from them I got a letter from the F.B.I. claiming that I had received draft notices, which I hadn't, and if I didn't respond to this one they would come and get me. My application had not been finally processed for the Marines so I was drafted into the Army and so I went directly from there, from California, to a reception center in San Pedro and waited for an assignment. I waited and waited; I think I was there for at least a week or two, whereas the other guys would be coming in and in two, three days at the most they would be getting their assignment. So I thought, "Well this is something special they've got cooked up for me," you know. Waiting to find just the right niche. Finally, one day I saw my name on a list and it was a long list and that's the reason it had taken so long, because of the long list of people that they were sending to infantry replacement training center in Camp Roberts, California. So that's what I did for my basic training. I was in the infantry. And then, again, you see, the reason I'm here, David, is things like that happened. One week before we were slated to go over to the South Pacific, which was quite a war zone at the time—Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal, and so on—there were a bunch of people that came around to interview us to go back to college in different fields that sort of related: physical science, physics, chemistry, engineering. So I was sent back to school. The contrast between training and being in downtown Pasadena while we were being processed there to go to whatever college was quite startling. I ended up at Ohio State, finally, in electrical engineering.

DB: Was that by your choosing or did they sort of put you in a program?

MC: This could take hours, David! They selected me for advanced chemistry, because I'd had quite a bit of chemistry in my agricultural background, and that was the closest thing to what they wanted. So I was presumably going into chemistry. The first summer was a quick refresher course in physics, chemistry, and math. We had all three subjects. Just a quick review of college physics, math, and chemistry, you know. That was fine, you know, kind of intense, but who could complain? However, when that was over—no, let's see, when I arrived at Ohio State they said I would have to choose from a form of engineering. So I said, "Well, OK, chemical engineering." So we went through and by the time that summer was over, chemical engineering had been removed from the curriculum and I had to choose between civil and electrical, and I took electrical. I thought there would be more math involved. Little did I know that civil was probably closer to what I would enjoy, being out-of-doors. But anyway, I ended up in electrical engineering, communication engineering. A lot of pretty advanced math in it, but typically when it was over—a year and a half of that—we didn't get any degree of any kind, whereas the Navy would send people to a school like at the V-12 program and they would get a degree, a bachelor's in the subject. But typical of the Army, that wasn't true. And you never know where you would end up. I was lucky that I ended up in the signal corps at least. So they sent me to radio school and I learned all about radios. And again, from there, they sent us to a training center for civilian agency. So we had essentially civilian conditions there. We were still expected to wear our uniforms while we were there. I neglected to point out that I met my wife-to-be at Ohio State, at a dance, a U.S.O. dance, and we've been together since.

DB: What year was that?

MC: That was '43 that I met her. We got married when I was in camp in '45. So it's 61 years ago. But we were being trained in Hog Island, Philadelphia, to install radio stations, fixed radio stations. I was a radio repairman. On the team we had linemen, installers, and so on and so forth. In the meanwhile, the war in Europe and the war in Japan were over. The war was over. And so I missed combat entirely and then they sent us, after our training, to Berlin, in occupation duty, to put up a radio station. I often wondered what they were doing with that fixed station in Berlin. I think it had something to do, eventually, with the airlift, the Berlin airlift that happened later, after the Soviets closed all highways into Berlin. We did that and I spent the winter in Berlin, so that was not quite combat, but shooting was still going on at night. It was a completely destroyed city, just utter destruction. People living in basements mostly. So that was also a part of my education, which stayed with me—the utter destruction that war has attained in the 20th century. So that led me to an interest in the peace movement.

I always felt that it would be great to teach at a college or university. So I went back and got my doctorate in plant physiology. I was advised by the head of the department of plant pathology, which was associated with the college of agriculture, where I got my degree, that as a person with an urban background perhaps I wouldn't feel too comfortable in plant pathology because you have to go out and meet farmers and you might not have the background to fit comfortably

into that niche. I myself didn't feel that way, but I got the message. So I switched, and the reason I'm here is I switched to plant physiology. I was going to work on plant viruses anyway and do a physiological problem with plant viruses so it was a bridging type of thesis that would cover disease and the physiology of plants at the same time. So I got my doctorate there.

DB: Where were you?

MC: At Berkeley. I considered going elsewhere, just thought it might be interesting, and I had a chance to go to Illinois and work with a pretty big guy in the area of photosynthesis, which always interested me up until then and after. But it just seemed, since I had my undergraduate work at Berkeley, it seemed that I wouldn't have to take too many courses and it's funny what things determine your choices at certain times. That was one. It would be a lot quicker and I was kind of anxious to finish up after, well, from '41 to '46, five years out of school. And I was married and I was anxious to be out in the world. So I thought, the quicker the better, and that's one of the reasons I went back to Berkeley. I never regretted it because Berkeley was still—for example, the graduate degree of plant physiology, which is where I took my degree, had 70-plus faculty people that could advise you on your thesis. They had faculty from all over the campus from the science departments: chemistry, physics, microbiology, even one zoologist. They had such a big choice, and that was typical of the Berkeley campus. You could get a liberal education by reading the bulletin boards, I felt. Not when I first came here, but now you can.

DB: So when did you finish at Berkeley?

MC: I finished at Berkeley in '49. My choice of plant physiology was fortuitous because the jobs in academia were not that available. So the fact that I had my degree in plant physiology interested the chair of the Botany Department here, who was looking for a replacement for—somebody was teaching the course in plant physiology but was going back to get his doctorate. He was apparently an excellent teacher and all but he had to go for that.

DB: Who was the chair at the time?

MC: The chair at the time was J.W. Severy. First of all, I had a degree in plant physiology, and plant physiology was the subject that he wanted taught. If I had it in plant pathology, I'm not so sure that I'd have gotten the job, even though I had the same background. So that was one thing. Another thing was he got his degree in plant physiology from the University of Wisconsin working on the physiological effects of virus infection, which is what I was working on for my thesis. I mean, these fortuitous things. Another thing was he was considering another applicant from Columbia University for the same job. And he said, "Well, you know, Mike,"—that's what they called me—"he's from Berkeley, so he probably has a little more understanding." We were teaching foresters, mainly; that was our service in botany. That was the *raison d'être* of the Botany Department. And foresters at that time were all expected to take almost two years of botany from botanists. Interestingly enough, now, the Forestry School gradually encroached on

those courses until Botany went from a high of 11 faculty down to just three in just a few years. So anyway, this other fellow was from Columbia. He might not interact so well. Of course, I was from New York originally, too.

All these fortuitous things happened and he was able to hire me on the spot. He came down to Berkeley, while I was still working there, from a meeting in Vancouver and he offered me the job just like that. When I responded to the letter—you know, he wrote a letter to me describing the position and the place—and, you know, it's a boyhood dream to come to this place for any kind of biology: fishing, skiing, small town, liberal arts school, you know, what more could you ask, could I ask? Because, you know, liberal arts was an important part of the appeal to me. And Bozeman may not have been quite so attractive. But anyway, that was the job. One job offer and I came here and stayed.

DB: What made the liberal arts nature of this school attractive to you?

MC: I was politically oriented. That was part of my life. I was a scientist, and I threw myself into that completely, but as a student at Berkeley—you know Berkeley, even way back then, when I was an undergrad—I got my degree in '41 and then when I came back from '46 to '49 it really exploded. They went through all kinds, well, we were going through all kinds of political upheavals. I remember Henry Wallace was running as a progressive, anti-war candidate against Truman and Dewey. We had a huge crowd outside of Sather Gate, which is the southern end of Berkeley campus. A huge crowd came to hear Henry Wallace and we worked on his campaign, so we'd been active. I'd always been active. I got involved with some of the fellow grad students at Berkeley there and they were pretty savvy politically as well. We were all some kind of socialist and, you know, that creates all kinds of arguments, which is the proper road.

Because I had been caught up in that, I won't say net, you know, I don't regret it. It was just in the air. But it didn't take long after I got here to see that there were people like that here too and it was a much smaller school at the time. For example, the English department would have a weekly seminar and many of them had philosophical, social, political implications. Or even different approaches to how literature can apply to our lives. For one thing, there was one fellow from England who was here for a short while. He was what I call a Lewisite, C.S. Lewis. No, not Lewis. Lewis was the one that got involved in...was it Leavis? I think it was [F.R.] Leavis from Oxford. It was Leavis versus that fellow at Cambridge. Who was the guy in Cambridge? Oh, I'd have to do some research on that. There was a big discussion as to what extent the Humanities should be more esoteric, ascetic, and detached, or should it be more involved in what was happening in the world.

DB: How did you make that crossover into dealing with that group of people, being in the sciences? You're over here in the Botany Department—

MC: Well, yeah, in terms of people, of course there had to be some people in my department. And I suppose the key link there was a fellow by the name of Joseph Kramer, Smoky Joe

Kramer. First of all, he came from the same background as my parents, from Lithuania. He came here when he was in his 20s to this country. Then he worked in farms in Alabama and New Mexico. He ended up at a camp for Jewish boys who wanted to go into agriculture. Baron [Maurice] de Hirsch, a famous philanthropist, who had camps in New Jersey and elsewhere—I think he went to New Jersey. So he was another one that wanted to be a farmer, to get out of the shtetl, out of the strictly urban existence. That's what drove him as well. But he was also a scholar. He had been trained to be a rabbi. He went to a yeshiva for a while. So all those strains were present in him and I think I mirrored, to some extent, that background. He described himself as an orthodox atheist Marxist. So you talk about different elements going into the psyche and I'm afraid that some of us First Generation types were caught up in that.

DB: When I think of first generation immigrants, or the children of immigrants' intellectual, political, social movements, you do think of places like Berkeley or New York City. Urban or large universities. So it's a little surprising to hear about that here in what would have been fairly rural Missoula, Montana, at this small university at the time.

MC: It was a hundred faculty. I knew every one of them by name and sight. I hardly know the people in the biological sciences now. Of course, I'm retired. It was much smaller and it was still, you know, a product of what had gone on through the Depression. Montana, as you know, had a special history, a pioneer history in which there were not too many buffers between people. You know, the Wobblies were strong here, and some of these people were identified with them. They were college professors but they spoke lovingly of the Wobblies.

One of them was Mel Wren. Mel Wren was chair of history for a long, long time. And then Joe Kramer, Smoky Joe they called him because he was kind of tempestuous. I assisted him in his class in ecology. I had never had a course in ecology as such, because at Berkeley, which considered itself the Harvard of the west, ecology was considered a synthetic science. You had to be a taxonomist or a physiologist or a geneticist. But ecologist was a mish mash of everything. So Berkeley did not get involved. I'm not sure if they have a course in ecology yet. Now they call it natural resources so they could get over that. I assisted him in that class. I sat in on all his lectures. I had some labs. And we'd go out on field trips a lot in the ecology class. So I learned the jargon and it didn't take me long to really become fond of the environmental aspects. So he was one of the people who would take me over to the English Department.

The English Department had people like Leslie Fiedler. He was another one, he was a Trotskyite. We were more, I wouldn't say Stalinist, but we were not Trotskyites either. We were fellow travelers—that's what they called us. Stalin was a little too hard to stomach. So they would attend these ecumenical things on campus.

The campus was much more integrated and collegial at that time. And we even had weekly assemblies. We used to have weekly assemblies for, well, maybe not more than 10 years after I came, but perhaps a little more. Every Friday we'd have the assembly at 9:30 to 10:30 and the Friday morning classes were shortened. The whole campus would go to what used to be the

theater, well, went to the University Theater, it's still there, to have some sort of university—we'd sing some songs and we'd have a speaker. Pretty often we'd have someone from the outside to come over and tell us what was going on in the world. Of course there would have to be the Christmas program. I thought it was a great addition but I couldn't get George Dennison to revive it when he came on board.

DB: You've mentioned that there were around a hundred faculty at the time and you knew them all and it sounds pretty collegial.

MC: But we weren't all on the same wavelength. That's another thing. No buffers. Because we had some people who didn't like people like Joe, from the Old Country. He had a very heavy accent, he was a leftist, and they were pretty upset with him. By no means the majority of the faculty, but there were people even in his own division and maybe department that were kind of that way, but they mellowed. So there was some of that undercurrent but I never felt that it really affected me personally. I thought they had good enough people in administration so that they would keep their eye on the ball as to what the person was doing in class, in the lab, and so on. And in service—service was a big part of the triangle. We were expected to do public service.

DB: So what were some of the public service things that you were involved in, and also talk a little bit about where students and the administration fit into that scene at the time?

MC: I guess I was blessed with administrators who were reasonably open and liberal-minded. The first was James McCain, who was only here for one year. He was great. He and Joe would exchange pleasantries as they went to get their mail in Main Hall. Main Hall had a bunch of pigeon holes for faculty, for their mail. So you'd have to go up to Main Hall and you'd meet people there. And McCain, Jim McCain, apparently was quite a reader. And Joe Kramer, of course, he read everything in sight, not only in his field but in every other field as well. So they'd meet on the steps and they'd talk about the latest book that they were reading. And that was kind of the environment that we had on a continuing basis. Not all of them were that kind of a scholar as an administrator. But George Dennison is a kind of person I could talk to on that score. And we had a vice president, Richard Landini, who actually taught a class in English while he was here. He was another one that would stop and talk to you about what you were reading. So some of the administrators tend to be rather arbitrary in terms of strict administrative prerogatives.

Before we had a faculty senate, that was one of the big struggles that we went through: to get a faculty senate that would have reasonable faculty voice in university affairs. And that took quite a time and energy over the years. We had different presidents that would cross the faculty, and of course there was always the question of who was with the administration and who was not. But then we had an AAUP [American Association of University Professors] before the senate, and the AFT, American Federation of Teachers, was small but it had a lot of the people that I described as being really progressive politically. Mike Mansfield was a charter member. He was

the secretary treasurer of the teachers' union. I'm not sure whether Edmund Freeman was in that group, although he was in the union. And H. G. Merriam and I were members. I joined the union early on. And we had maybe half a dozen people that would regularly come to meetings before, long before it became the bargaining agent for the faculty. So there's always been that kind of tradition in the faculty of really competent professors with a social outlook.

DB: So what was the purpose of the teachers' union before they became the bargaining agent? What were you doing?

MC: Well, they would get together. We would try to bargain with them informally, you know, express our point of view. The AFT and the AAUP, although there was a little too much of a rivalry between them. I think there were times when they got—in fact, at least one year, I think it was Al Stone, a law professor who I had gone to school with in Berkeley, was president of both organizations and that arrangement didn't last. Eventually, when the salaries started to pinch, the union grew and became a bargaining agent by vote.

DB: Is that the A. L. Stone that was in the Journalism Department [School]?

MC: No, that was Dean Stone. Now what was his first name? Dean—it wasn't Albert Stone...

DB: I've just seen him by his initials, A. L.

MC: Oh, is that right? Wow, maybe his name was Albert too. [It was Arthur L. Stone]

DB: I could be remembering that wrong. I'll have to check it.

MC: No, I think you're right. But, no, Al Stone was in law school. And Ed Briggs in law school. Herbert [David] Mason. Some real top-notch people in their fields. That impressed me as a young faculty member. Here were these real top-notch scholars.

DB: How about the student body at the time, both your relationship as well as—

MC: The student body didn't wake up, really, until the environmental movement, until Earth Day came on the scene. And then there was a really strong component there because, for one thing, we had professors and programs like the Environmental Studies Program. Clancy Gordon was the one that really catalyzed the environmental movement. He was another one that had a background in plant pathology and so he knew something about disease. He studied the effects of air pollutants on plants. Very potent kinds of evidence that he was able to present for the smelter, the aluminum smelter. When he was a student he did that work outside of Spokane, in the Kaiser Aluminum plant. Then when he came here, the Garrison Phosphate, no, the—Garrison, was it a phosphate plant that produced aluminum phosphate? [Rocky Mountain Phosphate Co.] Aluminum phosphate, I think, is, yeah, the whole Deer Lodge Valley and also the

Anaconda smelter. So he got involved there and did a lot of litigation work. So the students really woke up then.

Vietnam, really, is the thing that catalyzed the students, got them involved politically. So it was a hard thing to keep a restraining leash on the students then because they were really ready to go.

DB: Were there original or purely student-formed and run political or social organizations or were they becoming integrated into the service—?

MC: There weren't too many students, but let's say, for example, during the Vietnam War we had a group that met every Tuesday, the Tuesday noon group—faculty, students, and others.

DB: So they were becoming integrated into the faculty.

MC: They took leading roles in that kind of activity. At the ROTC ceremonies once there was a march and they were involved in that. And civil rights, they did a lot with civil rights as well. But that all got sort of mixed up with the Vietnam era. And then since then, I mean it's been up and down as far as students are concerned, as far as I can tell. But I think the students are more savvy when it comes to these things now and more aware. Maybe not so active as they were. Certainly not so active as they were during the Vietnam era. That was one of the kinds of public service that some of us thought we should do.

The public service that the faculty was involved in, one of the ways, was through this organization called the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, SIPI. It was started during the days when atomic weapons were being tested in the atmosphere and we were getting radiation all around the world as radioactive fallout. And Montana was right on the path of the wind currents, frequently, coming up from the Las Vegas area. So we got involved in that as a committee here. We had a small committee of faculty members—physicians, dentists, radiologists—that affiliated with the national group. The national group had been started by Barry Commoner and Margaret Mead. And there were about 25 committees like ours started around the country that cut their teeth on the atomic fallout situation. A baby tooth survey; we were getting people to turn in their teeth from the babies that fell out so that they could be analyzed for radioactive activity. I thought they were very effective. So we were part of that movement and it was a very deep involvement. The Western Montana Scientists' Committee for Public Information.

DB: When was that?

MC: That must have been started in the late '50s, early '60s. That was the peak of our activity on that issue, because in 1963 there was a limited test ban treaty negotiated.

DB: And were the things you were doing part of that test ban?

MC: What we did was to educate ourselves, first of all, specifically. I had some background in biophysics, and others had in vertebrate anatomy, like Bert Pfeiffer, a name of historic significance. He came in '59 and he immediately got us going on this radiation thing. We educated ourselves on the biological effects of radiation. That was our main focus. And then we would give talks to groups that invited [us], public groups, PTAs, any group that wanted to hear about this. Everybody was into fallout shelters, so we'd give the background of what the radiation could do and so on. And we were supposed to be—we decided that we would be completely objective, as much as we could be, during our presentations. And then if they asked us, "Would you build a fallout shelter?" we could then express our opinion on that. We thought that was something that should be up to the individual. I thought that was an effective way to go.

DB: Was there a fallout shelter on campus, in Missoula?

MC: You know, there were. Different public buildings were designated. But in terms of individual fallout shelters, people still had some questions about that. I guess I better take some water. We were at a meeting, Bert Pfeiffer and I were at a meeting. We were mainly the ones that would do the radiation thing. You had people like Tom Power, an early member of our group, and he would do his thing on economics. Ron Erickson on pollution, because he was an organic chemist, so he knew something about what those organic chemicals could do to you and so on. But we, Bert and I, were the sort of gold dust twins of radiation. We'd go and give talks and since I know a little more about the biophysics side, I would discuss radiation from an intrinsic point of view. Then he'd come on to say what it could do to people because he was a zoologist.

We were at a meeting once, back East in Washington, and I guess it was an AAAS meeting—the American Association for the Advancement of Science used to have annual meetings that we liked to go to. And after the session we went down to the bar to have a beer and there was a fellow there sitting near us and we introduced ourselves and he asked us where we were from and what kind of things had brought us there. So we told him about that work and he said, "Why, you know you guys are responsible for the limited test ban treaty, for the Senate ratifying the limited test ban treaty." So that really emboldened us so we could continue the work.

There was a lot of work once the missiles came into Montana and, you know, Bert was always the firebrand and the shock troop to get us involved. He'd drag us kicking and screaming sometimes into an issue, like he did to get me to talk about the civil defense hazards associated with missile installations around Great Falls. So I agreed to do that because there had been a previous study that we could fall back on, in Arizona, a fellow by the name of McDonald, a physicist who analyzed what would happen to Tucson if those Titan missiles were attacked. So I just applied it to the Montana situation in Great Falls and I think that was quite effective. It

didn't convince the folks in Great Falls, because it was jobs for them. But I thought that it had an impact, wider, outside of that. So that's the kind of thing we did in terms of public service.

Then Vietnam, same way, especially on the herbicides, as far as Bert Pfeiffer and I were concerned. Because I taught about herbicides in my classes, the effects on plants, and then he had been to Vietnam, where they actually had done the sprays and had a lot of pictures on the sprays. I concentrated on domestic applications of herbicides, like in the eradication of sagebrush. And I was able to get out and visit with some Forest Service people on some of those projects around the state. So I would talk about that and he would talk about Vietnam. That's the type of effort, the type of service which wasn't always appreciated. I had little difficulty because I wasn't quite so active in the Vietnam story, whereas Bert had a problem of whether that was considered positive or negative service. There were a lot of people that were upset about criticizing governmental actions.

DB: Who on campus was critical of those sort of things?

MC: Well, there were people on the faculty who were critical, who thought that we were overstepping our academic bounds there. I'm not going to name names there, although I can't really remember. Administrators were critical and I believe he received a negative service evaluation one year. Then the campus finally put an end to that because of his work and because he was the kind of firebrand he was.

DB: So you haven't specifically mentioned it, but from your background, from your parents and you mentioned growing up speaking Yiddish: am I right to assume that you come from a Jewish background?

MC: Right.

DB: And was there any sort of Jewish community here when you came? Did you search one out?

MC: I should cite certain references. Yeah. *Missoula Valley History*, I don't know if you're familiar with that book, because there is a piece that I wrote, somewhat immodestly, I have to admit, about the history of the Jewish community up until that time, which was maybe the early '80s. But that's really in many ways the more interesting part of the history because, let's say, through Joe Kramer and Leslie Fiedler. They were part of that community. There was a very small but very interesting group of folks that would come. It was not an organized community. They would have services, celebrations of different holidays during the year at their homes. They are a very interesting group.

DB: Was any of that campus-affiliated or was that just community, a separate thing?

MC: The campus affiliation was tenuous at best. But there were faculty people involved in that. The campus affiliation happened through a, I think he had campus affiliation, Benjamin Kelsen got a master's degree in history and the subject of his thesis was the history of the Jews of Montana and it was out of our History Department. I don't remember who was his major professor, but I know that one of the young professors was upset. They didn't think it was scholarly enough. Whatever, I'm not going to comment on that, but I think it's a rather complete picture of the earliest Jews in Montana. So you would find that history up until the time he wrote—I think it was shortly after I got here, and he wasn't sure—I'm sure he mentioned Leslie Fiedler. Certainly he must have known Leslie was already making waves in literary fields but he wasn't so sure about me. I had only been here a couple of years.

They're a very interesting mix of people, including several who had been immigrants themselves and were pioneers in the history of Missoula, Montana. One of the poems in my little booklet of poems—the booklet is called *Yippie-yi-yiddish*. That's thanks to Bryan Thornton, the [University Center] Book Store manager. I thought that was a pretty brilliant stroke. And one of them, well, several of them are about some of these early Montana Jews and Missoula. So I've been involved that way.

DB: Was there a great overlap of the Jewish community in the faculty here with the sort of service-based things you were doing?

MC: No. More so nowadays. Not terribly strong now, but certainly very little at the time. Because some of these old timers, the immigrants especially, did have problems. Unfortunately, they're not around to describe them.

DB: Problems on campus or just in the community in general?

MC: To some extent on campus but in the community, yeah. One of them, Henry Silver, ran this Big Broadway General Store on West Broadway. It was kind of a landmark in Missoula. His son took it over, Morris. And that was a big thing in Missoula. I think he really had to struggle at the time to make his way. Joe Goldman: Joe was, I think, born in this country, I'm pretty sure, although he might have come over as a very young lad. But I think he was born in this country. He was raised in Chicago but he came here early on, in the '30s I think, and he became a trial lawyer. He took on cases that no one else would touch, and, as a result, he developed a reputation to kind of foster the stereotype. A great guy, a cigar-smoking lawyer. But he would take on the most difficult cases. I know from having sat in on some of his clients, being there in the office, they were the poorest of the poor. I think he did a great service for them. So he received some flak, I know. He also was the fellow that people who were passing through who claimed they were Jewish—well, most of them probably were, riding the rails between Chicago and Seattle, back and forth. And if they stopped in Missoula they always looked Joe Goldman up. They saw that name in the phone book and they figured he'd be good for a loan. That's called a schnorrer [the person seeking the money] and I describe that in the history. Very interesting aspect of the history.

DB: So talk a little bit, if you will, about the arc of your career here and changes in campus, whether it be faculty, students, growth in the campus, change in emphasis. You've done so up to the Vietnam era.

MC: When I first came, '49, research was not a big part of the effort. It was teaching, mainly, but there was some research going on in the sciences and I guess quite a bit of creative work. But research, per say, in the sciences was not the strong point until the money became available from the federal government. Then, when it was possible to get grants, it burgeoned. The combination of that money becoming available from the federal government and the money from the state starting a downhill slide made that even more important, until, when I retired, I felt that the balance had been completely over-skewed.

DB: Towards federal money? Grant money?

MC: Yes. To the point where a new instructor, new faculty in the sciences, was expected to really make his way financially. In a way, I guess I was lucky in the sense that, first of all, I was one of the first that really tapped the federal money after I got here. And secondly, since that wasn't so terribly important, I could just go out in the field and find some interesting phenomenon. This plant was flowering at an unusual time; something that I could just follow up out of curiosity. That's the most fun, of course. If you can do that, especially if you don't require that much equipment to do it, it's feasible.

DB: And what were some of the interesting research projects going on in botany?

MC: Well in botany and forestry we had a professor, Chuck Waters, who was a—well, when I came he was already a well-established researcher and he was getting his money from the Forest Service to study different fungal diseases of the forest trees. The campground is named for him down on Bass Creek: C.W. Waters Campground. If you ever go into Bass Creek, that was named for him.

DB: And that's the Bass Creek in the Bitterroot?

MC: In the Bitterroot Valley. It was a disease that he studied before you actually get to the campground, or right in the campground. There were these big pines that were showing certain kinds of witches' brooms. The typical witches' broom was not caused by fungus, but that one was, and he was a specialist in fungi, especially the rusts. He did some very valuable work while he was here. Again, it was not the sort of thing that you need much more than a teaching lab: a microscope and a Petri dish and shoe leather to go out and collect your samples. I thought that was certainly one of the kinds of things that should set the pattern. Unfortunately, he died prematurely.

I would go out and see a plant. Well, when we didn't have all this building between here and the mountain, especially out where we lived in the Double X's—well, we didn't live in the Double X's, we lived in a house right next to them on Kent. I'd walk to school across that field before the X's were put in and I'd see all kinds of little annual plants blooming and seeding. There was one that never would seed and flower but it would come back every year. It looked a little bit like an onion but it didn't smell like an onion or taste like an onion. It was in that family. One year I discovered that if you just go up the hill a little ways there's a plant that has the same kind of leaf and it's in flower. I thought that was an interesting phenomenon that just going up slightly in elevation would result in the flowering process. Just right at the base of Mount Sentinel and just a few feet below, no flowering. By then I was already deep into my own federally sponsored research and I didn't really have time to follow up. That's the sort of thing that I could follow up.

Speaking of Joe Kramer, I don't know if he published it in a peer-reviewed journal, but he would go around and do research on soil temperatures. He always had an ordinary thermometer with him when he'd take his classes out on Waterworks Hill. He was the one that really brought Waterworks Hill to everybody's attention about the unique kind of flora that it has on the top there. He would take temperatures of the different levels of the soil. He had done his work on soil in ecology, which gives you some clues to what could happen, why things are happening with plants, and so on.

That's the kind of thing that was possible here with all the wild lands open to us. So I kind of miss that aspect of the academic enterprise. And of course the collegiality that they try to overcome with something like this Friday afternoon get together at the Honors College, but most people seem to be interested in drinking beer. But, you know, you can meet folks there and talk about what's happening.

DB: You know, it sounds like when you first came that collegiality was a natural thing. People were searching it out. And now you mention that they're trying to promote it. When and how did that change?

MC: Well, when we started really increasing in numbers, for one thing, that didn't take place until—well, during the Korean War, I'm not sure that it really coincided—our numbers were way down. They were talking about eliminating history and political science.

DB: Well history definitely lost its Ph.D. program some time in there. And there was sort of retrenchment campus-wide.

MC: Right, there was a general retrenchment. But even talking about eliminating certain departments. Somehow history stands out in my mind and I think you had some real giants of teachers there: Oscar Hammond, Bob Turner, Mel Wren. Since then you had a whole series of top-notch people in history, people that I remember. And pharmacy was almost down the tube. They were thinking of eliminating pharmacy, and look what's happened to it now.

DB: Right. It's big and well-funded. So the growth after that—size alone makes a difference in collegiality?

MC: I think size makes a difference and the, I think, major influence is the reduction of state support, which especially impacts the non-science people because they could never depend much on federal money and in some ways they don't need that much in the way of support for what they do, what they publish. Or even math. But I think the reduction in state support has had a very negative effect on the freedom to explore at The University. We had some episodes of criticism from state legislators when we were being active during [Vietnam]. Pre-Vietnam, too, we had our own little McCarthy-type things going on in the state legislature where we had to sign a loyalty oath. I don't know how we got rid of that, but that was one kind of thing that was happening.

DB: Has there been a diminishment in the emphasis on service amongst faculty, along with the growth and general decrease in collegiality?

MC: You know, I don't know for sure. I think it probably was not only that, but I got the impression that teaching was not considered that important, especially in the sciences. But since I've been retired fully, since 1990, I really don't have a good feel as to what's happening on the relative importance to the individual faculty member of the various things he's supposed to do, he or she is supposed to do.

DB: You mention Joe Kramer going around and taking his soil samples, and you as well, observing plants and that being part of your ongoing extracurricular research.

MC: A big part, because I felt that even though much of it was not publishable, it was very important and could contribute greatly to the teaching effectiveness. It provided real, live examples of your subject matter.

DB: You may or may not be able to comment on this, but in the early '80s—of course a big thing going on in Missoula right now is the removal of the Milltown Dam. And it was a university professor, I believe, who went out and first did some samples in the reservoir, as well as with the water samples, ground water samples in people's homes that kicked off the public consciousness of the problems with that. [Bill Woessner.]

MC: Yeah, you know I don't have a very strong recollection of who that might be, but Clancy Gordon would be a good possibility of that. But even some of the people—oh, Hal Braun, a physician, got involved in air pollution and I don't know whether he was involved in the water pollution aspect of that too. I'm trying to think of who some of those people would be. Some of the geologists I know have a great interest. Clancy Gordon could very well have been the one since he was doing that professionally, in the sense that he was teaching classes in air pollution, water pollution in general. Then Vicki Watson— don't know how long she's been here; of

course, time is flying by. But she took Clancy's place and her particular interest was water pollution and so I know she did a lot shortly after she came here. I know some of the geologists who had development interests later on: Johnny Moore; Bill Woessner, who is here now, recently; Garon Smith, of course, teaches about pollution but mostly his work is done in connection with the pulp mill. Yeah, that tests my memory.

DB: So you retired in 1990.

MC: I retired in 1990, two years into my three-year post-retirement contract, because after the second year of teaching on that—somehow or other I didn't seem to be on the same wavelength with the students in my plant physiology class. I just wasn't getting that same kind of feedback that I was accustomed to. I didn't want to put myself through that or through the end-of-the-semester evaluations, which could be quite painful to read. So I retired full-time after two years, but unfortunately, when my colleague, Mark Behan, who is now retired, asked me to take over his class the next year for a week, since he had to be away, I had a delightful experience with the students. So, you know, maybe I was premature. I really wasn't ready to retire in that sense. I felt that I missed student contact in general, but I was pressured to leave because it would make more money available—not that much more! But it was for new faculty, which they didn't hire.

DB: You know, it's not often you see or talk to someone who spent their entire academic career teaching at one university. What is it, or is there a single or number of things that have kept you in once place, here at The University of Montana?

MC: Yes, well, I have to say that I did occasionally apply for other positions. There was at least one case when I was well into my career here that I had a chance to go the University of Massachusetts when they were establishing a new Boston campus. But I just had mixed feelings about it. I was getting a little restless in terms of people in my field, because generally we tend to have one person represent any particular discipline in the broad field like Botany, and I thought it would be nice to have some more people that I could talk to. So I decided against it. Once or twice before I had looked into some other jobs but we had fallen so in love with Missoula, and in general the campus experience permits you to really throw yourself into life in general, academically as well as socially, politically, and otherwise. And of course, I fell in love with the environment here—hiking and skiing. I couldn't see giving that up on a permanent basis.

DB: Of course it's kept you here since you retired.

MC: Pretty much. And then I was able to get grants for sabbaticals and I had a few Fulbright experiences, National Academy of Science exchanges, and so it kept me getting out and I could get some money to go to international meetings. So I was happy to do that. I suppose in a way I looked at my rather—I don't know how you would describe how people looked at me: "Montana?" You know, like something from another planet, except for the very rare person

who had been here, you know. Then it was, "Montana! Do they really have science going on there? You mean there are other Jews in Montana?" I kind of, you know, in a way I resented it, but I felt like a celebrity. So this kind of eclectic life you could lead here. And my wife, I couldn't blast her out of here anyway. Our kids all grew up and went to school here, of course, since we stayed. And then I still find it a good place to be.

DB: So with, I suppose, as little modesty as you can muster, what will you be remembered for, do you suspect, in terms of your time on the faculty at The University of Montana?

MC: Well, you'd have to really talk to my colleagues about that, but I'd like to think that I would be remembered as a dedicated teacher and a good human being and someone interested in people and in bringing about a better world. So this is going to be on tape isn't it?

DB: This is going to be on tape.

MC: OK, I'll have to save that for the obituary. [laughs]

DB: Well, it's been fascinating talking to you. I would like to offer you the opportunity to add anything else that you'd like to.

MC: If I think of anything, David, I certainly will.

DB: Thank you very much.

MC: Thank you, David.

[End of Interview]