AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES HARTMAN

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas
JAMES HARTMAN

B.A., English, Ohio University, 1961
M.A., English Language, University of Michigan, 1962
Ph.D., English Language, University of Michigan, 1966

Service at the University of Kansas

First employed at the University of Kansas in 1970
Associate professor of English 1970-1985
Professor of English, 1985-2011
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Q: I am speaking with James Hartman, who retired in 2011 as professor of English at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, KS, on June 21, 2011. Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in Newark, Ohio, but I consider my home town Logan, Ohio, which is in the southeastern quadrant of the state. It’s the Appalachian section of Ohio.

Q: What were your parents’ names?

A: My parents…my mother, Mary McLin, was one of five, Scotch Irish/German and grew up on a scrub farm in southeastern Ohio. She was very smart, a very intense person, very influential in my life and my sister’s life. She passed away about seven years ago at the age of 94. My father, Ernest, was one of five from a coal-mining family in the eastern section of the county. His father had decided to go someplace else with another wife, so he and his brothers were left to take care of things. At 12 he went to work in the coal mines and worked in the coal mines until they shut down, then went to work for WPA and then left WPA to take a laboring job in a tire shop in a nearby town. His brothers all made fun of him because he took a job that paid less than WPA. My father said there was no future in WPA but there is a future here. He ended up owning the tire shop in my home town and becoming sort of a centerpiece of the business community there. They were both very smart, very direct people who looked at reality very clearly.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?
A: I have a sister who now lives in Baltimore. She has a high position in the Social Security Administration.

Q: You mentioned the town of Logan. Is that the town where you grew up?

A: Yes, we moved there when I was just about two. Then I was there through my high school years. Then after that I left for college.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

A: I went to West End Grade School. I just recently had a friend in Logan send me a video of them demolishing West End Grade School. They have built a whole new system of buildings. They took down all of the old regional elementary schools and built a brand new larger one in the central part of town. So West End Elementary is where I went to school. It was, of course, for all of us kids, within walking distance. So everybody walked to school and from school.

Q: Since you are an English professor and an English major, did you read a lot as a child?

A: I read a lot, yes. I read enormously. I can still remember coming home on my bicycle with the basket in front piled high with books. Then I would have a saddle bag that I used to deliver newspapers. I had a canvas cloth saddlebag that I carried the papers in. But I would load that down with books too. So I’ve always had a huge stack of books on all kinds of topics, history, ancient and modern, and fiction. It was just anything that caught my eye. I read very widely on a lot of different topics.

Q: So you had a library in town.
A: Yes, we had a library. The town was about 7,000. The library was upstairs over city offices. The librarians, of course, knew all of us kids and were very helpful, saying, “You know, you might enjoy that.”

Q: Where did you go to junior high and high school?

A: Junior High was located in the central part of town, still within walking or bicycling distance. It was just Logan Junior High. Then on the same block was Logan High School. We were the Chieftains. It was the fifties. It was a good time. The town was still very vibrant. Then the downtown was very alive and stocked with good merchants of all kinds. That, of course, has since changed. It is the future of a lot of small towns in Kansas and elsewhere.

Q: Were you involved in extracurricular activities?

A: I played football and basketball, particularly in junior high and the early high school years. But by about my sophomore year in high school it was music that had captured me. I had started playing an instrument in fourth grade. By the time I was in the eighth grade I was sure that I was going to become a symphony orchestra conductor. That was going to be my future. So I had learned to play at a rudimentary level all of the instruments in the band. Then in my junior year I became the student conductor for the band. I got to conduct a Wagner piece that pleased me a lot. I conducted the pep band at basketball games. I sang in virtually every choir in town that I could. I helped organize a German band that played to various groups in town. I went to the church that had the very best choir. The choir was run by husband and wife musical professionals who had retired back to Logan. There was, from my teenaged perspective, a little old lady who looked like she had a hard time getting in
and out of bed. But when she hit that organ it was if Bach himself was letting loose. It was a wonderful experience. So the main focus of my extracurricular life was music.

Q: Did you have influential teachers in high school?
A: Yes. For music my first teacher was a very rough but kind man who gave me good support. But then I ran into….We had a man who had just gotten out of the Army. He had been in Korea. He had played jazz saxophone with the Red Nichols group before he had gone into the service. He was an intellectual. He wasn’t just playing the instrument. It was about the music and understanding music and getting it right. He was very influential. His name was William Gasbaro.

Q: Did you have honors in high school?
A: Honors?
Q: Valedictorian, etc.
A: Actually, no. I graduated eighth in my class. In my sophomore year Miss Tannehill, an influential English teacher, took me aside and said, “Jim, you know you could be doing much better than this.” I said, “Well, I know what I know. I don’t care if anybody else knows what I know.” She said, “You’ll change your mind.” Sure enough, I did. I graduated eighth in my class.

Q: Did you have jobs in the summer?
A: Oh, yes. I did a variety of things. I worked in my father’s shop, so I learned to wrestle around tractor tires and big truck tires and learned how to retread a tire. So I knew tires then inside and out by the time I was 16. I also waxed cars. I would sort of solicit around and spend summer days waxing cars when I wasn’t at the tire shop
or doing chores around the house. In fact the summer before I went to college I made enough money to pay my college tuition for my freshman year waxing cars. State tuition was, of course, a different matter then. My father paid my room and board my first year and I paid all my tuition.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?
A: I graduated in 1957.

Q: Was it always assumed then that you would go to college?
A: Yes. From the time I was about 11 I was pretty outwardly directed. I didn’t know what else was out there, but I knew it had to better than what was around me. So I think part of my impetus for reading, part of my impetus for seeing lots of movies, part of my impetus for being interested in serious music was a matter of being directed to preparing myself to find a life outside of Logan. So, yes, I was always determined that I would go to college.

Q: So where did you go for your undergraduate degree?
A: I went to the state university that was about 30 miles from my home town because that’s what I could afford. It is Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where I received a very nice education.

Q: What was your major?
A: I started out, actually, in chemistry, not music. I was preparing into my senior year in high school to go to the music conservatory at Oberlin. That’s where I wanted to go. I got good enough and mature enough, however, to understand that I just did not have the talent. I had the desire. I had the work habits but I knew what excellence was and I knew I wasn’t there. No matter how hard I worked, I wouldn’t get there. So my
other interest was science. This was, of course, partly fueled by the era of Sputnik and the changes that came when the federal government became interested in supporting scientific work in universities. So I started out in chemistry and was a chemistry major for my first two years. I loved the theory. I loved chem. theory. I hated the lab, just hated the lab. And I thought, “Well, this is what people in chemistry do. They spend their time in labs.” So I went and talked to a chemistry professor just to be sure. He spent the time telling me how good his life was and that wasn’t what I wanted to hear. What I wanted to know was, what does one do with chemistry? Because I had no idea really. So after that it was: I’m not going to spend the rest of my life in the laboratory. I could spend the rest of my life theorizing but not in the laboratory.

So my other interest was reading. I had always continued to read. I loved to read. So my junior year I shifted to English as a major. Then one of the early classes that I walked into was not a literature class but a class on the history of the English language, followed by one on the structure of English. I thought, “Oh, this is the greatest thing ever,” because behind the study of the language is its structure, how English is built grammatically and its sound system. I thought, “Oh, this has the best combination of rigorous scientific kinds of thinking. You have to have principles and fixed terms and procedures, but yet it has to do with human beings and how human beings think and operate and interact.” I thought it was the best thing. And I still think it is the best thing ever. Those two classes just turned my life around. They were taught by a man named Bob Roe. He sort of became my hero. It had been discussed that after college I would go back and go into my dad’s small business with
him. I said, “No, I’m not going to do that. I can’t let go of this. This is too fascinating.” That’s when I determined I’ve got to go to graduate school because that is the only way I can keep on learning about this. And I have never, ever regretted that move. My love for the English language and how it works, and just my fascination with it and the sense of how important it is to understanding what human culture is and how people think has just never weakened. So I just never looked back after that.

Q: Where did you live when you went to college? Did you live in a dorm or a fraternity?

A: The first two years I lived in a dorm. The first year I had two roommates from northern Ohio who about fell off their bunks every time I opened my hillbilly mouth. They were a lot of fun. One of them was an Army veteran. He sort of took a very immature kid under his wing and helped him that first year. My mom kept a letter that I wrote to her in the middle of the first semester saying, “I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know whether I’m going to make it here or not. Things are not going very well with classes, etc.” But by the end of the semester I spent a lot of time playing bridge and I was doing very well in my classes. I figured it out. My sophomore year I had a roommate from Brooklyn, who was sort of a Jerry Lewis kind of character. I had a. never known anybody from New York City and. had only very casually known anybody who was Jewish before. He was a riot. I loved that guy. He was also an educational experience. After my sophomore year I got married. So my wife and I had a wretchedly hot and wretchedly cold apartment over somebody’s garage in Athens. So we lived in private housing then a university apartment until we moved to Ann Arbor.
Q: What was your wife’s name?
A: Her name was Carol.

Q: Was she a student also?
A: She and I met in high school, so we were high school sweethearts. That then persisted through a couple of years of college. So we thought, okay. It was also very much the correct thing to do. There was a movement to marry young. Not a real swift movement, but there it was. So we knew each other from high school. She had gone to a branch school of Ohio University in another town during those first two years. She then had a certificate to teach. So during the two years I was finishing up, she was teaching in a small town near there.

Q: Did you have jobs while you were in college or in the summer?
A: Oh, yes. My most memorable one is I worked for an ice cream company. I delivered ice cream down into the Ohio River area and into West Virginia. Of course, because I was the summer kid, I got the worst truck. I got the truck where the doors froze shut. I had to get up and put my feet on the side and pry them open. The truck had bad brakes. All the roads were straight up and straight down and curving. Whenever I would come back into Athens from West Virginia it was down a very, very long slope. I would have to be standing up with my foot on the brake holding the emergency brake at the same time in order to keep the truck under control going down. On one of my early days I was out by myself. I had stopped at a small store. We supplied them with ice cream bars and pints, etc. Somebody had come and parked their car close to my truck. I looked and I said, “Oh, I can get through there.” It was near the porch which had an awning on it. “I can make that.” I started up and
sure enough, I was missing the car. I could see it. But I kept hearing this scrunch, scrunch. I’d stop and look around. I couldn’t see anything. I started up again. Then scrunch and then pop. People came running out of the store. The top of my truck—it was a big truck—had caught the edge of the aluminum awning and had just torn it off the front of the building.

Q: Oh, my.

A: So that was an educational experience. Then another summer I sold encyclopedias. So I had a variety of summer work. During the school year I played in a travelling dance band.


A: Did you go on directly to graduate school then?

A: Yes. I was almost too dumb to live. I had done well in undergraduate school and determined that I needed to go to graduate school. This is the stuff that really moved me. I applied for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship because I knew I had to have a fellowship to go to college. Somehow I just assumed that I would get it. I went to Columbus to interview and the professors that they brought in, one of them said, “So, where do you want to go to pursue English?” I said, “One of my teachers said that Princeton was a good school. Maybe I’ll go there.” He said, “Well they really don’t have much of what you are interested in.” I said, “Where do you recommend?” He said, “Well, the strongest place in the country for what you want to do is the University of Michigan. You might investigate that.” So I did and I applied. I had no Plan B. If I had not gotten the Woodrow Wilson, I would not have gone to graduate school. If I hadn’t gotten into Michigan, I would not have gone on to
graduate school. It was just arrogance, just blind -- “Oh, well and good. So of course that will happen.” And it did. But I look back now and say, “Jeez, awfully green kid.” So in ’61 we set off for Ann Arbor with our goods loaded in my dad’s pickup truck. We moved to an apartment there.

Q: What was your major?

A: English Language.

Q: And that’s different from a major in English because a major in English involves literature. Is that right?

A: Right. I’ve had some literature. It was very interdisciplinary. I took courses not only in English language as well as some English literature in the English department, but I also took courses in Spanish and Portuguese, German and French. Some of those courses were linguistics courses. This was before the time when linguistics departments had been formed. In fact, while I was still in graduate school, a Department of Linguistics composed of many of the professors I had taken courses from in a variety of departments came together. My comprehensive exams were also interdisciplinary. That is, I took a couple in the English department and I also had two others from outside the department. It was a difficult course of study. But my years at Michigan were really very heady years. Ann Arbor is a very intensely intellectual community. It’s the kind of place where if you sit down at a coffee counter and order a cup of coffee and start talking to the person next to you he or she is doing something interesting. They are either in the med school or they were in architecture or engineering. They were doing this kind of research or that kind of
study. It was just very intense. My courses were intensely difficult. I threw myself into it and put many, many hours into my work at Michigan.

Q: Did you have influential teachers during this time?

A: Yes, my first year I worked with a man named Albert Marckwardt, who was a noted figure in the field and one of the reasons that Michigan was the place to go for that. I had courses from him both semesters of my first year. Then he left and went to Princeton and took all of the research materials that I was going to use. So there was another man there that I had also taken courses with the first semester, Jim Downer, who was interested in regional variation. So I started working with him. He was also a very kind and supportive person. It was easy in many ways to work with him. He sort of let me have my head and when I got way out of line he would say, “No, I don’t think you want to go that direction.” And I would take it seriously and say, “Okay, I’ll pull back and go another direction.”

Q: Did you write a thesis for your master’s?

A: The master’s degree at Michigan was more or less a formality. They by and large assumed that people who they took in were headed for the Ph.D. So my master’s degree was, “Do you have this course work done? Have you filled out that form?” That was the master’s degree. And I had never assumed that I was going for anything other than the doctorate level.

Q: So then you would have written a dissertation for your Ph.D. What did you write about?

A: It was on regional variation. I was interested in how regional variation is part of the larger pattern of historical change in language. What I was looking for were the
social pressures of people who were moving from one set of features to another. So I went back, in fact, to my home county. My home county is an interesting one because the western part of it was glaciated and therefore flatter with different kinds of soil. The eastern part of the county was unglaciated. It was quite typically Appalachian area, mountains, trees, coal. And the people who settled in those areas were different and they brought different speech patterns. But some of those speech patterns were moving across the county in younger speakers. But others were dying out. So what I wanted to look at was which features were spreading across the whole county and which ones were dying out and why might that be the case.

Q: In order to do this, did you go out and tape record the way people talked?

A: I did. I still have the tapes. Yes, I took a tape recorder out and just made appointments with people and sat down just as you’re doing and interviewed them. I had a questionnaire. I would ask them, “What do you call this? What do you call that?” I would set up a blank and ask them to fill in the blank. I was interested in how they filled in the blank. I also kept track of some pronunciation features that were distinctive to the area. There was one family, for example, where there was a very notable speech feature. One parent had it and one parent didn’t. Then they had four daughters. Two of the daughters had it and two of the daughters didn’t. I thought, you know, “Somewhere there is a set of dynamics of family relationships. If I understood that I would understand a great deal about how language changes, what moves people to make shifts in language.”

Q: Did you have children at this time?
A: Yes. At the end of my second year at Ann Arbor we had a daughter. She’s still right here in Lawrence, which is very nice. So, yes, we had one child.

Q: What is her name?

A: Jennifer.

Q: When did you get your Ph.D.?

A: I got my Ph.D. in 1966. I took a year out to teach during graduate school. One of the things that dawns on even the dimmest mind is that, well, I just can’t go on being a graduate student forever, although the learning is why I was there. I’m going to eventually have to do something. And that something was clearly going to be teaching. I had never taught. I had no idea if I wanted to teach. I had no idea if I’d be any good at it at all. Then on top of that we had just had the baby. I had had some health problems. We were dead broke. So the question was what to do? So I decided. I went out and looked for a job, a full-time job teaching. I found one in a school in the central part of Illinois, a smaller state school.

Q: This was a college?

A: Yes. Eastern Illinois University. So I went there and taught three courses each quarter, a total of nine courses. And by the time I was done with the first quarter, I knew, oh, yes. I loved teaching. I just loved being in the classroom. I loved sharing ideas. I loved sharing information. I loved trying to set up the material so somebody else could understand it the way I understood it. And it was just a glorious year of teaching. But it was also clear I did not want to spend the rest of my life in that kind of institution. So I wrote to Jim Downer and said, “Can I get my fellowship back?” He said, “I’ll see what I can do.” And he got my fellowship back. So we packed up
again after a year out and moved back to Ann Arbor. And then in two years I finished.

Q: Then where did you go after you finished?

A: It was a very good time in the job market. In fact, there has probably never been a better time than the middle ‘60s, particularly in the area of English studies. My first job interview was at the University of Pennsylvania. My best friend in college, who was there in chemistry, had finished his doctorate a year ahead of me. He had not taken that year out. He went to the University of Illinois and got a Ph.D. there and was at Penn. He said, “You must come. We’ll have a good time.” So I went to Penn and interviewed and I looked at Philadelphia and I said, “Can I raise a family in Philadelphia? I don’t know. I don’t think so.” My best friend had grown up in a city, Cleveland. Then I was interviewed by what appeared to me to be a group of 110-year-old men sitting around a table saying, “Here are the three courses that you will be teaching for the next seven years. Then when you get tenure, you might think about teaching other courses.” And I thought, “Oh, Lord. That sounds like death to me. I don’t think I could cope with Philadelphia. I don’t know how to raise a family in a city like this. The department just seems really restricted.”

So I took a job for a year back at my undergraduate university, Ohio University, where they were looking to form a new department of linguistics. So there were three of us young guys in the English department whose job it was to build new courses and to establish what would become a new department. I thought, “Okay, that’s going back home.” Then we had our second child while we were there. Our first child had had some serious health problems. We thought she might not
make it, but she did. Then we had our second child, also a daughter, while we were there.

Q: What is her name?

A: Her name is Anne. She now lives with her husband and child in the South Bay area of San Francisco. I’ve tried everything possible to lure them back here, but so far it hasn’t worked.

So I was offered the job at Penn and turned it down and went to Ohio University for a year. I had in graduate school been corresponding with a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Fred Cassidy. I was unhappy with a number of things. It was a mistake to go back home. The business of building a department was not going very well. So Fred Cassidy had headed up a project out of the English department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, that dealt with American English dialects—the Dictionary of American Regional Dialects. He said, “Why don’t you come and help me do that? You can be my associate director of this project.” I went to Madison. Madison is a wonderful town and it was an excellent job. So I told my poor wife, “One more time we are going to have to pack up again.” She said, “If that’s what you want to do.” So we packed the two kids and what few goods we had and moved to Madison after a year. That was my then third job.

Q: How long were you at the University of Wisconsin?

A: I was at the University of Wisconsin for three years. That job immediately preceded my coming to Kansas. I had also interviewed at Kansas before I took the Wisconsin job. I had very much liked the place. I had come to Lawrence. I had stayed at the Eldridge. I had taken a cold shower because the hot showers were not working at the
Eldridge. It was before it had been refurbished, of course. I took a walk up Massachusetts Street past the parks and thought, “You know, this wouldn’t be a bad place to raise my family. This looks like a nice town.” But the research opportunity at Wisconsin was way too strong to turn down. So I was at Wisconsin for three years. It was at the end of the ‘60s. There was a great deal of political turmoil.

Q: What was going on there? Were they having the kind of trouble that we had here, riots and things like that?

A: Absolutely. I taught with tear gas in my eyes at Wisconsin. So the campus was very much radicalized and politicized. There were lots of antiwar demonstrations. This division had sort of carried over, unfortunately, into the department. So there were this group of young Turks and then older, largely displaced New Englanders who were heading up the English department at the time. There were just intense battles of all kinds, over curriculum, over teaching, over research and how you do it, and what’s valuable and what’s not. It was very, very intense. I was watching as my friends were getting picked off as they were coming up for tenure and forced out of the department by older professors, just one after another. One man had a book that was highly praised by the New York Times Book Review, very highly praised. Again, in his tenure meeting, one professor got up and said, “I don’t like this book.” And he was turned down. So he went off to Israel then to teach. And just other similar things. When my best friend got treated the same way, I pulled out a letter I had been carrying around in my car for weeks to the chair, George Worth, here at Kansas. I said, “George, are you still interested in my coming to Lawrence?” He wrote back and said, “What will it take to get you here?” So in the summer of 1970
my poor wife and long-suffering children and I moved to Lawrence. And it was 105
degrees. I have never forgotten that. It was 78 when we left Madison. It was 105
when we got to Lawrence. We’ve been here ever since.

Q: But there were still things going on in Lawrence in 1970, weren’t there?

A: That’s right. In fact, that spring the Union had burned. There were shootings,
including the death of one person as part of demonstrations on campus. In fact, I
called somebody that I knew here and said, “Is it safe to bring my kids here?” He
said, “Oh, yes. Don’t worry about that. It’s a public demonstration issue. It’s not a
private sort of issue.” So I said okay. Interestingly enough, that summer I had to go
back and finish up some research work in Madison. While I was there, the Army
Mathematics Research Center was bombed, killing somebody who was there. In fact,
I was staying with friends close enough. About three in the morning I was
virtually
blasted out of my cot that they had put up for me because somebody had filled a
flatbed truck full of high nitrogen fertilizer, soaked it in fuel oil, and packed it into a
narrow loading dock area and just blew apart a building that was used by the Army
Mathematics Research Center. And, unfortunately, there was a poor graduate student
who was trying to finish up his research still working late and he was killed. In
Madison, too, it was kind of the peak of radical, antiwar, violent protesting, as it was
in Lawrence. I think maybe the leaders of the movement sort of backed off after that
saying, “Have we become the enemy? Are we doing worse than the things we are
protesting?” Yes, it was a period of a great deal of turmoil and upset. It was very
difficult to keep one’s bearings in those times.

Q: What was your title when you came here?
A: When I came here I was hired as associate professor. I was an assistant professor at Wisconsin and was associate professor here.

Q: What building were you located in?

A: We were located in Carruth-O’Leary, which is still a better building than Wescoe Hall is today. In fact, there were a number of us who pleaded to be left when we saw what was shaping up with Wescoe. We pleaded to be able to stay at Carruth-O’Leary. But we couldn’t do that. We had individual control over heating and cooling. We had windows, all the things that you think, that’s what people have. That’s not the way Wescoe is.

Q: About when did you move to Wescoe?

A: It was in the spring of ’73, I believe.

Q: You had just been here a few years then.

A: I was in Carruth-O’Leary for two and a half years before we made the move over to Wescoe. We have been in Wescoe ever since. The last few years I sort of pulled rank and got an office with a window. I had spent something like close to 40 years down on the second floor in what is really more of a bomb shelter than it was anything else.

Q: You also taught in the Department of Linguistics, is that right?

A: That’s right. In fact I taught courses there and for some years I had a joint appointment. The joint appointment became sort of unwieldy because both departments started to have expectations that you are there full time and are resentful when you are not there full time. So finally, I thought, “I want to make this simpler.” So I went full time in English.
Q: What courses have you taught here?

A: My major focus has been on English language courses. So I taught History of English Language, Modern English Grammar, and on the undergraduate level, Introduction to the English Language. Then there is an undergraduate History of the English Language. Then I taught for a good many years a course called American English – Its History and Structural Traits and Regional and Social Variations Uses of English. Then I also taught courses in metaphoric theory. The metaphoric theory classes I originated and the American English class I originated. The graduate and undergraduate history and structure courses I inherited. They were already here.

Q: What have your research interests been here at KU?

A: My research is I do regional variation of American English, particularly pronunciation differences. Most of that has come through doing dictionary work. So I have provided pronunciations for about four or five different dictionaries that are still going on. In fact, I expect to soon be doing a new edition for a Cambridge press dual British and American English pronunciation. It gives both the British and the American pronunciation. We’ve gone through about three different editions now. It’s almost time for a fourth edition. Then the Dictionary of American Regional English, which is the project that I had gone to Wisconsin to work on, which is still going on, still being developed. I had a signed monograph in volume one of that and I provided the methodological basis for determining pronunciations used in that dictionary.

Q: Is this some kind of specialized dictionary? I mean it’s not like a Webster’s.
A: That’s right. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* contains only words that have regionally limited meanings, whereas the *Webster’s Dictionary* when you pick it up you expect to find words that all English speakers could or would use. So you look up the word “huckleberry” in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* and you will find unique meanings. If you’ve ever heard the song, “Moon River,” “my huckleberry friend” and you say, “What’s a huckleberry friend?” It turns out that one of the regional meanings of huckleberry is dear friend.

Q: Oh, I thought it was some sort of fruit.

A: It is. But “huckleberry” has a lot of rich meanings. It also at one time was applied to African-Americans by whites. So Mark Twain’s title, *Huckleberry Finn* if you know enough about the possible range of meanings, particularly earlier in American life, you’d say that Twain was playing with perspectives when he named that character Huckleberry Finn. So the *Dictionary of American Regional English* has words where meanings are limited to various groups regionally, rather than a general meaning going across the culture.

Q: Did you send out graduate students with tape recordings of people telling you what words meant?

A: In fact, that was my job at Wisconsin. I was in charge of the field work. So I recruited graduate students and sometimes they were professionals even. We even had professors who in the summer thought they would do that and then get their own research materials that way as well. So I recruited and trained them and gave them equipment and sent them out. I interacted with them as they were out there. They were all across the country. The questionnaire was around 300 pages and they would
mail them in. It took about a week of working with somebody to fill one of these out. So I saw to it that there were over 1,000 of these questionnaires collected all across the country.

Q: How did you decide who to interview?

A: We had a researcher, a demographic researcher, who worked for us. We knew we wanted to have 1,000. But we wanted it proportional to the population of the state. Then we wanted the areas of the state that might be historically different. So Ohio, for example, has three broad speech areas, the northern area, the central area and the southern area. So we wanted to be sure that there were communities from all of those three areas in Ohio. But then also Ohio is one of the more populous states. So it had more informants totally than, say, Kansas did, which has a smaller population. So each community is researched so that we knew who moved there, so we knew the demographic background for each of the communities. Then we send field workers into those communities. And because it was the ‘60s also there were just all kinds of strange things. When you have somebody with Wisconsin plates hanging out in Mississippi in the ‘60s, they would ask, “What are you doing here? Why are you here?” Particularly for people with less education, explaining the job to them, often they didn’t believe it. Another guy who was in a small town in eastern Pennsylvania could not get anybody to work with him. Nobody would help him or give him any kind of references of people to talk to. He was sitting in a bar about the third day in that town. He was despairing. He was telling his troubles to a bartender. The bartender listened to him and listened to him. He said, “Oh, you are here to do this, this and this.” He said, “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m after.” The bartender said, “I’m
sorry, son. People just assumed that you were an FBI agent. We had a murder here recently. Everyone just assumed that you were an undercover FBI agent. After that, the bartender spread the word in the small town and the guy got somebody to work with him and finished up the questionnaire. So that was one of my jobs with the dictionary while I was at Wisconsin was to run that field work.

Q: But then you continued on with this dictionary when you were here?

A: Oh, yes. I went back. There was Rockefeller grant money one summer. I was back for several summers after I was here helping to set up the basic methods. A friend and I, a man who actually ended up here, Michael Henderson, developed the computer-generated maps that are used in the dictionary today to illustrate. And because the populations weren’t proportional to the size of the states, it is a rather odd looking map because states have to be distorted in order to accommodate the number of informants. Massachusetts, for example, is much smaller physically than Kansas, but has many more people so therefore many more informants. So we developed the map for that. And then I also supervised the transcription of the tapes that were made for the pronunciation studies. There is the use of the international phonetic alphabet, which is an alphabet where each symbol has only one sound possibility unlike the ambiguities of the English alphabet. I oversaw the training of people to transcribe those. And so I had all that data then.

Q: Who uses this dictionary?

A: The Dictionary of American Regional English is a cultural artifact, so the people who are interested in the life of a particular region. For example, say you moved to be a teacher in western Kentucky and you want to come to understand western Kentucky
better, then the dictionary becomes a resource for that. Literary scholars, particularly scholars of American literature. So *Huckleberry Finn*, for example. There are any number of words that when you look it up you understand that, no, it’s not the current meaning, the popular meaning today that is really intended. It was something else. So it becomes an in-depth tool for investigating regional and subregional cultural traits and features in the country.

It’s also of course of interest to linguists and English language scholars who want data for testing how does the language work, what kind of evidences for the shifting of vocabulary, the shifting of pronunciations across social groups and regional groups. I mean regionality is a trait we sort of take it for granted. But in language there is really no reason why Americans today should be regionally different in their pronunciations. We are enough generations removed. It’s separation that produces differences and we have been so mobile and so communicative in so many different ways. But yet some people in communities decide they are going to replicate that kind of speech, they are going to keep that alive. That says something interesting. There’s no physically necessary reason for it, but there are social reasons for it. And another dictionary I have worked on, *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary* is heavily used because English is such a popular second language across the world. We sell many copies in Asia and Africa and Europe. I keep getting fan letters from a guy in Italy who wants to know when the next edition is coming out. He said, “This is the best book since the Bible. I use it all the time. I want to make sure my English is just right.”

Q: So you are still working on this dictionary. And the language is always changing too.
A: That’s right. In every edition. In fact, I have a whole list of things I want to change. A word like “sure,” for example. In earlier editions I’ve listed its first pronunciation as being “shoor,” but I don’t believe that is correct any more. I think that what I had as the secondary pronunciation is what most people say most of the time. And that’s “shur,” not “shoor” but “shur.” So I’ve got a list of dozens where I think things have shifted, things that have been considered too informal in prior years, I think now if what you want to do is sound natural, that’s the pronunciation you need to be listing. And there are other interesting things to deal with. Dick Cheney, for example, that family name of Cheney, it’s always “Chaney” in the news. But the family calls it “Cheeney.” So what do you privilege? Do you privilege what the family itself calls it or do you say, “Oh, no. It’s in the media and what is most widespread. So if your philosophy is if somebody’s coming in and wants to know what sounds most natural, will draw the least attention to itself, then you have to go with “Chaney,” even though Cheeney is what the family itself uses.

Q: Did you ever have sabbaticals?

A: Yes. Actually, I’ve only had one sabbatical here. And I used it to split time between going to Ann Arbor and doing research with materials there and in Madison. So I continued to work on the dictionary. It was another summer and fall that I split between Ann Arbor and Madison. That was the only sabbatical that I had applied for.

Q: Have you had any administrative responsibilities?

A: I have. I served for a year as the acting director of freshman-sophomore English, what is now called First- and -Second Year English, in the department. For 10 years I was the director of what was then called the Writing Center. The Writing Center for
that 10-year period was not a student-oriented center. But it was writing across the curriculum. We worked with professors across the campus to develop materials to support writing being used in classes both to promote the learning of the course material but to strengthen student writing. The assumption is that there are not general writing traits. That is, learning to write an essay in English is not necessarily the same as writing a lab report in biology. If you want students to write good lab reports, you have to show them how to write good lab reports. You can’t just expect things to transfer from having written an essay in English 101. For example, We did a lot of work with in Civil Engineering. We developed a booklet for use in the department with guidelines on what does good writing of various kinds in engineering look like. So then professors could refer this booklet their students and say, “This is what I’m looking for. Don’t give me something that looks like that. I want something that looks like this. I want it to have these qualities and traits.” It turns out that people in different disciplines use language in quite different ways. What is it to make an argument? In English it doesn’t matter if you have statistics as part of your argument. In other areas and other disciplines in the university you have no argument unless it is based on hard data that you’ve analyzed.

Q: Oh, yes.
A: How one builds an argument then is not just a matter of superficial traits, spelling and punctuation, etc. but how you use the language appropriately to address the subject matter that is expected within that discipline. So I ran that unit for about 10 years. Then the university decided that now they wanted something for students. I said, “That’s fine. I think you should do that.” So they took us and reorganized us and
made us a student-oriented writing center, which is still in existence. I then moved from that and I became chair of the English Department in the year 2000. I served a three-year term as chair of the department. It was a very enlightening time. Those are the major administrative jobs I have done.

Q: You’ve been on university committees, I suppose. Any you particularly remember?
A: Oh, Lord, yes. Promotion and Tenure committees, Sabbatical committees. I did several stints on University governance. These are places where you meet colleagues from across the university. And you also get a clear chance to see that people have differing values and what they are looking for in academic work. That’s always good to get that kind of context. Sometimes it can get very intense, the discussions around these issues. I don’t think there were any disasters, just places of more or less difficulty and some real pleasures as well working on University and College-level committees.

Q: And you remarried.
A: Yes. I remarried. I remarried about 20 years ago.

Q: What is her name?
A: Here name is Amy Devitt. In fact, she is in the English Department here at the University. She, too, is interested in language and writing study.

Q: Have you been involved in community activities?
A: Not very much. I’ve generally been a 60 hour a week man with the University. In many ways graduate school never ended for me. It was just, “This is my life and this is where I put in my time.” Students and classes and administrative work and research
and publication have been my focus. I’m hoping in retirement that I can sort of stick
my head above ground and make some contributions back to the community.

Q: Do you have grandchildren?

A: I do. I have two grandchildren here in Lawrence and I have one in the Bay area. I
have a great-grandchild here in Lawrence and another great-grandchild on the way.

Q: What do you plan to do in retirement?

A: That’s a good question. I have my theory. My theory is that there will be three major
things that I want to do. One is go back to my youth and try to recover some of the
things that I most enjoyed from my youth and that I gave up, largely in graduate
school. I really miss music, making music. So I think that I will be trying to take
some steps to get back to being able to do music. I’m not sure exactly which
instrument or which way yet, but that’s one thing I want to do. Another is I want to
continue with some of the things that got me here. So I’ll continue to do dictionary
work, the new edition of Cambridge, for example. I’ll probably be doing some work
on the final volume of the Dictionary of American Regional English. It will be
coming out soon, but then they are going to be doing a supplementary volume. I’ll
probably be involved with that when that starts. So I want to continue with the
dictionary work. Then the third thing is I want to be open to brand new things. That
is, I’m not quite sure what those will be. Working out in the community, perhaps. It’s
just that I want to do new things, learn new things, become aware of different things.
And if I develop passions for them, fine. That’s the theory. Exactly how that will
work out, I really don’t know yet. Actually, since I retired in mid May, I’ve been
busier than I was before I retired. So when the desk clears, I’ll start to have a better sense.

**Q:** To kind of finish up, what is your assessment of the English Department, KU, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

**A:** That could take a long time to discuss. When I came to KU one of the things I liked about it was that the balance between in effect being a liberal arts college and being a place where research was valued and supported, I thought, was just right for me. The university across time, the emphasis has shifted, of course, increasingly to research and less to teaching. I sometimes am concerned. I don’t know if the people of Kansas are well served by that move. For our point of view, of course, you have to do what it takes to survive. And so the movement to grant getting and private support of research is completely understandable in the current context. But I sort of lament that some valuable things are being shunted aside in order to pursue that. The English Department, where we have never had very much money to go after anyway, has been less involved in that. But it has come at a price.

That is, when I came here, the English Department was the largest and probably the most powerful department on campus. We had people everywhere, in administration, on every committee that mattered. Across the university, English had its finger in the pie. Since then the department’s tenure track faculty has been reduced by about 50 percent. And in effect the department has been restructured, without it ever being overtly discussed. So we end up having to use many more part-time teachers and many more graduate students teaching and teaching higher levels in the department than we used to. Part of that has come because we trimmed back our
teaching load so that we could do more research. Indeed, we do more research. The department publishes well and in our national ranking we are probably as high or higher than we have ever been. But there are just a lot of other things that are less visible that have gone by the board.

Q: Do you have less students in English now than when you came?

A: No. We have about the same number. When I came the English Department had 60 some tenure track faculty. The population of the university was around 17,500. Now it is close to 30,000 and we have 30 some people. The basic requirements and courses have not changed dramatically in that period, although I think they are going to very soon. But the only significant place where we have fewer students than we used to comes from more students using AP, high-school taught, and community college courses to bypass our early courses than in the past. But the number of majors that we have, the number of graduate students we have is really pretty comparable to what we had. So that means somebody is doing the teaching. And it’s not that the part-timers, the graduate students aren’t caring and good, effective people, but they have differing agendas and a different context to work in than tenure track faculty do. So that shift over the years… I understand it and from the point of view of research some gains come from it but there have also been losses. My private feeling is that at some point in the future people are going to stand back and take a look at the losses and say, “Can we recover some of that?” We need to be of service to the young people in the state and their parents. I just came back from doing the Wheat State Whirlwind Tour.

Q: I read about that.
A: We went on a bus and it was very fascinating. One of the impressions of many that I had that stand out was the quality of the people that we met. And we met townspeople and public school teachers and community school administrators and businessmen and just a variety of people. I ran into people who were bright, articulate, well informed, purposeful, hard-working, and I thought, “Yes, that’s why some of my very best students over the years have come from central and western Kansas. That’s what they are reflecting.” It’s those kinds of people. Part of what the university needs to be doing is help keep that alive, supporting that kind of approach to life in less urban areas of the state.

Q: Is there anything else that I’ve forgotten that you’d like to add?

A: When I came to Lawrence, I thought, “Well, ten years and then my kids will be out or nearly out of high school and I’ll move on to something else.” Long before that ten years, it became increasingly difficult for me to want to or think about going anywhere else. I think while both the university and the community are certainly not perfect, and I certainly have had disappointments, by and large I think it has lived up to the promise that it held when I looked at the place back in the 1960’s, that it indeed was a good place to raise my kids, that they became who they are, that they were allowed to become who they are and are successful in their ways in part because of the kind of community they grew up in. The university, by and large, gave me the room to explore and teach and research in ways that I valued where I could in good conscience pass it on to my students. I think that is very valuable. I have enough friends in enough places, different universities, to know that it is not a universal feeling. So I think both Lawrence and the state, which can be difficult to deal with
sometimes, have served me well. I guess the only other thing to add is continued
dedication to my field of study, which I came across when I was 20, the English
language. My students have failed me at times, my institution has failed me at
times, I have failed me at times, but the English language has never, ever failed me.
It’s always been a source of wonder and amazement. How does it work? Why does
it work that way? And the recognition of how important it is to understand it and for
people to work with it, that’s always been there. So I guess if there’s anything for a
retiree to pass on to somebody who isn’t, it is find something that you care about that
much. That will carry you through difficult times. That will lead you to do
successful things because you care to do it. I hope that the move for funded research
never pushes that out for individuals. I hope individuals can always at least make use
of that to be able to carry out their passion because then learning will go right on.
And it will be fine.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You’re welcome. Thank you very much for doing this. It is a very good service that
you provide.