Robert A. Benkeser Interview

Conducted by Katherine Markee on June 16th, 2009

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The following interview was conducted with Professor Robert .A. Benkeser, Hovde Distinguished Service professor emeritus of chemistry at Purdue University for the Purdue University Oral History Program. It took place on Tuesday, June 16th, 2009 at his residence in West Lafayette. This is part 2 of the interview, and the interviewer is Katherine Markee, the oral history librarian. Good afternoon, Professor Benkeser. We'll start with you being on the staff in the chemistry department.

RB: Right. I…

KM: You might want to move just a little closer.

RB: As you may recall, I had to go back to Iowa State for the summer to get my PhD degree. As Henry Gilman had said, I needed two and a half years, so I went out in the summer of 1947. I got my PhD degree and came back here. Immediately, Henry Hass who was head of the chemistry department kept his word, and I became an assistant professor immediately. I continued to teach here. Now my teaching assignment was in Home Economics as I told you. I taught the women in Home Economics. All the general chemistry people at Purdue as I told you earlier had to take at least one year of chemistry. That included all the women, and in those days just about everybody in Home Economics were women. They too had to take a course in chemistry, and I taught that course. Now the head of general chemistry at that time was Frank D. Martin. So he was my immediate supervisor so to speak. But Frank was, actually Frank got his degree in chemical engineering. He was most concerned about teaching the chemical engineers. We didn't have too many chemistry majors in those days, just straight chemistry

majors, undergraduate majors. He said you teach the Home Economics girls, and, you know, he couldn't really care less about them although he didn't put it in those terms. But to me it was a teaching job, and I enjoyed teaching. I really enjoyed teaching those young gals what I knew about chemistry. As I said earlier, it was a real pleasure just to see them come in very afraid of the course. As time went on finally they caught on, some of them left almost enthusiastic about the course. Some of them left enthusiastic just because they were leaving the course. But I did my best, and I enjoyed it very, very much. Then within about a year after that, Henry Hass did one more thing at least. He hired Herbert C. Brown from Wayne University in Detroit. That turned out to be of course a very valuable person to hire. He was just making a name for himself in chemistry, and I think he came here at the time because Wayne University at that time could not provide him with funding and what he needed for his research program. Henry Hass here promised him I don't know what, but considerably more I'm sure. So Herb came, and of course later on as we know, he was a Nobel Laureate. I got to know Herb very early, and I must say he was absolutely the best and brightest chemist I ever met anywhere, anywhere in the world. Herb was a real asset to our department although he was a somewhat prickly individual at times, but none the less, he was very nice to me and I learned a lot. Alright so Henry Hass, you know, he did this hiring, and the reason was he had obviously the money to do hiring.

KM: He was building the department?

RB: Exactly. He had money, state money, it turned out, because Hovde, the president, refused, absolutely refused to do any kind of going outside for money. He said, “This is a state supported school. Every bit of money we get must come from the state. That had long changed, but that was Fred Hovde’s view. So Hass hired H. C. Brown, and then, a short while later, we had a staff meeting. Hass called a staff meeting. In those days there was nothing very formal about it really. You’d just get a phone call thing saying there will be a staff meeting this afternoon at three o’clock. I remember going to that staff meeting and Henry announced that he was going to take a one year leave of absence. You could hear a pin drop in that room. He said he was going to join up with a chemical company that year out in the east somewhere. I don’t recall exactly where it was. I remember one of the full professors that was there. His name was Roy Newton. He was a physical chemist. Although you could hear a pin drop, Roy spoke up and said, “Henry, does this mean that you might not come back?” Henry paused and said, “Well, possibly.” We then had an interim head of the department. That was an analytical chemist by the name of Dr. Guy Mellon, a very decent man. He had reddish hair which turned white as he got older, but he had reddish hair, a rather respected analytical chemist in his own right. So he was appointed the interim head and I really believe that Mellon was hoping that he would become the permanent head. I think he would have enjoyed it. He was only interim head. So we kind of bumped along that year wondering what would happen with Henry Hass and so on. It turned out that Henry Hass resigned. He did not come back. The reason, at least the reason that leaked out was that Henry wanted to be

president of this university. When Fred Hovde was appointed and he lost out, he just pulled up stakes and decided to go out in industry. He left here and never go into academics again. He took a job in industry. The interim head was Guy Mellon, but he wasn't an interim head very long. After Hass resigned, Hovde announced that the head of our department was now to be Earl T. McBee, Earl Thurston McBee. I tell you that was roughly, I think that might have been around 1949 or thereabouts.

KM: That's the date that I have in some research.

RB: Is that right? Roughly.

KM: Wasn't he a chemical engineer though or was he doing more chemistry?

RB: No, he got his degree under Henry Hass. He was one of Hass' students. But I'll tell you, I hate to say this about the dead people or anybody else, but he was really a very poorly chosen person. But he was a friend of Hovde's and I once said loyalty meant so much to Hovde, and he just picked out Earl McBee as head.

KM: Would that have meant that in searches he could make a lot of the decisions?

RB: Absolutely. In those days there was nothing democratic about the process.

KM: Would he maybe be in conjunction with say one of the administrators or say, the department, may or may not consult with them?

RB: Oh, he may have. I really don't know.

KM: But he made the final decision.

RB: There was a Dean of Science back then, and his name escapes me. I did know it, but I can't think of it. Anyway the announcement was made that Earl McBee was the new head and that really was an unfortunate choice. I won't go into all the ins and outs of Earl McBee. I got along with him alright, and I was teaching Home Ec and Earl left me pretty much alone. I was picking up graduate students along the way. There were young people that wanted to work with me. As a matter of fact, when I went out to Ames to get my PhD, I had already had two graduate students who said they wanted to work with me-

KM: Good. What area of your research studies, what was that?

RB: Okay. Oh well, my area of expertise so to speak was organometallic chemistry. That's why Hass wanted to hire me and that's why he wanted a Gilman man as he said on his faculty. Anyway I asked my friend Nathan Kornbloom who was one of the full professors here on the staff, organic chemistry staff. Well, he would take care of my two students while I was out in Ames. If they had any troubles, they should ask him. He said, "Sure." But I was only out at Ames, they were on the quarterly system, so I was only out there about three months, then came back here. But in the meanwhile, I was picking up more and more graduate students, I think in part because I was a young person. I think they tend to gravitate more toward younger people than older people, I found out later on. I

did pick up graduate students. Oh, I was in my glory. I was teaching. I was directing research. If you ask me today, which did you enjoy most, I really don't know. They were both at the top of my list. I enjoyed both and tried to do both. It was very hard. Most of the time people would gravitate either to being teaching most of the time or directing research most of the time. By the way, H. C. Brown came here with the understanding that he was not going to teach, but he was going to be just a research director although he did ultimately teach just one graduate course totally, just one. But he did nothing but research. Okay. Now one little interesting highlight here. About 1950 there was an ACS meeting, American Chemical Society meeting. We had two national meetings per year, in the spring and in the fall. This was in the spring meeting and it was in Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was going to present a paper there. You know, you get up in front of a hall and deliver a paper and the members come in and out with their badges and they listen to you and so on. We were supposed to do that. McBee wanted everybody to really put Purdue's name out there in front. So I took one of my graduate students who also wanted to go. He said, "Doc, we'll split the driving." I said, "Okay." So I drove with, his name was Frank Riel, R-I-E-L. So we drove to Philadelphia, and one of those days we were there, we were only there four or five days and then had to come home, but one of those days, I was standing in the lobby of the hotel, and I look across the lobby and I saw a fellow there I knew from Xavier back in Cincinnati. I hadn't seen him for years. It was Harry Gold. I said, "Harry, how are you? Do you remember me?" He said, "Yes." and we shook hands. Maybe I should remind you that Harry Gold

was later known as one of the atom spies. Well, anyway, the story there is that Harry Gold went to Xavier University. At the same time, he was one year ahead of me, but we were both majoring in chemistry. He would get there very early in the morning. As I told you, I'd use the bus to go up there. I don't remember how Harry got there, but I'd get up there about 8:15 or so. Classes started at 8:30. Harry Gold would be there in a classroom, and I would go in. We'd be alone, we'd chat and I found him a very interesting person, well educated, obviously. At one point, I said to him, "Harry, whatever caused-he told me he was from Philadelphia-whatever caused you to come to Xavier?" I said, "There's University of Cincinnati here", which at that time really had a better reputation. He said, "Well, I had some credits that I wanted to transfer, and University of Cincinnati," better known as UC in those days, "did not accept them, but Xavier would, so I came here." Sounds good enough to me.

KM: (Laughs) Sure.

RB: But then Harry graduated a year before I did. I lost track of Harry. I don't know where he went. Of course he was very busy it turned out in the meanwhile. I don't know anything about that. But I did meet him in Philadelphia. I said, "Harry, I've got to go do a paper in a hotel", I named the hotel. I said, "I don't know exactly how to get over there from here." He said, "Come on, I'll walk with you. I know Philadelphia." He said, "I'll walk you over there." I said, "Alright." So we go down the street and we stop. Here's the hotel. I said, "Well, let's exchange addresses, and so on so we can keep in touch." He said, "Good idea." So we

both write down on separate papers and exchange these papers. So I go in. Well, later on I came back. I can remember about a day or two after I got back, now we lived on Ross Ade Drive, Building 21, Apartment 11. I was married. My wife, I got out of the shower that morning, and she said, “Bob, Bob, Harry Gold was arrested. He’s an atom spy.” I couldn’t believe this. I said, “No. My gosh. There we were just a couple of days ago in Philadelphia exchanging addresses. I’ll bet the FBI was tailing him all along.” So when I come back, I told the head of the department who was Earl McBee, “Boy, I met this guy, Harry Gold. I’m sure the FBI is going to be here to talk to me.” Earl didn’t bother him too much. That’s the way he was. So sure enough, a few days later, the phone rings. It’s the FBI agent, and he said, “I would like to talk to you. Let’s make an appointment.” Well, I…we came and I was pretty nervous. I thought, “Where do I fit into this picture?” Well, by the time, after about one or two minutes of the conversation, I was very much at ease because it was clear they weren’t interested in me. They just wanted to know what I knew about Harry Gold.

KM: Background information.

RB: Yes, and, you know, I told them what I knew, which was kind of…you know we were such good friends one year at Xavier, I invited Harry down to my house for Thanksgiving dinner because he wasn’t going home. So, I can remember him. He ate-he ate heartily which pleased my mother a great deal. But that indicates how good a friend I was of his. But the only thing I could tell the FBI, I said, “He always spoke about a girlfriend that he had back in Philadelphia.” I said, “I asked

Harry, 'Did you ever get married?' and he said, 'No, I never did." So I said, "You know, you might want to look up whether he did have a girlfriend." I said, "Maybe she would have more information than I can give you." It turned out they had plenty of information. Well, I have to refresh your memory. Harry Gold was the courier, so to speak, between Ethel and one of the Rosenbergs. Ethel and whatever his name was Julius, and they somehow had access to the secrets about the atom bomb. They would steal those. They'd pass them on to Harry, and Harry would carry those things and pass them on to the Soviet spy. So he was very actively engaged. You know, I told my wife when I got back from Philadelphia, "There was one thing about Harry. He seemed rather sad." I said, "He didn't speak as much as he used to." That was just my observation. He seemed rather sad. He saw the handwriting on the wall. I think he did by that time. You know, it was very interesting. If you look on the Internet, you will find that whole trial is on the Internet. Ethel…

KM: I forget what her husband's name was.

RB: I forget what her husband's name was, oh, Julius, I think, but anyway he, Harry Gold, in that trial, turned…he was a prosecuting attorney's chief witness. He turned against the Rosenbergs and gave… and the Rosenberg's were ultimately electrocuted and killed. Harry Gold was imprisoned in Philadelphia. This was all on the Internet. I got it later on. It said that he was a model prisoner. He seemed to have been bullied in college, in high school. He seemed to adapt very well to

prison life. But he died shortly after he was imprisoned, and that was the end of Harry Gold. But it was a sad saga.

KM: Yeah, I imagine. Isn't it ironic that after all those years, to just happen to run into him and then they were looking?

RB: In Philadelphia. It was such a…as I say, you would think that Earl McBee would have been somewhat interested, but he wasn't interested at all. Okay. Now I taught the Home Ec. students here until about the mid 1950's. One day, this shows how the department was run in those days, Earl passed me in the hallway, and he had a kind of a way of speaking out of the side of his mouth. He said, "Bob". He pulled me over and he said, "I think starting next fall you should teach Chemistry 651 and 652." He said, "Bryant Bachman is teaching that now, but I think you should teach it." That turned out to be the plum of a teaching assignment because it was what all organic majors had to take. It was a graduate course in organic chemistry, and needless to say, all organic chemistry majors had to take that course. The chemical engineers would send their graduates over to take that course. In terms of quality of students, they were just at the top. They had to be interested. But I really worked on preparing for that course. I worked harder than they did, I think. I went to Bryant Bachman. I said, "Bryant, do you have any notes at all that I could use?" "No, I don't have anything." I think Bryant was ticked off that he was not going to be teaching it. He didn't have anything anyway. So I had to work up my whole course, and I had to work hard. But they were a very receptive bunch, of course. I learned more than they did.

KM: That's good on both sides.

RB: To tell you the truth, it was about a year ago, I was cutting the grass right out front here. The neighbor, I didn't recognize him, comes over, introduces himself as Bob Perlis. He said, "I was in your graduate class." "You were?" "Oh, yeah. Remember you telling us about this guy who synthesized all these perfumes and things from Switzerland." I thought to myself, "By gosh, I did have that in the course." He remembered. Anyway once I got into that course, I attracted all kinds of graduate students because these students had not yet picked their major professor. Well, you know, if you make a good impression on them, and let's say I threw myself into that. You know, I was a pretty good teacher I do believe. I got some of the cream of the crop in terms of graduate students. Honest, you know, in that business, the graduate students do the work. You do the direction. But if you got bright students, they put their two cents in too. I'd go visit them twice a day I had good training under Dr. Gilman who'd come around at nights, on weekends. I would go around the next day, and they'd say, "You know, Bob"…well, not Bob, but Dr. Benkeser. " "I heard such and such, and I wonder whether what we're seeing isn't …" I'd always say, "Let's try it. Let's try it out." Actually we hit upon something accidentally which was perhaps one of my greatest contributions to chemistry at that time. It was a so-called name reaction in organic chemistry which is now called the Benkeser Reduction. It's an accidental discovery because I had at that time some very, very good, probably the best graduate students I ever had. Anyway I had a great teaching job. I didn't teach Home Ec. anymore, never did after that. That was the plum of the teaching

jobs, and I was getting some of the best graduate students although Herb Brown got some of the…

KM: Did you have both chemistry and chemical engineering? Just chemistry?

RB: No, the chemical engineers didn't do graduate work in our department. They went back over there. Anyway I had the best of both worlds, the best teaching course I could have had, and I was getting some of the best graduate students. Therefore I was doing some of the best research. Things were just going along great. I would say perhaps the darkest moment I ever had in my career started in the…I'd say about 1961. I had a graduate student, one of the brightest students in the department, a straight A student, came to us from Harvard. I don't know if I should mention his name. It was Rex Grossman, and he breezed through. I had a research idea, and I told Rex about it, and by golly it worked. We published this immediately, put it into print, and boy, that made a big splash. It was in organo-silicon chemistry. I was now doing work in organo-silicon chemistry as a result of my background from Henry Gilman. Well, to make a long story short, Rex Grossman, I got him, I said, "Rex, you should be a teacher." He didn't object to that. I got him a post-doctoral appointment with somebody at the University of Chicago. Rex left here and went up there with his PhD from here, went up there to do post doc work. In the meanwhile I hired a post doc from Japan, a Japanese post doc by the name of Nagai, N-A-G-A-I. He was a little hard to understand when he got here. He still had to learn English so to speak. But he was a superb lab worker, superb. He worked day and night. He was a hard worker. One of my

others said, “Well, he had to work that hard because you were paying him so well.” Well, anyway, “Nagai, you follow up on what Grossman did. Let’s continue on and see where this will lead us.” To make a long story short, Nagai discovered that everything Grossman had done was off. He had fudged his results. They were incorrect. They could not be reproduced. Nagai even hesitated telling me this. That was a terrible blow. In fact to this day, it’s hard for me to see how he got away with that because I was looking over his shoulder all the time. There were other students there too. They had worked in the lab with him, and they were doing similar things. They too didn’t detect this. Well, Nagai detected it. I thought, “We can’t give him a PhD. He’s got a PhD, but it has to be withdrawn.” I mean it was based on just a fake, phony thesis. So I went to Earl McBee, and I told Earl. Earl said, “Well, if you decide to do this, you’re going to go it on your own. I don’t want any part of it. I don’t want my name connected with it.” I must say the graduate dean at that time who was Fred Andrews said to me too, “Bob, I wouldn’t bother about that. You know sometimes you do things and they come out this way, and sometimes you do them and they come out that way. “Fred,” I said, “This is an exact science. This is not the truth. We must withdraw that degree.” There was a very fateful faculty meeting that the entire university. It was a university faculty meeting. I will never forget that because I had to get up and explain to the whole faculty who attended that this was a phony, forged thesis. I had all kinds of…he even forged the name of the analyst that carried out the elemental analysis. He put her name down, but he forged it. She would look at it and say, “That’s not my name.” She was Chinese. “I didn’t sign that.” Well, you

know, I never thought that anybody would forge anything. It was unbelievable. Well, you could hear a pin drop in that huge room, and you can imagine how I felt. I had to explain to them what happened, and I said, “It’s my recommendation that we withdraw that PhD degree.” Incidentally, that faculty meeting had another issue which was quite important. St. Thomas Aquinas had requested of Purdue that they bring down, I’d say a theologian or a philosophy professor from Notre Dame to give some courses over at St. Tom’s, just two courses, that’s all. Students who wanted to here could take the courses for credit, just two courses. But that had to be approved by the faculty, and the fact that this was Notre Dame…well, that faculty meeting, I’ll never, never forget it. Here I am wanting to vote to withdraw the degree, and incidentally it was a unanimous vote for my part. I remember sitting down dripping with perspiration, and somebody behind me just patted me on the shoulder, one of the other guys, I don’t know who it was. Anyway this thing with St. Tom’s, boy was that a thorny issue. I remember one of the faculty members, and I will add that there is a building here named after him. I will not mention the name. He got up and said, “Well, it’s my opinion that when these people get their foot in the door, they tend to just barge in.” In other words, there was great concern that we were going to have some Catholic people here teaching these state school students Catholic. That was something that was a terrible thing. Well, as you may remember, it passed. Even that passed at that faculty meeting, but just barely. To my knowledge, even today there’s somebody permanently stationed at St. Tom’s that’s still a faculty member up at Notre Dame, I don’t know. I understand those two courses he teaches are

really quite popular. He's a good teacher. I don't see that the Catholic people have taken over or that the Pope is now running Purdue or anything of the sort. But I mention that. That was definitely the low point in my career here. I won several research awards here.

KM: What about the Hovde Distinguished Service for the research?

RB: Well, yeah. I won the Alpha Chi Sigma Award. This is an award for the research we did. I won the Sigma Chi Award which was for research that we did. There were several teaching awards that I won here too.

KM: Did you get a Murphy Award, the Murphy Award?

RB: No, I didn't. I wasn't there.

KM: There used to be…the Amoco used to be the precursor to that as a teaching award that they used to give.

RB: I don't know. Now, I'll tell you. Frank Martin, who was head of general chemistry, when he retired, he set up a teaching award. It was called the F.D. Martin.

KM: So you got a lot of awards within the department?

RB: That's right.

KM: That's fine.

RB: Every time I became eligible for that, I would win. Frank was very chagrinned because I was an organic chemist. Here he was an inorganic chemist. Well, anyway, be that as it may.

KM: (Laughing) That's alright.

RB: Okay. Well, Earl McBee was just an impossible head of the department. I look back, the appointment of Earl as department head indicates perhaps the low level we were operating at in the department with him as department head. He would…toward the end, he would hardly even show up over there. He would do a lot of consulting work for Great Lakes Chemical here in town. As a matter of fact, as I remember it, he became the CEO of Great Lakes Chemical. Because Earl and Henry Hass, they did work on chlorination and fluorination, and Great Lakes Chemical thanks to Earl McBee moving out there, they began to make some of these compounds and they were flame retardant. They use them as fire extinguishers, this and that. Great Lakes really began to flourish, but Earl McBee was most of his time out in industry out there, not back in the department. He wasn't paying any attention to the department. I can remember it was under the auspices, during the time of Earl McBee that JFK was assassinated. We were having a faculty meeting at the time, and I remember the secretary came in and gave a little note to Earl. Then he said, "Kennedy is dead." So he didn't care. He said to me once, "Boy, that guy was quite a shot to kill him that way." Well, anyway that was Earl McBee, but by that time, we had a fellow by the name of Phil Hass, Felix Hass, was now the Dean of Science. I don't remember how the

other dean…actually I think he became an alcoholic. I don't remember. But he was replaced by Phil Hass who was in the mathematics department here. He became Dean of Science, and there was more and more…Purdue was getting to be much more democratic in general. The faculty was having more and more say in how to run things. But one day, finally there was a group of us who went over to Hass as a group. All full professors with tenure went over. I was one of them and we told Phil he really should remove Earl McBee as head because Earl didn't spend any time there. He wasn't interested. He'd been doing a lot of things which was really quite unethical. I think Phil Hass himself never thought much of Earl. That's just my personal opinion. So we told Hass we should have a system over there that rather than appointing a head, everybody previously has been appointed, we should have a rotating headship, maybe every five years. Then the faculty should vote, the tenured faculty should vote whether they wanted him to continue or whether they wanted someone else. Well, Hass agreed to that. I was told that Hovde was so angry with Hass. He expected this loyalty, and he made Earl McBee a distinguished professor. So that Earl wasn't fired, he became a distinguished professor. He didn't teach. He didn't do anything. In fact he practically never showed up but he was a distinguished professor. But anyway he was out of the way so to speak. But anyway the faculty voted to put in Joe Foster who was a biochemist as the next head of the department. Joe Foster, he was from Iowa State too by the way. He got his degree in biochemistry out at Iowa State. A real decent fellow, Joe was a very decent guy. He became then the department head. We were free of Earl McBee who later on left. To say the least,

he divorced, left whatever. Anyway Joe Foster became the head. I remember him telling me, “Bob, I really think you should have been the head, but you were an organic chemist.” That’s why. See Earl McBee was an organic chemist, and he didn’t think that …Joe didn’t think that was quite right-not an organic chemist. Incidentally organic chemistry in those days was really potent headed by H. C. Brown. Brown, Herb, would not go with us to Hass’ office. There were thirty some of us that went over there. H. C. Brown refused and later on he said, “Look, I can win the Nobel prize, and I don’t intend to jeopardize that. I wouldn’t be part of it.” Well, Earl thought H. C. Brown was really great. I remember when we got kind of a resignation letter from Earl, he said, “Now there’s a real man. H. C. Brown’s a real man. He didn’t go over to the Dean.” So Joe Foster took over, and we began to hire some really very good people. Boy, when they would come through here, we would grill them. They’d go around and talk to everybody on the faculty. Boy we hired just what we thought were top flight people. If after two years or so, they didn’t pan out, we’d let them go and hire somebody else. Ultimately they built up really a very, very good faculty here. When Joe Foster stepped down, lo and behold I became the head of chemistry department despite the fact that I was an organic chemist. So that was a new world for me, an administrative job if I ever saw one because it was a large department. By that time, there was a huge…the faculty were around forty members or so, lots of students taking chemistry, a lot of graduate students, undergraduate students. What a job that was. When I took over that job…

KM: What year would that have been?

RB: About 19…oh, let me see, about 1972 or thereabouts I took over the job. At first, I said, "Well, I'm going to divide my time, half the day I'll spend down in the main office, and the other half, I'll spend up in my own office to direct my research students. So if they wanted to see me, they had to see me in the mornings. Well, it didn't work out. There were just too many problems in the department. So my research began to suffer, and I became a very reluctant administrator, but I was going to do the very best I could. That's the way I was. Everything I did, I did my very best. So I had real problems. Everybody would have problems. It was interesting to me. I had a lot of friends on the faculty, but once I became department head, I was a different guy. I was now an administrator, and I was no longer, well…they looked rather sideways at me. I am now an administrator, and am I your friend or not your friend? That was a very interesting transformation I would see with a lot of these guys. Anyway I did the best I could, and unfortunately, I ran into one nasty problem. Joe Foster had hired a guy by the name of Frank Fong, F-O-N-G. He hired him as a full professor. I don't remember where Frank came from, but he came with very good recommendations. He was the hard…oh, he gave Joe Foster fits. He would be in the main office half of the time pounding the desk and getting concessions from Joe. He'd get his salary raised, he wanted this and he wanted that. Joe would give most of it to him, what he wanted, and the faculty became infuriated with this guy, Fong. Fong would run over to the President's office, and tell the President what he wanted. Hovde was no longer there. Hovde stepped out in 1970 as I remember it.

KM: It was '70-'71.

RB: And Beering…No, it was Hansen. Hansen was President for a while. During that interval Hass was moved up from Dean of Science to Provost. Boy, Phil was really a friend of mine. He was my boss of course as head of the chemistry department. He was Dean of Science. There were about five departments in the Dean of Science and chemistry was one of them: chemistry, physics, computer science, I don't know what all, and biological sciences. Phil really helped me. Boy that phone would ring. My phone on my desk would ring in the morning. "Hello, Bob." "Yup." "This is Phil." He liked calling himself Phil in spite of his name was Felix. He wanted to be called Phil. "This is Phil. I got about $1500 here, but I need it spent right away. Can you by tomorrow morning send me some projects that you could use $1500 on?" Well, I had a whole stack of things there that I would collect, send to Phil Hass, and I would get…I really appreciated Phil so much. One day I really got a phone call from him. He said, "Bob, we have some…" Incidentally, we by that time had put on an addition, the Wetherill addition on to the chemistry building. But there wasn't enough money. The fifth floor was not finished off. It was just roughed. The plumbing was just roughed in and all that. But Phil called and said, "Bob, I got enough money to finish off the fifth floor of the chemistry building, but I ask only one thing from you. That is that you turn over one of the labs in there to biology." His name was Koeffler, Henry Koeffler was head of biology. He was also quite a capable, confident fellow, a good friend. I liked him a lot. He said, "Koeffler's got so many undergraduates over there, we don't have lab space." He said, "Now, you could even give us one of your poorer labs. I don't care. Just one lab." "Phil, that's a deal. I get the whole

fifth floor." You wouldn't believe it. There were some of the chemistry guys who were opposed to even giving them one room. Nothing was easy when you were head of the department.

KM: Sure. Right.

RB: Arguing with these guys. What's one room you know? Anyway, so be it. So we did finish off that fifth floor. We finished it off in good style. Boy we filled that up right away. In the meanwhile Hass went on to be Provost. That opened up the head of Dean of Science. They called me over to Hovde Hall, and they wanted me to be the Dean of Science. Boy did they twist my arm. I mean Hansen and Hass, they twisted my arm. Well, I didn't want it. I said, "No. I've just had enough administration. I can't take anymore. I want to go back to teaching and directing research. No, I don't want to be the Dean of Science. " So I said, "No." They brought in a young guy by the name of Allan Clark, A-L-L-A-N, Allan Clark. Very young fellow. He was from Brown University. They brought him in as Dean of Science. So in my latter days there, I would report to Allan Clark. He was a decent guy. I had no trouble with him.

KM: I'm going to stop this for a second.

RB: Okay. Seventy-seven. I told Allan Clark, I said, "I've had it. I'm stepping down." He didn't want me to, but I said, "I'm going to. I'm going back to teaching and science." You know, it was just as well that I did because just about that time, my wife developed colon cancer. Needless to say, I was in a turmoil. She had an

operation locally. Thank God she lasted five years. Actually she's lasted twenty, twenty-five years, but that was a very hectic time. I went back and you know, I tried to teach and direct research, but I could no longer get good graduate students anymore. Somebody told me, "You know, you're too old, Bob. These younger guys, when they come in, they tend to gravitate toward the younger people." I said, "Oh, well, that could be." So anyway about 1984 I announced that…we had to give five years notice that we were going to retire. As I said, I had a mandatory retirement date of 1990 I think. But by 1984, I was exhausted. I'd had all these experiences. So I announced that I was going to be retired in five years, so I stopped taking graduate students. By 1989, I stepped out. I was just exhausted. I said to my wife, "Do you mind if I retire early?" She said, "No". So that was the end of my career. I'd like to…just one last thing.

KM: Sure.

RB: This is, I don't know much about this. This is put out now by the College of Science. See it says Spring/Summer, 2008.

KM: Here, I'll turn this off.

RB: Look on this page. I don't get this publication believe it or not. Well, one of my sons called me up and said, "Dad do you get this publication? See all my kids went to Purdue. I said, "No, I don't get it." "Well, there's a nice article about you." It's very short. You can read just the last.

KM: (Flipping through pages.) How nice. You know I'd like to make a copy too. What I will do, I'll take it and then I'll make the copy and then return it to you. I want to thank you very much.

RB: No problem.

KM: I've learned a lot. Good things.

End of Interview

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