

# Ralph B. Bennett

SR 483, Oral History, by Jim Strassmaier

1991 June 8



BENNETT: Ralph B. Bennett

JS: Jim Strassmaier

Transcribed by: Unknown

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## Tape 1, Side 1

1991 June 8

JS: With Ralph Bennett, and the date today is about the 8th of June, am I right on that?

BENNETT: Yes, yes.

JS: And we're in Mr. Bennett's home in San Diego, and the interviewer is Jim Strassmaier for the Oregon Historical Society. Well, without further ado, why don't we begin just by my asking you to give your full name, and the date and place of your birth?

BENNETT: Oh. Ralph Blackhurst Bennett, Jr., July 4th, 1920, Portland, Oregon.

JS: And you were born in Portland?

BENNETT: Yes, but before we begin, I want to give you a little something here from St. Augustine, if I can find it. This is an epigraph. He says, "Great is the power of memory, exceeding great is it, oh God. An inner chamber, vast and unbounded. Who has penetrated to its very bottom? Yet it is a power of my mind, and it belongs to my nature, and thus I do not comprehend all that I am."

JS: Puts it in perspective.

BENNETT: You were asking me?

JS: Yes, I was going to suggest going into the memory, and perhaps adding to it, as you go along, a little self-analysis, which Augustine must have done plenty of.

BENNETT: He did.

JS: And since we're kind of limited on time, I wonder if you could give me some idea of your upbringing in terms of your political formation, and some of the influences that brought you to the point that you were — when you became, in effect, a publicly active person working for B.P.A. [Bonneville Power Administration], and into journalism.

BENNETT: Well, your parents always lay the foundation, I'm sure, at least they did in my case. And the first political thing I can remember, [Laughs] is the election of 1928, when I was eight years old, and our family was very much horrified at the prospect of Al Smith getting elected president, because he was against Prohibition. And so, I remember that that was horrifying everybody. But four years later, why, my parents voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and he also was against Prohibition! But by that time it didn't seem to matter that much, because of course the country had gotten into a terrible depression and wanted out, and it seemed that maybe he offered a way.

But my father had grown up in upper New York State, which is Republican territory, and he was Republican. And he supported Theodore Roosevelt though, when he was in college, or right after that, and that was sort of liberal Republicanism. And I don't think he thought too terribly much about politics thereafter, until the Depression came, and then he switched over and became a Democrat.

My mother, who grew up in Seattle, and was the daughter of Swedish immigrants, was much more liberal than my father by upbringing, I think; not morally liberal, but

politically liberal. So she sort of encouraged him to become more liberal, and he did, and he had a paper in The Dalles, a small weekly, and he wrote many editorials which were backing the New Deal. There was a small daily there, called *The Chronicle*, and it was just the opposite. It was widely believed that many of its more fiercely conservative editorials were written by Judge Fred W. Wilson. [Both laugh]

JS: What was the name of his paper?

BENNETT: He didn't own it, but it was thought that he often wrote anonymously some of the best editorials — in *The Chronicle*.

JS: And the name of your father's paper?

BENNETT: *The Optimist*. It's gone now.

But, in any case, so, my father was very internationalist, and supported our getting into the, you know — interventionist as far as World War II was concerned. But I was in college, and I was very much against getting into World War II. Most college students were. So I kind of, when I was in college, for various reasons, I'm not sure just why, but I was quite liberal. I was more than liberal, I was progressive. I was more than progressive, I was sort of radical in a college student type of way. So I joined the John Reed Club, and I must have, without realizing it, I must have been around a lot of people who were either in the Communist Party, or wanted to be, or considered to — but in any case, I guess I was a Lefty, but, you know, bourgeois Lefty. [Laughs]

So I came back to The Dalles, and my dad was pretty sick at that time, and after — this was in 1944, right after the election of Franklin Roosevelt for his fourth term. So then my dad was sick, so I came home specifically to take over the paper, and so I became the editor of the paper. There was a tremendous fight going on about trying to buy out the P.P. & L., Pacific Power and Light Company, system in The Dalles, or to have a competing system, which is what finally happened, a competing system that was going to

be a public power system, and it would be operated by the Public Utility District of northern Wasco County. So to be brief about it, we had one hell of a fight.

JS: But don't be too brief. [BENNETT laughs] It sounds like a good one!

BENNETT: Well, it is interesting that the city council at that time was petitioned by the P.U.D. [Public Utility District] to grant them a franchise for a competing system, because the Company — they didn't want to condemn the Power Company system, it probably cost too much, and they'd have to pay severance costs and all that. So they thought well, we'll just get a franchise to build a competing system. The city council refused to grant the franchise. So an initiative campaign was started, and the signatures obtained, to put this thing on the ballot, and let the people decide whether another franchise should be granted. Then the city council refused to put it on the ballot, which is the best thing that ever happened to the people that were pushing this thing, because it created the impression that the city council, and the Power Company, didn't trust the people, or the will of the people.

Then we hired an attorney, Gus Solomon by name, you may have heard of him.

JS: Yes.

BENNETT: He later became a Federal judge up there. And Gus Solomon took the case, I think, to the Oregon State Supreme Court, and meanwhile was all this time generating publicity about this shameful effort to silence the people. Finally the Court said, yes, you have to put it on the ballot.

So it went on the ballot, and we campaigned strongly for it, and *The Chronicle* campaigned against it. In those days, *The Chronicle* used to put up on the front window of their office on Second Street, the results of the election as the counting progressed. I think there were four precincts in town. *The Chronicle* had an old line editor, or editorial page editor, I think he was the editor of the whole paper, named Ken Hicks. Ken Hicks

had been there forever, and I was just a young punk, just out of high school a few years, and so I was standing out there talking to him, and these figures were posted for all the precincts. He told me he'd been watching elections in The Dalles for decades, and the trend was obvious that the franchise was defeated. Couldn't possibly win.

Well, [Laughs] the returns from the last precinct swung it over, and by a very narrow margin the franchise was approved. This so enraged the Power Company, that they pulled all the ads out of our paper, and they were our biggest advertiser, they put a big ad in every issue. They also quit giving us any job printing, which was our biggest job printing account. All this happened after my father died, and so we went on for perhaps a year or so, and then thought it was probably wise to sell, when we could base our selling price on the gross of the previous year, which included all these P.P. & L. monies, and that's what we did.

Then is when Bonneville, which had been watching this whole process very closely, invited me to come and work for them.

JS: Oh, really? They initiated it?

BENNETT: Yeah.

JS: Oh. Before we get into that, I wonder if — did you deal directly with Gus Solomon, or did you know Gus Solomon?

BENNETT: Oh, yes.

JS: Could you tell me a bit about what sort of person he was?

BENNETT: Well, I can't remember very much, but my mother, especially, was very fond of Gus Solomon. Well, everybody in the public power movement there in The Dalles thought he was the greatest thing, because he seemed to be very, very smart, that was

number one. And he wasn't shy, or bashful, or backward. He was pretty pushy, and we thought he was pushing in the right direction. So, yeah, he was very — I wouldn't exaggerate, you know, but — and I didn't know him nearly as well as my mother and father did, especially my mother. So he used to come down here, you know, as a visiting judge, and I never called him up, or anything. But he was quite a guy.

He represents that liberal Jewish community in Portland. You know, in The Dalles, if we had any Jewish people, I never knew it. I was never aware of anything except Protestants and Catholics. So, in that, Portland was different from The Dalles, and more interesting. And Gus was a representative of that liberal Jewish community in Portland. And he prevailed in the case, so he was our champion.

JS: Are there other names in this community in Portland?

BENNETT: That I can think of?

JS: Yes, or of any...

BENNETT: No, they've gone out of my mind, I can't remember them. But I know that when I worked for Bonneville, that they were very — and I was involved in these liberal political organizations there for a couple of years, there was a lot of Jewish people there.

JS: Okay, so we'll be talking about that sort of activity, when we get into it, I wonder if we could go back for a moment to your college experience, was that — what college was that?

BENNETT: Harvard.

JS: Oh, you were back at Harvard? Oh, okay. And the political scene that you were involved in in Harvard was pretty liberal? I wonder if you could describe what that was like?

BENNETT: Well, the war was the big issue, above all.

I was pretty lonesome back there my first year, and I was very insecure, and I was very much afraid that I wouldn't make it. So, all I did was work and study. It wasn't until the second year when I realized that I could make it, and that it was going to be alright, as far as that's concerned, that I did anything other than study.

Then I went out for *The Crimson*, which is the newspaper there, and some friends of mine I think went out for it, and encouraged me to go, but in any case I did. And this was, must have been in the fall of 1939 that I did that. The war had just started. They had the competition, and I made it to the editorial board. And that meant that we would have meetings, and we would argue, and we would write editorials — I mean and periodically, a person would write an editorial. Usually, or often, but not always, after the editorial board had agreed that this was what we wanted to do.

So we were very much against the war, and I can remember we sat up there in the editorial board and listened to Charles Lindbergh's speeches against the war — against us getting involved. The sort of a bible of our group was a book by a man named Walter Millis, called *The Road to War*. This was the story of American involvement in World War I, and we were doing just what the generals always do, and that is we were fighting the previous war all over again. Walter Millis proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that we should never have gone into World War I. We thought that was clear evidence that we shouldn't go into World War II.

Let's see, that went on through 1939, and 1940, the spring of 1940, and then the phony war ended, and Germany swept through France. This took everybody aback, and everyone thought, my God, what's going to happen? Are the Nazis going to take over the world? But I took a year off then, between my sophomore and junior year, because I felt

as though I were in a treadmill, and I wanted to get off and do some reading on my own, which I did. So I wasn't at school during that time.

But during the time that I was off, my friends called me and said, "Come back to school, we need you! We want you to be editor of the editorial page, because they're trying to change our policy, and make us interventionist."

This must have been like in January of 1941 or so, and I said, "No way, I can't come back, I've got too much to do here."

JS: Let's see, were you back here, in...

BENNETT: No, I wasn't, I was in Cleveland, staying with an aunt at that time, and I sort of bummed around in the East there, and stayed at various places and read books, which is what I still ought to do. [Laughs]

So, I didn't come back then until the fall of 1941. Well, by that time, a very important event had occurred, one of those landmark events, watershed events. That was 50 years ago this month: Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Well, the remarkable thing was, about half of the people who were strongly against the war, as long as the Soviet Union was against the war, suddenly became all interventionist. That was enough to tip the scales, and the paper, *The Crimson*, became interventionist. Well, I didn't even want to have any part of that, because I was still against the war.

JS: Oh, really?

BENNETT: Yeah. And...

JS: Is there still some conflict in your mind? Was that a difficult position to continue...

BENNETT: No! Because I was a true believer that Millis was right, that it was all — that there was no reason to do it. I didn't believe all these propaganda stories about the



Germans being beastly to the Jews, and all that. I didn't — that was all propaganda. I didn't believe it. So I had nothing more to do with *The Crimson* from then on.

But, I don't know how I could have been so stupid, but I did associate quite a bit with the leftist clubs and students, even though I didn't agree with them on the war. I can't understand that. But I did. I did agree with them on other things, I mean I felt that Capitalism was a failure, and had proved to be a failure, and that the only way was to move in the direction of Socialism in some fashion. And that, you know, there were too many poor people in the country that needed help and weren't getting it. And that the extremely wealthy people were oppressing the rest of us.

But of course when Pearl Harbor came, everything changed in a flash, a minute, and I very much wanted to get into the service, but I couldn't because of my eyes, and I was very disappointed when I was turned down in the Draft.

JS: Now, you wanted to get into the service. Is that a complex motivation? Is there more to understand about a person at this time, you in particular, wanting to get into the service? I mean isn't there an element of fear, and that sort of thing?

BENNETT: I suppose...

JS: Is there more to it than just...

BENNETT: Well, it's very complex, I'm sure. Extremely so. But it was real, I guarantee you that. I mean there's all kinds of things like, you know, you feel patriotism. My father was a reserve officer, and he was extremely patriotic, and interventionist, and all that. He used to go down to Camp Vancouver, you know, and go to summer camp there every year, with his uniform on and all that. So it was a feeling that there was a sort of military tradition in our family that should be upheld, that's one part of it. And another part just plain old patriotism, because there wasn't any doubt, in those days, about America being always right.

Then there was the ordinary things that anybody would feel at any time, any young man would feel, that this is a test of his manhood, to be out there. And I didn't want to go in as an officer, or anything, I wanted to go in as a plain old infantryman. It was — I felt that was the democratic thing to do. And I didn't want to pull any strings of any kind to get any special treatment, and I didn't.

Which I think if I had, I could've gotten into the service, but I went down to Portland on the train with a bunch of sheep herders and cowboys from The Dalles, and I was in charge of this little group of 10 men or so, and I felt very self-important at carrying all their manila envelopes full of their war records and stuff. Then we went to this place where the — the induction center, I think it was called. And I was determined in not to try to fool anybody about my qualifications, or my eyes, or anything. So I did what I always do, and that is that I over-compensated, and if I'd've just made an effort to tell them what I could see, instead of trying to be absolutely sure that they didn't have any false idea of my eyesight, I probably would have passed, but I didn't. [Both laugh] So I was pretty crushed by that, and went back home on the train with these fellas, because I think we went home and they were going to call people later. And that was the end of that. So then I tried to get into something else, and didn't seem to succeed.

So I graduated in — that must have been in the summer of 1942, I guess, that that happened. So, the next year, I went back to school, graduated, and then I went into the American Field Service, which was the only thing I could get into, which is an ambulance driving outfit. Then I went to India, and I spent a year there, and we went up to the Burmese border and we drove ambulances, mostly for the Indian army. Well, always for the Indian army, which is composed mostly of Indian units, and then some British units. It was quite an experience. Then I got word that my father was not well, and I should come home, and that's when I came home. So then that's when this Public Power thing started.

JS: I wonder if we could go back a bit. I'm kind of interested in the sort of sources that people with your interests and inclinations drew from besides Millis.

BENNETT: Walter Millis, yeah.

JS: Besides Millis, what were your sources?

BENNETT: Well, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is the prime example. The movie *Grand Illusion*. Did you ever see that?

JS: No.

BENNETT: Oh, you should see that. One of the greatest movies ever made, and I think the first foreign film that — well almost the first foreign film that I ever saw, was *Grand Illusion*. And that's about World War I, which was the grand illusion. I don't know, it just — I guess the whole culture of the 1930s really rejected war. And I believed that. [Laughs] I don't anymore.

JS: And that's the leftist culture, that is just pretty definite in that area.

BENNETT: Yeah.

JS: Well, were there any doctrinal readings?

BENNETT: Oh, I read all the — you know, like — I read a lot of leftist stuff, you know, Engels, but I didn't probe very deeply into it, I must say. I just picked up a few little ideas here and there, out of it.

One of the most interesting ideas incidentally, and this has nothing to do really with politics, or anything, but it is interesting, and that is that one of the ideas that Engels, I think, had, was that society evolved over the centuries, and that in prehistoric times there was matriarchy, and that the women ruled. And that the inheritance was through the woman, and of course this is true in many primitive societies, including Indians and so

on, American Indians. And that they determined their descent from the woman's line, and so on. And that women, at one time, were far more powerful than they are now, and that patriarchy was introduced sort of as a preliminary to capitalism, and individualism, and that the women were more gentler, and kinder, and more compassionate and all that, and so this was the golden age, sort of. And that all of history was to be seen in the light of this departure from the matriarchal golden age. And there were actually different people who...

**[End of Tape 1, Side 1]**

**Tape 1, Side 2****1991 June 8**

BENNETT: [Johann Jakob] Bachofen, the Swiss writer, or researcher, developed it on his own, this theory of an original matriarchy, and I think Engels picked it up from him, maybe. There was an American anthropologist by the name of Morgan, who did a lot of studies on the Iroquois Indians, and his researches were — I know I'm going on too long, but it's interesting to me, anyway. His researches were picked up by Engels. And then there was an English writer by the name of — well there was a fella by the name of Briffault, I think his name was, that worked on this, but the whole thing of it was, that the feminine sex was much put down, over the centuries and the eons, and deserved to rise again. That was the whole — and that there should be equality of the sexes, this was the big deal with the Marxists too, you know, equality of the sexes.

So that was a big interest of mine, and I wrote my big senior thesis there, on the idea that you could understand some of ancient Greek history and literature on the basis of this theory, that it was a construct of patriarchy imposed on a foundation of matriarchy. And that the Furies, for instance, in the Greek tragedies, were actually the personifications of these ancient and much abused feminine figures. You asked about the roots, but that was the kind of thing I was interested in. I guess it was Marxist, but it was very dilettante Marxist.

JS: Yeah, it kind of interests me to ask you directly whether you read any of the sources like Marx, and Proudhon and whether you knew these people, or whether your Socialist ideas came through other sources.

BENNETT: Well, it's obvious. I read that *Origin of the Family*, by Engels and Marx, I think, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, just a little thing, and I still have the book. And that's about the only thing I read. But that made a powerful impression on me. Because I'd already read Freud quite a bit, and I thought Freud had pretty much explained [Laughs] human personality, and here was an explanation for culture in

general. I think when you're young you like these big overarching theories that seem to explain everything.

JS: Well, I guess, you know, I think it's a mistake to whittle away and say, "Did you read this? Or did you?" I think the question should be, you know, what were your sources? The most exciting sources. [Inaudible]

BENNETT: I've mentioned them to you. I've mentioned them to you, and that's as far as I went. And then other things like *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets, do you know that play?

JS: No.

BENNETT: Well, that's a play that was written during the Depression. *Waiting for Lefty* was waiting for some — I don't know, I've forgotten what it's about. It's about a strike, I'm sure of that. That, and, like, *Grapes of Wrath* made a big impression on me. I'm not systematic in my approach to these things.

JS: Some people have — I interviewed Charlie Porter, who was at Harvard too, and I think he may have been working on *The Crimson*, I don't know. He got into journalism, from Eugene. And he talked about Lincoln Steffens being important. Were you aware of Lincoln Steffens?

BENNETT: Oh, I read Lincoln Steffens. Sure. Yeah.

JS: But not one of your major sources.

BENNETT: No.

JS: When you got home, to your parents with your new ideas, what happened there? Was there some dialogue, conflict — what actually happened?

BENNETT: No conflict, and very little dialogue. I just didn't talk about it very much, I think.

JS: Were you avoiding conflict, or?

BENNETT: No, I don't know. Perhaps, you know, my commitment to this stuff was, like I say, pretty dilettante. It may have been a reaction to going to Harvard, and I wanted something that nobody else — that other people didn't have. There were things there that I couldn't ever have. I wanted something of my own, and this seemed like a good thing. I mean, I was —

All I can say is, well, there people there that I was friendly with, friends of mine, and I can remember walking one time with this one fella, who was from New York, and he was Jewish, and he was quite liberal, or left-wing, in his thinking. He was so interested in politics, that he said he had to stop reading *The New York Times*, because so much was happening every day, that he couldn't study and read *The New York Times* too. I wasn't that way, I didn't read *The New York Times* except very occasionally. I was often somewhere else, but he was much tied into the whole thing.

And I remember walking with him one time and saying, "I think I'll join the Communist Party," I said.

"Oh," he said, "don't do that, for heavens' sakes!" [Laughs]

JS: Why?

BENNETT: So I didn't. [Both laugh]

JS: Why do you think that was a bad idea?

BENNETT: Oh, I think he thought it would lead to social ostracism, and it was just — I think, but he didn't say, I mean he must have thought to himself, "My God, this guy doesn't know what he's talking about, really." [Both laugh] It was a romantic thing to do. A romantic gesture, I think. A defiance of the establishment, of the conventions. That was all. It wasn't thought through, and it wasn't dogmatic, and it didn't amount to a great deal, really. It was just sort of a part of a general tone of the times, as far as I was concerned.

JS: What was his name?

BENNETT: Paul Sagalyn was his name. I've never talked to him since I graduated from college. He's a physicist somewhere back there.

JS: So, I think, in terms of the chronology, we're at the point where you had sold *The Optimist*, and went to work for Bonneville Power. What was your initiation experience in getting into Bonneville Power, as you began finding out the situation and getting to know people?

BENNETT: Well, it was very friendly. I mean, I must say they liked me, and they thought I'd won a notable victory for them up in The Dalles. And there were a lot of fairly young people there, young men, of great abilities, at least I thought they had, and I'm sure they did have, like Charlie Luce for one. He and some others had stopped at our house in The Dalles, and, you know, had dinner with us and stuff.

The couple of people that I worked with most directly, were Steve Kahn, and a fella, Michael Loring, by name, that wasn't his real name, but he'd been in Hollywood, and was a singer, and one thing and another. He's now a cantor, I think, if he's still alive, a cantor in a temple in Fresno. But he and, Michael Loring and Steve Kahn, and their wives sort of took me in, almost like a cousin or something, and it was fun.



It was a great time in my life, it just seemed as though anything was possible. And it was a time when I think a lot of people felt that way, when they came back from the war. It seemed like a great load had been lifted off of the world, and it was the dawn of a new era. The Depression was over. And it was fun. I got married about that time too, and that made a big difference.

JS: And your wife? Her name?

BENNETT: My wife's name is Anna Lou McClain, and she was working at the A.V.C., I don't know if you've ever heard of the American Veteran's Committee. The American Veteran's Committee was organized to be a liberal alternative to the American Legion, and the V.F.W. [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. At the time, [Laughs] Ronald Reagan was one of the great figureheads of the A.V.C. And so, I joined the A.V.C., because you could do it even though you — 'cause I was in the American Field Service, I could join that. Couldn't join the Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars, but I joined the A.V.C., and that's where I met — she was working for them, and that's where I met her.

JS: What was her maiden name?

BENNETT: Pardon? Anna Lou McClain?

JS: McClain, okay.

BENNETT: And so we met, and this was 1947. I went to work for Bonneville in July of 1946, and it was in 1947 that I met Anna Lou. And we went on our first date on Valentine's Day 1947 and got married on March 30th, so that was about six weeks later, and had our son in December. So things were moving right along! [Laughs]

And that was the same time, that spring, that Woody came out. So he wrote a whole bunch of letters to us, which I lost, unfortunately, in the Vanport flood. But the main thing I remember about the letters was that he persisted in referring to us as “The Weelynoods,” and who had just got back from their “moneyhoon.”

JS: Oh, the new — oh, alright, spoonerisms. [Both laugh]

BENNETT: I guess so, the guy was tremendously imaginative and creative and playful with language.

JS: Well, he sounds like kind of a character.

BENNETT: Yeah, he was. But that’s — so I got started there, and it was great fun, and you felt as though you had all the power of the United States government behind you. You could go to the garage and get a car, black Ford V-8, probably, and go wherever you wanted, drive wherever you wanted to, and have a card to gas up the car, and you were a representative of the government.

Meanwhile, you were espousing this cause of public power, which was highly controversial at that time. And you were opposing Wall Street and its minions in the private power company. And you were working with people like the Oregon State Grange, and independent farmers around who had organized their rural electrification cooperatives, and other sturdy folk who were pushing public power, these utility districts in the State of Oregon and Washington, to get ahold of this low cost Bonneville power and sell it.

As I said in the letter to you, it’s a populist movement. It’s tremendously exciting to be in a populist movement, because you feel like you’re part of a mob, sort of, but it also has its drawbacks. Just by way of illustration, one of the big leaders of public power, and a big friend of my family’s, was Walter Pierce, who was a Congressman for Eastern Oregon, Democratic Congressman for Eastern Oregon.

JS: Was that Walter Pearson?

BENNETT: Pierce. Walter Pierce. He's a former Governor of Oregon. And he was a big friend of my family, and he appointed my father to be Postmaster of The Dalles. But I've read his biography, you know, a biography of Walter Pierce, and it appears that he was not only — he was a populist, yes, but he was also a racist. He was one of the great exponents of the Yellow Peril, and he pushed and authored a lot of very bad legislation against the Japanese, and the Orientals generally. So, you know, there was this — I don't think the public power movement had anything like that in it, that I know of, but it was subject to the same, what I would consider, excesses of enthusiasm, that led to that.

JS: So there were sometimes elements within, that could divide the people in that movement.

BENNETT: Well, it functioned pretty well I think, considering. At my stage in life now, I look back and think, well, it was more emotional, maybe, than it should've been. But maybe you couldn't have gotten anything done without that kind of emotion. I don't think it did any real harm, I think it's died out now, pretty much. I don't know, I don't live in Oregon, or the Northwest, so I don't know.

But there was a real zeal, a real missionary, an evangelical quality to it then. I remember the Oregon State Grange ran ads in the papers saying, "You own a river." You own a river. And that was pretty strong stuff. Anybody that lived by the Columbia River, and didn't realize that they owned this mighty thing, and now they were given title to it by the public power movement. Well, of course what actually happened was that the river was virtually destroyed by the public power movement.

JS: You mean the fisheries?

BENNETT: The grandeur of it. The power of it, the wildness of it, the independence of it was tamed, utterly! [Laughs] So you own a river, but you use that river for your own purposes, which is what happened.

So Bonneville was there, presiding over this somewhat wild populist movement, and doing it sort of by subterfuge, and no one was supposed to know that I was going around to various public power districts and advising them on how to win elections, and helping them with ads, and so on. And so I felt sort of conspiratorial as I did this, I would go to these meetings of these public power people, who often were farmers, and grangers. And they were people who, you know, their hands showed that they had lived lives of manual labor, and they weren't extremely articulate, or polished, or anything like that. And I was telling them how to manipulate public opinion. And it was a big ego trip for me.

JS: Can you give me some detail, some substance, on how to manage public opinion? I'm using a different term, but go ahead.

BENNETT: Well, I remember — I mean it was very, it was sort of primitive stuff by today's standards, I guess. But, I went up to La Grande, and there was a big fight up there, the Union County P.U.D. was trying to get ahold of a company, and they weren't having much luck. And the daily newspaper there, I think it's called *The Observer*, I think was bought by somebody who had close ties to the power companies there, from California. In any case, I went up there, and as so often happened, the weekly newspaper was on our side. And I went to the weekly newspaper and I talked to the people there.

So I wrote a little pamphlet about it, and I was staying at the hotel, and I wrote this pamphlet and got it printed there at this little weekly printery. The name of it was *The Man Nobody Knows*. I don't know where I got that title, but I think it's the title of some kind of a story about Jesus. But in this case, [Laughs] it referred to some lobbyist who had showed up in town, to lobby against the public power movement. And I mean this

guy was painted out to be more of a conspirator than I was! I was the man nobody knows! [JS laughs] But anyway, that's an example.

JS: Your effort go around and to work with people, do we trace that purpose all the way to Paul Raver? Can you give some info on Paul Raver?

BENNETT: Oh, I don't know, Paul Raver was very remote from me, I never had much to do with him. There was, you know, it's like any big organization, the people at the top probably didn't want to know everything about what was going on underneath them. And I have no way [of knowing] that he knew that we were doing all this.

But I'm sure the power companies knew, because in 1946, Republicans took control of Congress for the first time since the Depression started, and that was the famous 80th Congress. And one of the things the 80th Congress did, was to cut way back on the funds for public relations, public affairs activities by government agencies. So they hit Bonneville with that, and I lost my job in July, beginning of the new fiscal — I think the fiscal year began in July then, and I lost my job in July of 1947. That was the end of that. And I think it was a pretty good thing that it was, because I didn't then, and I don't see now, any future for myself in government, on that scale. It was just a dead end as far as I was concerned, except it was a lot of fun, and it was money. But what I always really wanted to be was a writer. That's all I ever wanted to be. I didn't want to be a P.R. [Public Relations] man, although it was a lot of fun.

The biggest fun I had was, it didn't have too terribly much to do with what I was supposed to be doing, but the R.E.A. [Rural Electrification Administration], the national R.E.A., the cooperatives, had a big convention, a national convention in Spokane about April or May of 1947. So, I had heard some of these Woody Guthrie records that he had made for Bonneville, the songs, and I had heard them before I came to work for Bonneville. And I was tremendously moved by these songs, Here was somebody who seemed like an authentic folk poet, who had taken this subject and had made it come alive, and it made me — it gives, like all art does, it gave a new dimension to the everyday

world around me. You know, to see the Columbia River, and to think of his songs. It was just very impressive to me.

So I wanted to get him out, 'cause I was into folk music anyway, and you might say, you know, folk music had leftists, the big revival of folk music was sort of a leftist thing to some extent. So here was a guy that was singing songs about my country, my Columbia River, and the Klickitats, and all that, and doing it real well, I thought. And so anyway, I wanted him out.

So I talked to the people there at Bonneville, and said, "Why don't we get him out here, for this convention, and have him sing some of his songs at the convention?" Well, my purpose was to meet him and see him and get him out there. And they said, fine, let's do it. So we got the people — we were sort of telling the convention organizers what to do, and it didn't take much money. And they must have sent Woody maybe \$500 at the most, or something like that, to come out. He was living in New York then. And so he did come out.

I'll tell you about that in a minute, but first I've got to say that another big deal I did — I had a big program made up for this convention, I wish I still had one, and I got a commercial artist in Portland to work on it and design it, and he was very good.

JS: Who was that?

BENNETT: I forget his name. But I have the impression that Oregon, that Portland, had printers, and had commercial artists, of top quality. That's just my impression. At that time. And this was one of them, and it was a beautiful job, with color, and things, and I was very proud of that. That was a lot of fun to do that.

Anyway, so, I went up to Spokane. In those days you could get around. The Bonneville Power Administration had some old plane, a DC-3, or something like that, and they flew it around the Northwest and picked up parts and transformers and engineers and stuff, and dumped them at various places along the way, and it was fun. And I rode in

that plane to go up there to Spokane and meet Woody at the Davenport Hotel, which I'm sure you know about.

So, I asked at the desk had Mr. Guthrie checked in. Yes, he was checked in on such and such a floor, and I went up there with my heart pounding, and the door was open, and the great man was there, I was sure. And I walked down the hall, looked to the left into the bathroom, and it was obvious that somebody had been there, because the toilet wasn't flushed. I walked on into the bedroom, or the room, and here were a whole bunch of dirty clothes on the bed, including underwear, and pants, and shirt, and so on, but no Woody. No guitar, no Woody, and I didn't know what to do.

But he showed up several hours later, and he had gone down to whatever passed for skid row in Spokane, and had been singing at the beer bars down there, and this is what he liked to do. He had no luggage, and he didn't get his clothes washed, he just threw them out and bought new ones whenever he needed to. He didn't read music as I remember, but he had a whole sheaf of songs in his belt. He carried them around, and his guitar, and that was it!

I don't remember too much about it, really. But I do know that we tried to get him to sing at a luncheon of the group, and nobody was listening, they were all going on and eating, and he said, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to sing." So he didn't.

JS: He started to, but...

BENNETT: Yeah, he started singing, and he sang a song or two, and nobody paid much attention, so he said, "I'm not going to do this!" So then we took him over to the exhibit hall they had there, and tried to have him sing some songs at the exhibit. Well, that didn't work either. So the result was that as far as the convention was concerned Woody's visit was an utter flop. But as far as I was concerned, it was great, because I got to talk to him, and talk about different folk singers that we both — that I'd heard, and that he knew personally, like Leadbelly, and that was fine.

And then, after that he sort of made a circuit around the Northwest. He went to Seattle, and he went to Portland, and he sang. And he may have gone down to San Francisco too, I don't remember. Coming out — incidentally, he came out by bus, and he said he went down through Oklahoma because he wanted to see some of the effects of some recent tornadoes down there. [Laughs]

But I've since found out, I mean I've since been led to believe by some newspaper stories, or stories that I've read about that visit that appeared in one of the Seattle underground newspapers, that Woody took advantage of that trip to contact Communist Party members in each of those cities, and sang at fund raisers for them and stuff. Which is interesting. And he was writing then for the Communist paper called *The People's...*

**[End of Tape 1, Side 2]**



**Tape 2, Side 1****1991 June 8**

BENNETT: But of course I didn't know anything about those activities of his, and if you'd've asked me about 'em I would have scoffed at you! Because this was one of the big things then, that there was a Red Scare going on, and I didn't believe it. I wouldn't have no part of it.

So in the liberal community there were two groups, there was a group called the A.D.A., which is still existent, the Americans for Democratic Action. I think that's what it was called then, but I'm sure, there was a predecessor group to the A.D.A., and it may have had a slightly different name. But this was the group that rejected any influence from Communists, and believed that Communist influence was a real danger to any independent organization, and like Richard Neuberger was big in that.

And then there was another organization, another wing, you might say, that was organized mostly under — I think it was called the Progressive Citizens of America, or it's sometimes called the Independent Committee for the Arts and Sciences, something like that. This was a group that scoffed at the Red Threat, and the Red Peril. And there was this cleavage in the A.V.C. too, between the two groups, and I always sided with the scoffers. And you'd see the same people at all these concerts, and parties, and stuff. And Steve Kahn was another who was on the A.D.A. side. But Michael Loring was on the I.P.P. [Independent Progressive Party] side, or whatever they called it.

But anyway, I was real shocked, my wife said I was terribly shocked, and I know I was, when about, oh, I guess it was later, after I'd left Bonneville, it was probably around early 1948, when we went to a friend's house, and out of the blue, this guy invites me to join the Communist Party. Well, [Both laugh] this fella was in that, I think he was in one of those logger's unions, you know, that they had then. Woodsmen or something? I don't know, I forget his name. I wouldn't tell you if I did know it, but I've forgotten it.

JS: Isn't it safe now?

BENNETT: I don't know. [JS laughs] I don't feel it is, no.

Anyway, there we were, and out of the blue, he invited me to join the Communist Party. Well, you know, I'd talked about that with Paul Sagalyn, but I never had any intention of doing it, really, serious, and I was horrified! And that is the moment where I think my whole political perspective, such as it is, began to change.

I think I had already been pretty well shaken up by the revelations after the end of World War II, in 1945, that all that we had heard about the Nazis was not propaganda. And that instead of it being propaganda it was one of the greatest tragedies that ever occurred anywhere, and represented, you know, an evil thing that no one could have possibly imagined. And when that happened, and it began to sink in, you began to wonder about all your utopian ideas. And then when you found out that there was a secret organization going on right around you, and you didn't have any idea that it was, then you began to wonder, you know, about some of these verities that you'd always believed in, and that was that all liberals were good, honest people, and trustworthy, and open, and all that.

So, I did vote for Henry Wallace to be president in 1948, because I didn't think — I thought Dewey was certain to be elected, and Truman, I didn't think, had a chance. Well I knew he didn't have a chance. Nobody thought he had a chance, they knew it was perfectly clear that Dewey was going to be elected. So I didn't change my views immediately, but I think gradually, it dates back to that.

So after Bonneville closed down for me, there was a period of about, maybe, almost six months when I didn't know just quite what I was going to do. And we were living in Vanport. I'd chosen an apartment right down where all the Black people — they segregated in Vanport in those days, and so I got an apartment right down with the Black people. My wife was getting pregnant, was very — getting more and more pregnant as the days went on. And I had no job. I didn't have much idea of what to do to get a job. [Laughs] Maybe, well, I went out — I was kind of impractical. I took a course in Shakespeare from some guy at Reed, Lloyd somebody or other, who was a great liberal

at that time. So I took a tutorial from him on Shakespeare, and I felt that I was accomplishing something. [Laughs]

JS: It may have been the right thing to do. [Laughs]

BENNETT: But I wasn't making progress in getting a job, and then the citizens group, or tenants group there at Vanport, and there were maybe 15,000 or 20,000 people living in Vanport, and they had a newspaper, and they thought maybe I could help them with it. So I looked into it, and they came and asked me to take it over, so I did. Took it over. But as soon as I did take it over, then another guy, I don't know whether he was a tenant, or who he was, but he tried to start a paper in competition with it. And somehow it got involved with the Housing Authority of the City of Portland, and I remember going to a meeting of the Commission of the Housing Authority, and trying to prevail upon them to permit us to continue to operate there, and to continue to have office space in one of the community centers.

JS: So you needed that kind of support.

BENNETT: Yeah, and they did, they let us do it, and the other guy just dropped out. So I had the paper printed down at *The Banner-Courier* in Oregon City. And I sold advertising, and wrote stories, and I had some help from some of the tenants, and we mailed the paper, 6,000 copies it was, to everybody once a week in the thing, and it was — it just barely made a little money, just barely. But it was interesting, it was fun, because you were in contact with everything that was going on, and it was interesting to work with the advertisers, and see what their concerns were. Everything went along. We had various interesting things that we did, and we had a column in there about nutrition, and child care, and stuff; things that we thought were helpful to the tenants. And it was going along pretty well, by I think it was Memorial Day in 1948, and it was beginning to look as if we might be able to make a living out of it.

So I went down to Oregon City, as I did usually on, I think it was Wednesday of each week, to get the paper printed — or maybe it was Thursday, but in any case, one of the linotype operators there asked me, “Aren’t you going to put anything in about the flood?” And a little bulb went off, and I realized that I hadn’t had one thing in that paper about this tremendous flood that was going on, and the fact that there was water all around it.

So I sat down at a typewriter and wrote a little piece about — that went on the front page, that was a headline something like “River Flood Circles City,” and it said that everything was under control, and that everybody would — the Housing Authority would give people notice, and there was no need to worry, and I believed that. And the Housing Authority put out flyers and said that if anything happens, we will give you plenty of notice, and there’ll be sirens go off, and people will go around telling you what to do, and so on. And I believed all that. And then I think it was on a Sunday of that week, somebody came to our apartment — I think we were having somebody there for dinner, for lunch, yeah, and somebody said, “Hey, the water’s coming through!”

We’d gone around and looked at some of the dikes and stuff, and you could see where there water was boiling up through the side of the dike, and they’d put sand bags around it to hold it, but we were always assured that everything was under control, and then somebody said, “The water’s coming.” And I said couldn’t be, because we hadn’t heard any sirens, and let’s call up the Housing Authority.

So we called up the Housing Authority, and either we couldn’t get through, or there was some panic-stricken operator there, that said, “Get out!” So we hauled as much of our stuff as we could out of the apartment and we couldn’t haul everything, and I lost a lot of things that I’m awfully sorry for, books, and pictures, and records and so on, including letters from Woody and so on. But we put the baby in the convertible, put the top down, and started out.

Well, this fella that was there for lunch, offered to drive the car — I mean I asked him to drive the car, ‘cause I had a little home movie camera, an 8 mm movie camera, and I wanted to take a picture of all this! Which is stupid, because here’s my wife and

child, in danger. [JS laughs] Anyway I turned the car over to him, and I went up on the levee and took pictures of the people running from the water, and the units floating by with people on the roof, and stuff. And then I went over to where this highway, comes up out of there, and I finally found my family and my car. The front end all banged in because some truck had stalled on the way out, and he had to push the truck out of the way.

And that was the end of Vanport. And it's also the — a great deal of the end of my confidence in any official announcements about anything.

JS: Well, did the officials not know any better?

BENNETT: No, I think they were perfectly candid, and sincere in their beliefs that everything was under control, and they would give notice, but everything wasn't under control, and they couldn't give notice! [Laughs]

JS: Relatively innocent.

[Tape stops]

JS: Well, in resuming, I think I was interrupting you. Do you recall what you were about to...

BENNETT: We talked about the flood. And...

JS: The aftermath of it...

BENNETT: The aftermath of the flood. That was sort of a flotsam and jetsam in a lot of people's lives, and ours too. And we went down to the beach for a week with our friends

Michael Loring, and his wife and children, and our baby. And pretty much at loose ends. And then the people at Bonneville tried to help me get a job.

I mean I can't remember for sure whether it was at this point, or earlier when I'd been fired from Bonneville, but one thing they tried to get me to do was — or I found about it some way, is that, I think it was the DuPont Company, that was then operating the Hanford works at Richland, wanted somebody to be an editor of their newspaper up there. I went up there, and interviewed there, but I didn't get the job.

Then somebody suggested me to Rufus Woods, who was the editor and publisher of *The Wenatchee Daily World*, and a big advocate of public power. To hire me as a reporter, and he had the idea of putting me as the reporter at Ephrata, Washington, which was the capital, you might say, of the — it was the headquarters of the Bureau of Reclamation for the Columbia Basin Project, which was the big irrigation project from the Grand Coulee Dam. And they were just completing the project, nobody had settled yet. So I took that job, and it wasn't very much money, but it was interesting to me because I hadn't known too much about the Grand Coulee Dam, and here was an opportunity to live there right beside it, and see all the great things that were going to come from it.

So I went up there in 1948, and stayed there for four years, at which point, in the summer of 1952, my wife decided that she'd had enough of that sagebrush and isolation, and she wanted to come to a city. And it seemed like a good idea to come here, because her family was living in Los Angeles. So that's when we came here.

That was interesting, living in Ephrata, which is the county seat of Grant County. It was interesting because of the people that were there, many of them sort of hard rock individualist types, who had put up with a lot of bad times and hard times, and now saw before them a great promised land blooming there, and they were full of it; full of this vision. And so it was fun. And Rufus was full of it too, he was a visionary. So he didn't pay very well, at all, but I enjoyed it and would have stayed. A certain inertia in my personality I guess. I wouldn't have made a big move, except my wife demanded it, and so we did.

The interesting thing about it is, that here again, one of the big people there, they had a P.U.D., was Glen Smothers, the head of their P.U.D. He was the manager. And

Frank Bell who was a hotel man, owned the Bell Hotel and was a big politician there. They were big in public power, and so on. So the interesting thing is, that long after we had left there, the P.U.D. had gone ahead, in the spirit of public power, and had built a dam at Priest Rapids. And built it on their own. And got involved in high finance, and all that. And the outcome was a horrible scandal in which Glen Smothers and Frank Bell were both involved in taking corrupt money from either the contractors, or the financiers, or somebody. And Glen Smothers actually committed suicide in a hotel room in Las Vegas. So the public power movement there kind of came crashing to the ground too, as far as those two guys were concerned.

JS: That was kind of decisive.

BENNETT: Yeah. That was long after we'd left. I'm sure that after that there wasn't the same enthusiasm and idealism about public power in Ephrata, or in Wenatchee either, for that matter. But in those days, Wenatchee was the center of progressive, liberal public power. And Spokane, well, *The Chronicle* and *Spokesman Review*, was the opposite. We were right in between.

JS: P.P. & L. was strongly — wasn't...

BENNETT: No, no. Washington Water Power. They were the big bad guys there.  
[Laughs]

But it was fun, it was a fun time to be there, you had the feeling of this great promise, of this great development that was soon going to occur, and it was going to occur, by you might say socialistic effort and socialistic standards. In other words it was all the product of a government project, and they were going to design the farm units in such a way that if you had class one land, then you only had a 60 acre farm, and if you had class four land, then you might have a 300 acre farm. But it was all organized so that there would be the proper plots and everything.

Well of course, I think all that has gone by the boards now. I think all of that optimistic social planning didn't work out. And what's happened is, that instead of having these little landers on each little plot, it's absentee ownership of the units, they've combined the units into bigger farms, and it's operated by lease, and so on, contract operators. I don't know for sure, but that's my impression. But the dam is still a big success, and the irrigation project is still a big success. And they built, since I was there, since we were there, two more power houses on the dam, I think, one over on the north side, and then I think one is underground, it's in the, actually into the rock

JS: Did a lot of new people come into the area while you were there in Ephrata?

BENNETT: Oh, yes. They were coming all the time.

JS: What kind of effect did that have?

BENNETT: Well, it was — I'd have to say that it was sort of a spasmodic thing. In other words, it wasn't on a mass movement at that point, because there was no water on the land. There were people who were coming in in anticipation; people who were coming in to help build a project, and so on. And some of them looked forward to — you know, had actually bought land that was going to be watered. But most of them I think didn't. They had jobs, and that was all there was to it. It's quite different — I think later you might have seen something more interesting.

But here in San Diego, there's been this huge movement of people, over a long period of time, so that whatever kernel of group memory about the past remains, it's overshadowed, overwhelmed, and almost completely forgotten by society in general.

Now, it's the exact opposite in The Dalles. Exact opposite. Because The Dalles was one of the big cities of the Northwest, at one point. I mean say, 1860, or along in there. There were three big cities in the Northwest: The Dalles, Portland and Seattle. That's my impression. But in any case, The Dalles' population went up and down over the



decades, and has never greatly exceeded what it was at the peak of the Gold Rush into the Eastern Oregon and Idaho.

JS: Never got overwhelmed.

BENNETT: No. And so the consequence of it is, that the people there are obsessed with the past. That's my impression. Obsessed with it.

JS: Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised.

BENNETT: And it lives with them all the time. It used to be, like when we moved to The Dalles, I guess it was around 1932 or so, in the depths of the Depression, we felt, and our family felt, I heard it at home all the time, that The Dalles rejected newcomers. And until you'd lived there a generation or so, you weren't really regarded as bona fide residents. [Both laugh] I don't know. That's the result of virtual stasis, virtual, you know, motionless position in time.

And that's exactly, having gone through that, exactly why I can't go along, here in San Diego, with the people who are against growth. Growth is a dynamic thing. I believe in it. I believe in growth.

JS: What happens when they lose the history? I mean when they...

BENNETT: They go around in circles, in my view. They go around in circles. They lose a common bond, don't they? That holds 'em together. They lose understanding. That's what history gives us, I think. History is something that is recreated every moment, you know, every year, every generation creates its own history, and lives by that history. If you can't do that, you're in danger of losing a lot of common values, it seems to me, and actually losing the ability to understand each other, to an extent.

San Diego has been plagued in recent years by a whole bunch of high-binders, people who came in here and exploited the situation for everything it was worth. Well, criminals, actually, but white collar criminals. And I'm wondering if that isn't partly because nobody knows who to trust here. And so, somebody comes along that seems totally trustworthy, they go with them. And they aren't, a lot of times.

JS: And so you've seen what you're talking about in your position with...

BENNETT: Whereas in The Dalles, everybody knew everybody, they knew all their weaknesses, and nobody would do anything that they didn't expect everybody else to know about in the relatively near future. [Laughs] At least that's my impression.

JS: I wonder if we could drop back to some points that have occurred to me as we've gone along? I would like to really hear more in the way of a picture of the people that you worked with at Bonneville. I'm thinking of, beginning with Steven Kahn, a sort of a portrait of Steven Kahn, and then your friend Loring, Michael Loring, and some of the people that I think it would be valuable to get a closer picture of.

BENNETT: Well, I can't remember all of them, but to my impressionable mind at the time, they were quite a group. Steve was, as far as I was concerned, was preeminent. Steve, and Mike Loring and their wives came down to our wedding, which was in an Episcopal church that had a liberal rector, where that reformatory was, in the Willamette Valley, that town that had the reformatory?

JS: At Salem?

BENNETT: No.

JS: No, Woodburn.

BENNETT: Woodburn. But they were there, and threw rice at us. So we were very close to them.

But Steven Kahn and his wife are now living in Carmel, and they are quite well off. And that's because — I don't know whether this is interesting to you, but it is to me. Steve's father was some kind of a Jewish trader of some kind, I don't know what he did. I don't think he was any big deal, but Steve was a trader at heart. When we worked in Bonneville, the first thing he'd do every morning, was get the *Oregonian*, look through all the ads for cameras. And he was constantly buying and selling cameras — Leicas, and Contaxes, and Rolleicords, Rolleiflexes. He was constantly doing that, and you got to feeling he's probably making money on every trade.

But later, then — I don't know how long he worked for Bonneville — but he started buying what he called stumpage, which was nothing more nor less than trees, forest trees. And you could buy, I think his father did this too, you could go to the courthouse steps in these county seat towns, they'd be tax sales, and you could pick up bargains. Well, that's what Steve did, and he got a lot of timber land, and he sold it, and he made a lot of money. That was after he left Bonneville.

But while he was at Bonneville — oh, and incidentally, I understand from some of my friends in state politics at Carmel, that he's a big contributor to Democratic candidates and causes, but he always wants to tell them how to campaign, as a condition of his gift. He wants to [Laughs] advise them on how to campaign, or at least he did. But Steve was fascinated by — he was an advertising man at heart and he was fascinated by...

**[End of Tape 2, Side 1]**  
**[Tape 2, Side 2 BLANK]**

**Tape 3, Side 1****1991 June 8**

BENNETT: So Steve Kahn, was largely responsible, I think, but I'm not sure, for getting a movie made; getting Bonneville in the moving picture business. I know he was in the war as a soldier, but I don't know whether he worked for Bonneville before the war or not. I kind of suspect that he may have. But in any case, whether he started it or not, he was thoroughly sold on the idea of getting people into a dark room, and, as he put it, you could "rape them there," with a picture on the screen. And it was true, that you could put a terrific emotional impact into what appeared to be a plain factual documentary. And of course, getting Woody into the picture, to sing these songs, was part of that whole scheme. And there was some German producer from Hollywood, called Gunther somebody-or-other, that produced these films for Bonneville. And one of Steve's big deals, when I was there, was trying to get them to put up the money for another one, another film. I don't think — as far as I know, he never succeeded, but he may have after I left.

But Steve was liberal, but not leftist. He was fully for public power, but he probably voted for, almost undoubtedly voted for, Truman, who was regarded by others of us as being a great Cold Warrior, who was causing all kinds of trouble with the Soviet Union by his failure to appreciate their virtues. [Laughs]

And Steve — let's see, what else did he do? Well, he probably got Mike Loring in there, too, because Mike was a Hollywood person. But Mike had relatives in the Jewish community there in Portland, but he originally came from Minneapolis, or somewhere. But he was a Lefty, more leftist than Steve.

Steve had a hard edge to him, you know? And he was shrewd, and he could be cutting. He was an intellectual, I'd say, although commercial interests were very big with him. Whereas Michael Loring was different. He was softer and more emotional, and he had a big heart. He was quite different. And now he's ended up to be a cantor at a — and that figures, that he would.

JS: And what did Michael Loring do? What was his role?

BENNETT: Well he and I were — he was sort of senior to me, and I was the bottom man on the totem pole, and he was an information assistant. But I'm not sure quite what he did, actually. I know what I did. I'm not sure what Mike did. I know what Steve did, pretty much, he kind of masterminded everything.

We had a boss by the name of John Wheeler, who didn't know anything, and he was kind of out of the whole thing, and [Laughs] I would write articles and he would put his name on them, which offended me. I don't know, I can't remember exactly what all we did, but we were constantly plotting about how to push public power, and we were meeting with anyone else that wanted to meet on that subject, you know, the grange people and so on. But it was as though we were kind of a cell there, and the rest of the organization didn't really participate in what we were doing.

JS: I'm really interested in knowing what people were thinking and talking about, you know, about what they knew what was going on in terms of policy and the leadership of B.P.A., beginning with say, Paul Raver, his attitude and his purpose, and so forth. I mean, there must have been some debate going on and discussion.

BENNETT: Yeah, I don't — my impression was that he lived in a different world from us. And I know that a big part of what they did there at that agency was in the nature of public relations with the business community, and with the newspapers and so on, all on a very high level. They'd have a council. They had this Business Industrial Council that would meet periodically and review all of their policies, you know. And it was all on an extremely high level, and they never got into the dirty, gutsy little business of fighting the public power election in any town. But you go on down into the organization, and there were people who did. Luce knew what was going on. And a guy named [Henry H.] Alderman, I remember him. And then you get down at our level, and we were actually doing it. Which was more fun. [Laughs]

JS: But you weren't aware of, say, a problem about going ahead and doing this? It seems to me that Raver would have been in an embarrassing spot, he wasn't like his predecessor. He was trying to maintain a sort of a clean image...

BENNETT: Oh, I'm sure he was. Surely. But he could always deny it, you know, that he knew nothing about it, and it was not his doing, not his policy. That was fine with us.

JS: But there wasn't a sense of division, like Raver is not somebody we quite trust...

BENNETT: Oh, no. No, no. We never felt there was any opposition to what we were doing, it's just that I think, I felt anyway, that a lot of people didn't want to know about it. Because it would be embarrassing if they had to admit it.

But I think I mentioned this before, maybe I told you in my letter, that there was an awful lot of optimism around in the land at that point. I'm sure I did mention it, and we were confident that what we were doing was going to lead to a better life for everybody in the Pacific Northwest. And these dams would generate all this power, and it would go directly to the people, and transform their lives, and pump water for irrigation, and heat homes, and create industry where there wasn't any. It was a source of energy that would last as long as the sun, and the Columbia River flowed. It was, we were — we believed!

JS: And didn't have a second thought about the fishery?

BENNETT: No.

JS: Just weren't noticing the cries of some of the...

BENNETT: Oh, I noticed 'em, and when I was up at The Dalles, I wrote briefs for the cannery owner there, on the importance of the fisheries. I did that.

JS: Oh, tried to persuade them that...

BENNETT: Well no, I wrote them — these were propaganda, or briefs, that — for the Seufert Brothers Cannery, that they — he was a public power believer, but he was against the dam, because it was going to wipe out his business. So, I wrote, as a favor to him, I wrote pamphlets, and you know, briefs and stuff, about the importance of the Columbia River fisheries.

And then I covered hearings when the Army Engineers had hearings on The Dalles Dam project. They had — the Indians came and testified, and told — you know, this is our food, you're taking our food away from us, and the white men came and promised in 1855 that it would be ours forever. You know, they had the right to fish at the usual and accustomed places by treaty. Well, those rights mean nothing if there's nothing to fish for. I knew quite well what was going to happen, it's just that knowing it and — I didn't quite realize. I was so convinced that the blessings of development, that I didn't realize the cost. Until I go up there now, and see the dam, and here's the Celilo Falls flooded forever. You can see dams in a lot of places, but you can't see Celilo Falls anywhere except Celilo.

JS: Well, did the Seuferts — I'm a little confused about the Seuferts. They were public power advocates, but they didn't realize what it was going to do to the fishery, or?

BENNETT: Oh, they did. They were — Seuferts were very strong in supporting the public power distribution system in The Dalles. Incidentally, the competing system was built, I believe, and eventually P.P. & L. sold out. But they didn't want the dam built!

It wasn't, to them, it wasn't the same. To us, it was. To most people it was the same. The private power companies opposed the dam. And that's why we were so convinced that dams were great for the region, that's one of the big reasons why we were against the private power companies and for public power. It wasn't, as far as I was

concerned, the fact that the public power would be cheaper, that our — this is what we always sold it, on the basis of low cost, keep your bills down, and so on. That was the basis we sold it. But that's not the basis that I was working for. I was not working for just mere saving a few pennies per kilowatt hour on the bill, I was working to eliminate the private power companies as a major player opposing the dams, and the development of the river.

Now Seuferts apparently didn't see it that way. They must have thought — I think they thought that the power company was gouging them as consumers and they were going to gouge back, but they didn't want the dam.

I now believe that Pacific Power, or as it was then known, Pacific Power and Light, was a relatively enlightened and well-managed company. And I wouldn't find any fault with it at all now, and I think they had every right to try to oppose these big public dams that was encroaching upon their monopoly. And they were reasonable people.

But then I thought they were terrible. And I thought they were controlling politics in The Dalles, which to some extent they did. Just like they bought all the advertising and brought in the job printing to be done in our little shop when they could have had it done much cheaper somewhere else. It was really an attempt to buy us off. And by the same token, it was my belief then that they wielded an unconscionable influence on the elections of city councilmen. Witness the fact that the city council refused to call an election on a franchise for the P.U.D., and even the school board! So that was the basis. It was a — we were — I was — that was the basis of a lot of people's feeling against the power company. It was Wall Street telling us poor Oregonians what was good for us.

JS: Well, it was a misperception, or were you wrong then?

BENNETT: I think I was, I think I was.

JS: They weren't doing this?



BENNETT: They were doing it, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it was. I mean, in other words, I'm not sure that politics in The Dalles has changed a great deal after they moved out. I doubt that it has. I doubt that a new day dawned the day that P.P. & L. sold out, and that we had enlightened politics and humane leaders and all that. I just don't believe it. I think the problem was more in the electorate than it was in the electrical company.

JS: "The problem was in the electorate." I don't know what you mean there.

BENNETT: Well, I mean that if there were failures of government there, it was failures by the voters not paying enough attention, and electing the right people.

JS: But it's the same sort of thing. I was going to say, if you were back in that situation once again and know what you do now, what you would do. But it's the sort of — you must be in situations like that in your journalistic career all the time. Where you're against that sort of influence.

BENNETT: Yeah, yeah. I still do the same thing. I still do the same thing. And with a great deal of glee, when I can stick it to the power company. [Both laugh]

I must admit, we just had a big fight here in this town over a merger. San Diego Gas and Electric Company was going to merge into the Southern California Edison Company, and lose its identity, and become part of the largest single power monopoly in the country. It was a three billion dollar deal. And when I went back to work last August, why that was one of my big projects, was to galvanize the paper to oppose this thing. Which I did, and it was shot down, much to my satisfaction, by the P.U.C. [Public Utility Commission]

I think that was a good move. But partly because I think the San Diego Gas and Electric Company is a good company. True, it's controlled by stock holders and Wall Street, and so on, and they tried to make this move that was hurtful to our local community, because it was beneficial to the stock holders, they'd make some money out

of it, and to the top people in the company who were going to get bonuses and higher pay and stuff, if they gave up their company. That's all true. But even so, I still think it's a pretty good company.

JS: Are we getting close to understanding or talking about your idea of your slow decline into present condition of political conservatism?

BENNETT: Yeah, we are. I think that's very interesting, because there's a dynamic in everybody's life. You can't put yourself back into the position that you were, and if you did, you probably wouldn't act the way you did then, but the fact is, you can't. It's gone, and you change. That's the interesting part of it. If you just marched through life unchanging, it would be pretty dull, wouldn't it?

JS: I don't understand what your political conservatism – I don't understand how that term applies to you now.

BENNETT: Oh well, I feel it because I'm working at the paper now, I'm a consultant in Editorial, and we have these younger people there who don't — who have ideas that I, you know, can't buy.

I used to think that almost all the problems of the world were fairly easy to solve, and all it took was good will on the part of everybody, and the proper legislation, and it could be done. I don't believe that anymore. I've seen too many reforms that turned out sour, or to have results that were completely different from what the people that put them in thought they were going to have.

Is that conservatism? I guess it is, I feel it's conservatism. I still vote Democratic, but I vote for a Republican occasionally now, and I don't think I've ever voted for a Republican for president, but it may be that one day I will. But I don't go — like the Civil Rights Bill that's before Congress now, I have great doubts about that.

JS: The quota thing?

BENNETT: Yeah, because I think what you're doing — I'm all for — I'm against discrimination of any kind. Of any kind. Every person ought to move forward on their own merits. But I don't think that — I'm afraid the bill would just increase litigation, and that it would be used as a club against employers to require them to discriminate in effect. That's what I'm afraid of. That, I guess, would be conservatism.

JS: Well, if you then start using the term for yourself, you'd find yourself in the company of a lot of other people who are identified as conservatives. And then you start differentiating in that category? You're not the same conservative as others...

BENNETT: I don't know, I don't — I somehow, it doesn't seem to matter to me very much what I am anymore! [Laughs.]

I think when I was in college I wanted — I aspired to a certain role, you know. And now I don't. I don't give a damn anymore about what role I am, or how I appear to people. I just call 'em as I see 'em, and forget about it and go on to the next one. I know that I might well be wrong.

I mean I think my opposition to World War II was what? It was a mistake on a scale of a century! That was a mistake good enough for a whole lifetime, to be against that. So I've accepted it, you know, I was wrong! So that doesn't mean I'm not going to take any positions anymore, but I know I may be wrong. So be it.

I'd be more cautious, maybe, about taking positions, somewhat. I think I'm more inclined to lend an ear to the establishment by far, now, than I used to be. And I even see myself as part of the establishment now. So. But I really think I'm a liberal, but I would say a seasoned liberal.

JS: Can we talk a little bit more about Steve Kahn? Just a couple of specific things. Do you remember his talking about knowing Richard Neuberger? And perhaps you knew Richard Neuberger.

BENNETT: Yes, I do. I did.

JS: Perhaps we can bring Richard Neuberger in here.

BENNETT: Well, Neuberger was interesting, because — I don't know how justified my opinion of him is, but my opinion was that he was very much of a right-thinking person. And he stood for the right things, the things that I stood for, like public power and so on. But of course he, like Steve, would never want to be identified with Communism or Communists, or have anything to do with any organization that was infiltrated by Communists.

But, as I say, he stood for the right things, and he was a brilliant person, a brilliant speaker, but he also was not likeable. That's my impression of him. He was not a likeable person. He was — Steve was likeable, despite his shrewdness, and his scheming tendencies and stuff, I found him extremely likeable. Not Neuberger. He was egotistical, this was my impression of him. He was egotistical, and he was kind of arrogant. That, at least, was my impression of him.

For instance, we'd try to get him up to The Dalles to give a speech on public power or something, and it was hell to do it, and when he did it, he was condescending about it. As if, you know, he was doing us a great favor by coming to The Dalles and speaking. I didn't like that kind of people.

The kind of people I liked in The Dalles, in the public power movement, was a guy like Alf Wernmark, who was a shoemaker, Norwegian shoemaker, I guess. And his hands were all gnarled, and dirty with shoe polish, and so on, and yet he was a real spark plug. And he never gave himself any airs, but he was the real spark plug of the whole thing.

JS: Is that right. In The Dalles.

BENNETT: He organized something called The Dalles Industrial Club. That was a paper organization, he was The Dalles Industrial Club pretty much. And the whole idea was to get new industry through low cost power, and get jobs for people. And he, Alf Wernmark, was a real benefactor of humanity. He really was. He was a funny guy, this guy was a — used to promote — he was a boxer, I think, or pugilist in his youth, and he used to promote boxing matches at the Civic Auditorium, and have like — run kind of like a gym, you know, for young men to become boxers and so on. But he did good things.

He was never married, and I think he lived with his aged mother, and maybe father, and he would go up — there used to be a big T.B. [Tuberculosis] hospital in The Dalles, up on the hill, and he would go up there and organize entertainment for the patients. On his own! And he would organize that. And he would go and visit, they had a Poor Farm, County Poor Farm there then. And he would go and visit there, and he took me out there one time and showed me how bad conditions were, and so I wrote something in the paper about, about how terrible, and took pictures of the walls smeared with excrement, and so on. And there was a guy out there, young guy who had arthritis, and he was frozen. He could just — all he could do was move his eyes, and he was only, maybe 25 years old or so. And he was just living his life out there in this bed, and Alf would go out there and cheer him up, and console him.

Well, Neuberger would never do things like that, not unless there were somebody there to cheer him on, while he did it. So, I had my reservations about Neuberger. He was great, but I guess it takes certain people to do certain things. Alf would never be United States Senator, and Neuberger would never be a shoemaker!

JS: Yeah. Kahn and Neuberger were roommates, as I understand it, at University of Oregon.

BENNETT: Were they? It could be.

JS: Was Kahn a – did he get into law? Was he a lawyer?

BENNETT: I think he was!

JS: I think he had a law degree.

BENNETT: I think he was a lawyer, but he never practiced.

JS: And there was some real anti-Semitism in those days at the University of Oregon.

BENNETT: Was there?

JS: Yeah. And I've heard people talk about B.P.A. as a Jewish outfit.

BENNETT: Is that right?

JS: Did you hear any of the anti-Semitism...

BENNETT: No. Not a word.

JS: Surfacing...

BENNETT: Not a word. See, anti-Semitism was something, I think I've mentioned to you, that there was no Jewish families, that I knew of, in The Dalles. I was shocked, in the summer of 1938, I think it was, after I got this scholarship to Harvard, somebody stopped by, some alumnus stopped by, to see me after I got this scholarship, and — he was a Harvard alumnus, and he started talking about how the Jews were taking over Harvard. Ooh! I couldn't — didn't know what to think of that. It was totally new to me. That's about

the only overt anti-Semitism that I have run into in my life, from somebody that close. You know, I've seen, you know, you see it in the newspapers, and stuff. But I've never run into anything as overt and vicious as that guy.

JS: Oh, is that right?

BENNETT: Yeah. Although I think there were a lot of Jewish people at Bonneville, I never heard anyone mention it, or...

JS: Oh, okay.

BENNETT: I didn't.

JS: The internment, when that occurred...

BENNETT: Oh, the internment of the Japanese?

JS: What were your experiences of that?

BENNETT: Oh, I didn't have much experiences about that, except that my father used to write me very regularly, and he would give me all the news. I've got some of his letters. And he would tell me that Harry Morioka, who was well-known there, had been in high school about the same time I was, a little ahead maybe, had a radio shop, I think on lower Washington Street in The Dalles, not too far off Second Street, not too far from the Post Office where my father worked, had been discovered to be in communication [Laughs] with Tokyo! Believed to be communicating, you know, by radio. And that all the Japanese had been moved out of town, out of the Pacific Coast, because of this kind of thing.

JS: Your father believed that story?

BENNETT: I guess he did. That's my impression.

JS: Oh, a straight report.

BENNETT: Oh, yeah, it was believed. And I believed it, and that's all there was to it. But the only — the aftermath to that was, that when I came back and took over the paper, then there was a big fuss about the Hood River Legion Post taking the names of the Japanese G.I.s off of their Roll of Honor in front of the courthouse in Hood River. Because, see, in Hood River there was a big economic interest against having the Japanese come back, because they'd been ousted and their places had been taken over and were being operated by others.

JS: Did they still have title to their properties there?

BENNETT: I don't know. But in any case, they were adamant down there about it, and so I wrote a bunch of editorials then, about how terrible it was for Hood River to do this. And I think there was a bill in the legislature to correct some of this. That's all I know about the internment problem.

JS: So, in other words, the civil rights aspect of it didn't surface.

BENNETT: No. And I don't think it affected most people. Now maybe Gus Solomon may have been affected. He would be one who would have been the A.C.L.U. [American Civil Liberties Union] attorney or something, on the thing. But most people — my impression — of course I wasn't here during that period of time, I wasn't really here, but my impression is this, that it's hard for us today to understand the traumatic effect of Pearl Harbor...

**[End of Tape 3, Side 1]**



**Tape 3, Side 2****1991 June 8**

BENNETT: The invasion of the Philippines, the fall of Singapore, the sinking of the British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*, and then followed by the fall of Corregidor. It's hard for us to imagine the horror and shock that this produced. Especially here on the Pacific Coast. And when people suffer grievous shocks, they are liable to do crazy things. And I know, that in this, because I've looked it up, that these papers here in San Diego at first, after December 7th, 1941 said, "No, don't move the Japanese out, they're alright, they're loyal citizens," you know, "They're okay, we need them." And then by January there was beginning to be a note of doubt about the whole thing, and you know all these war extras had been coming out in between, with these big black headlines about one thing and another, and then by March, February and March, they completely reversed their position.

JS: And it was a sort of a natural thing as people thought further?

BENNETT: Under the impact of events. Events is what changed people's minds.

JS: I see. So that could be overlooked.

BENNETT: Oh, yeah! Because people forget that. They think of, "Oh well, I'm a liberal person, I'd never do something like that." But if they had been hit on the head with a sledgehammer a few times, they wouldn't know what they were going to do!

JS: Sort of on the civil rights subject, I'm interested in your remark that when you got into Vanport that you lived next to the Black area, and you talked about the area being segregated. I wonder if we could look at the mechanics of that. How did they go about segregating it?

BENNETT: I don't know, but when I went out to apply for an apartment there, because I was getting married, I wanted to — that seemed like a good idea to move there. This must have been in March or so, of 1947, they said they had no openings, there was no room, except I could if I wanted to, if I didn't want to wait, I could get an apartment down in this Black area. So I said, "Fine, I'll take it." So we moved there, no problem. I liked it. I enjoyed it. Later we moved out, I — for some reason, we had an upstairs apartment and my wife wanted a downstairs apartment, or something, we moved away from there into another, white, area. But it was taken for granted, I guess, that this was the way it was supposed to be. I don't know.

A lot of Black people came up to Portland and worked in the shipyards, you know. And that's what a lot of those apartments I think were for, those shipyard workers. There was a shipyard at Swan Island, and another one over at Vancouver, Kaiser Shipyards.

JS: Anything that you recall noticing about the lives of the Black people and...

BENNETT: [No].

JS: Okay.

BENNETT: No, they seemed to pretty normal to me.

JS: Were they losing their employment at this time? was there...

BENNETT: I don't know, I can't...

JS: As shipyards were scaling down?

BENNETT: If they were, they must have been at that point, but it didn't make much of an impression on me.

JS: Any reportage that you remember from covering Vanport news about the Blacks?

BENNETT: No, they were largely ignored, as I remember it. We didn't make a big deal out of it. I used to run little enquiring reporter things — you know, a photographer'd go around take your picture and get you to respond to some question. And I usually put a black person or two in there. But it was — race relations were no big deal, as I remember it.

I think they were passing civil rights bills, though, even then in Portland — in the Legislature, 'cause I think I wrote editorials in favor of them. I think they were. Oregon was, you know Oregon is ahead of everybody on most everything, and I think that legislature was passing civil rights bills in the late 1940s that California didn't pass 'til the 1950s or 1960s, and the Congress didn't pass 'til the 1960s.

JS: Yeah, they were beginning to work on that. Somebody who was actually coming into the area, and working with minorities, maybe a bit later, but somebody you may know, Monroe Sweetland was beginning to do his party work. Did you run into Monroe Sweetland?

BENNETT: I knew Monroe quite well.

JS: Oh, good!

BENNETT: I knew him when we had the paper in The Dalles, and he had *The Mollala Pioneer*. And I went down to see him, and we used to comp copies back and forth, and he'd write editorials in *The Mollala Pioneer* and then I'd reprint them in *The Dalles Optimist*, and he'd reprint editorials from *The Dalles Optimist* in *The Mollala Pioneer*. Yeah, he moved to California too, you know.

JS: [Yes], and what were you noticing about Monroe? What were your impressions of him?

BENNETT: Oh, my impression of Monroe was an extremely charming individual. He was loaded with personal charm, that's my impression, and smart, and a do-gooder and liberal from a way back, and [Laughs] you know, "bred in the bone" you might say. I liked him.

JS: [Laughs] I'm laughing at the expression do-gooder! Would that have been a term you would have used about...

BENNETT: I wouldn't have used it then, no. I wouldn't have used it then. I'm more skeptical now about those kind of efforts. I think he's stayed the same way that he always was. He hasn't changed very much, I don't think.

JS: Did you see him recently?

BENNETT: No, no. But he's been around you know, working for the National Teachers Association, I think.

JS: Did you know what he what he was up to then? Can you give me an impression of what you saw him being up to in those days?

BENNETT: Well, of course, he was for public power, he was for civil rights, I know that. And he was doing the paper, but that was very secondary. I mean he had other irons in the fire beside the paper. I'm not sure what, but I think trying to build coalitions, in the Democratic Party. I think, wasn't he State Chairman of the Democratic Party, I think, in Oregon? Later. But he was already building, and I think he may have even run for the legislature and even been a member, I'm not sure about that, but I think he was.

JS: Did he come around The Dalles, doing any party organizing...

BENNETT: Not that I can remember.

JS: It may have been a bit later that he began to...

BENNETT: There was another guy named Dave Epps, I think it was, had a paper at Sweet Home, or somewhere, *A New Era* or some of those — and he was a war veteran. Sweetland was a war veteran, he was probably in A.V.C., almost surely. But you know, he would have been A.D.A. crowd, you know, with Neuberger and Steve Kahn, and so on. Just a little more respectable than the rest of us.

JS: Well, he eventually became very much the organizer of the Democratic Party, the liberal Democratic Party. Howard Morgan, did you run into Howard Morgan?

BENNETT: Yeah, I remember him, but very vaguely. Very vaguely. You know, I have a pretty clear remembrance of him. I went, as I say, I went to Mollala one time to see him at the newspaper. I don't think he ever came to The Dalles, that I knew of.

JS: What was your Democratic Party like in The Dalles, do you know?

BENNETT: Well, the Democratic Party was pretty much nonexistent then. Pretty much. Seufert was a Democrat, quite a few of these public power people were Democrats. Alf Wernmark was a real Democrat, a real committed Democrat. And course my parents were Democrats. There was some — some conservatives, like Celia Gavin. Did you ever hear of her?

JS: No, no.

BENNETT: She was City Attorney, her father was John Gavin, had been an attorney there for a long time. But they were Democrats, but Celia and a few others that I didn't know very well were conservative, they were like Southern Democrats. And they controlled the Democratic Party, I think right after the war, in Oregon. They controlled the state machinery, whatever it was, I don't think it was very much. But my impression is, it was controlled by these conservative Democrats, who were not for public power, who tended to be maybe against organized labor, and so on.

And so all of that changed, and The Dalles and Wasco County became Democratic. When they built the dam there a lot of people moved to town who were new construction people and so on. And, you know, once you get something like that going, it has a self-perpetuating tendency, I guess. They elect public officials and it becomes respectable to be a Democrat, you know, you're part of the establishment now and so on. And I think that's what's happened in The Dalles. Used to be rock-ribbed black Republican. And Judge Fred W. Wilson was the blackest of them all! [Both laugh]

JS: I also wanted to ask you about Woody Guthrie as a person.

BENNETT: Yeah. Very interesting, very interesting. I think. Because, he was undoubtedly a genius, by my definition of genius, but he was a very great deal from being a responsible citizen, or a good family man.

JS: How's that?

BENNETT: Or even a good person. He was a texture of, I think I'd have to say hypocrisy, and anarchistic tendencies, and selfish aggrandizement, and sexual predatoryness, all these things. He was not a simple person, by any means. And the idea that he was just an ignorant Oklahoma farm boy is not true. He was much more sophisticated than that, but he put forward the front of being a simple person. And he —.

Well, here's an example of the contradictions in the man, he put on his guitar, "This machine kills Fascists." And he wrote songs, and he sang songs about the heroic war effort, and he supported the war effort. I imagine 'specially after the Soviet Union got involved, but in any case, he did. But when he was drafted, he did everything he could to keep from being drafted! And he was lugged, kicking and screaming, down to Fort Dix, New Jersey, I believe, and inducted into the Army. Well, that was a contradiction. If he really believed in the war effort, why wasn't he willing to go to war? That's one.

He made a big deal about his devotion to his children, and wrote all these children's songs and so on, but I think as a father and as a husband he was pretty much of a flop. Somebody wrote and said that when he was going around on that visit in 1947, he was, how did they say that? Well, I think they actually said that he was "peddling a lot of dangerous shit." That's the way they see it now in retrospect. That he was...

JS: Who was seeing it that way?

BENNETT: Well, this was that article in that underground — not an underground, but alternative newspaper in Seattle, I've got a copy of it downstairs. But he was kind of an anarchist at heart really. He really was. And this Bonneville thing was a job to do, and I think he probably relished the idea that he was planting a bomb under the power companies. That it was kind of a Socialist idea.

He may even have understood, I may be giving him too much here, but I think — you know Lenin, one of Lenin's big ideas was the electrification of the countryside. And if you go to Moscow now, right across from the Kremlin there's a big power station with a big neon light there with a slogan about, "electrification is the future of the people" or words to that effect. Lenin. So he may have — Woody may — it's just possible that Woody had somehow absorbed that, somewhere in his leftist...

JS: Directly or indirectly perhaps.

BENNETT: Yeah. But...

JS: Do you think he did any reading?

BENNETT: Not very much.

JS: But were the people around him, that one could identify as being sources for him, do you think, some hangers-on, or some influences?

BENNETT: Well, you know, it's like Pete Seeger was a close friend of his. There were just a lot of leftists in the labor union, the C.I.O. [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and so on, and in New York.

JS: So being with that group he could pick up...

BENNETT: But so, somehow it doesn't bother me when I listen to his songs and hear him play the guitar and blow the harmonica. It doesn't bother me a bit. I still enjoy those songs just as much as the first day I ever heard them. But I know that the man that did it, was something less than what he appeared to be. Or something more than what he appeared to be. And he's not altogether a nice person.

JS: So you were disillusioned at the time? Was that a shock?

BENNETT: No, I wasn't disillusioned at the time, no. No, I wasn't disillusioned at the time, I really wasn't. It's just later, and I've read biographies of Woody, that I came to know more about him. No, at the time, it was great. No problem. I could handle it, you know. Didn't bother me. I didn't know that he was doing a lot of the things he was doing. I didn't — it wasn't so dangerous to my eyes.



JS: Well that adds quite a bit more about Woody Guthrie.

BENNETT: Yeah, I didn't want to say any of that on the program, because it'd just be embarrassing to Bonneville, and it wouldn't help build up Woody. But they had some romantic ideas on the program that Woody sat on a stone overlooking the Columbia River and wrote his story, his songs and stuff. It wasn't anything like that of course. He just opened some history books and read history books about the region, and pick up a few brochures and then go back to his motel room and write something. [Laughs]

JS: Well, that's what we're working to do, to keep things as true as possible.

BENNETT: Yeah. I'm not sure what — I don't know. Memory does strange things, as I've told you before, and you can't trust your own memory, even.

JS: I was really interested in your reading St. Augustine, and why you read St. Augustine, what that passage meant to you.

BENNETT: Well the reason I read it was we can end it, right? The same passage there. It's a marvelous thing, and it goes right down the alley of your work. But I'll read that same piece that I read before, and it said, "Great is the power of memory, exceeding great is it, oh God, an inner chamber vast and unbounded. Who has penetrated to its very bottom? Yet it is a power of my mind, and it belongs to my nature, and thus I do not comprehend all that I am."

That's the important part, to me. We don't understand ourselves, we don't understand our memory. We don't understand our experience. It's a mystery! That's what I think. And then it goes on, "Must we ask where is this power?" It says — no, it says:

"Is the mind therefore too limited to possess itself?  
Must we ask where is this power belonging to it which it does

not grasp? Is it outside it, and not within it? How then does it not comprehend it? Great wonder arises within me at this, amazement seizes me. Men go forth to marvel at the mountain heights, at huge waves in the sea, at the broad expanse of flowing rivers, at the wide reaches of the ocean, and at the circuits of the stars, but themselves they pass by.

“They do not marvel at the fact that while I was speaking of all these things, I did not look upon them with my own eyes, yet I would never have spoken of them unless within me, in my memory, in such vast spaces as though I were looking at them outside, I could gaze upon mountains, waves, rivers, and stars, which I have seen, and that ocean which I believe to be.

“Yet when I saw them with my eyes, I did not draw them into myself by looking at them, nor are the things themselves present to me, but only their images, and in each instance I have known what has been impressed on me by each bodily sense.”

In other words, the past is created in our memories, but we don't understand how it's done. We don't even understand what's there in our memory. I think our memory is just a thin layer on top of a vast ocean, you might say. And it's all there, but we don't reach it all the time. Sometimes it comes up, and then it disappears. That's all I — I think that as you grow older, and your memory gets fuller, you realize more and more how much is there. And it also is important to remember, it seems to me, that, how do you say? Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was the mother of all the muses.

So, I think art taps into these things, these wonderful things inside of us, in a way perhaps that direct narration can't. People create artistic things out of their experience, that reflect the memories impressed upon them.

JS: So we have to reach beyond reasoning to grasp what it all is.

BENNETT: Yeah. That's what I think. I don't think — I know Elizabeth Wilson is big on Jung and so on. But I think there's a mystery of life, and if you don't have a sense of it, you're missing out. If you think you can understand yourself, or the past, or the present, or other people, you can't.

JS: Well, if you don't do that, you probably will have to do a lot of rejecting. If you insist on establishing a rationality to everything, then you reject things like Woody Guthrie, and who knows what.

Well, I'd like to thank you very much for your contribution, I think it's really a wonderful contribution, and it really sheds light on a number of things that are important to our history.

BENNETT: Thanks for listening, and thanks to anyone else who may listen.

**[End of Tape 3, Side 2]**  
**[End of Interview]**