Oral History Project

Interviewer: Charles R. Alberti
Interviewee: Robert L. Volz
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TAPE 1, SIDE A

CA: This is Charles R. Alberti of the Class of 1950, taping Robert L. Volz, Custodian of the Chapin Library at Stetson Hall. This is Tape 1A.

Where were you born?

RV: Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

CA: When?

RV: January 30, 1938.

CA: Who were your parents?

RV: Leona and Norbert Volz. Her maiden name was Finkler, so I’m Germany on both sides.

CA: And what did your father do?

RV: My father was a machinist. He ran a drill press in a metalworking factory.

CA: He was the owner?

RV: No, no, far from it – just a machine operator.

CA: And what is your schooling? You went to school in Milwaukee?

RV: Yes. I went to grade school to the Catholic school, Mother of Good Counsel, and then for high school I went to the minor seminary run by the Capuchins up at Mount Calvary, Wisconsin, which is just 10 miles or so to the east of Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin and that’s the minor seminary my uncle had gone to. He was a Diocesan priest in
Milwaukee. About half of the Diocesan priests in Milwaukee went to Mount Calvary for
minor seminary and half went to the one run by the diocese itself down on the lake in
Milwaukee. Anyway, so I went there and then after that I went to the Jesuits and I had
two years as a novitiate outside of Oshkosh, Wisconsin and then their
juniorite down at Florissant, Missouri, which was affiliated with Saint Louis University
and then to the philosophate down at Spring Hill College (they had their house of studies
for philosophy down at Mobile, Alabama) for two years. After that I left the Order and
finished a year at Marquette. I went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin,
Madison for my library science degree.
CA: What degree did you get?
RV: They gave a Master of Arts.
CA: Do you have any further degrees besides that?
RV: No.
CA: Where did you go from there? What year did you get your Master’s?
RV: 1963.
CA: You were born when?
RV: 1938.
CA: 1938. So you were 25 at this point.
RV: Right.
CA: Where did you go to work?
RV: Northwestern University, the main campus up in Evanston in the Deering Library.
Those were the days when there were library openings like to beat the band. There was a
nice opening there in the rare book department and I had always liked Chicago and so I went there.

CA: What was your Master’s in?

RV: The degree was Master’s of Art and Library Science.

CA: Did you specialize in rare books?

RV: As much as I could, yes. The University of Wisconsin Library School was aimed primarily at public and school librarians who were trained but the head of the school, Rachel Shank, was especially fond of the history of the book and she was so delighted that she had one of her students that wanted to make that his career, so she encouraged me whenever there was a chance to not alter, but construe a course a certain way to do so when you’re writing papers. If you’re taking a course in national bibliography, well, I concentrated on the Library of Congress and British Library publications that relate to rare book and manuscript fields. You could do this with library administration. I took university library administration rather than public or school library administration and so forth.

CA: And then you went to work at Northwestern?

RV: Northwestern.

CA: And what was your specialty there – rare books?

RV: It was just in the rare book department. There was just myself and the head of the department plus a head librarian that was something of a well respected person in the field of rare books themselves. So he was very supportive of our operation.

CA: How long did you stay at that location?
RV: Just two years. Fortunately the reference librarian at Northwestern, (the rare book department), was right outside of the main reference department at the university library and he was also with the American Library Association when Ricarlo at Bowdoin was looking for someone young who maybe showed some promise – I guess that’s the way they put it – to help organize the special collections department going into the new Hawthorne-Longfellow Library at Bowdoin College, I was suggested as a possible candidate and was ultimately the one that was chosen. So I went up to Bowdoin then from ’65 to ’70.

CA: You went in what capacity?

RV: As the organizer and head of the special collections department, gathering all the College archives and rare books and various special Maine family collections together under one direction and in one given space as opposed to being in rooms here and rooms there and up in the tower of the old library building and so forth.

CA: And how long were you at Bowdoin?

RV: Just for 5 years.

CA: Where did you go from Bowdoin?

RV: At Bowdoin one of our appraisers, who did appraisals of our gifts, who happened also to be a trustee of the University of Rochester, so when the University of Rochester position became opened he threw my name in the hat and for some reason or another I got the job at Rochester.

CA: What was the title?

RV: Head of the department of rare books, manuscripts and archives.

CA: How long were you there?
RV: I stayed for 7 years.

CA: So we’re at 1977 now?

RV: We’re at ’77 and finally I saw the notice that my predecessor, H. Richard Archer, was retiring from the Chapin Library and I just had to apply for that job. I was fortunately the winner in that contest too.

CA: Was that the job as Custodian of the Chapin Library?

RV: Right. But that had been on my mind since 1963. In other words since the late summer my first year out of library school and working at Northwestern. I went to a conference down in Baltimore. I quickly joined the manuscript society. They were meeting in Baltimore. Out at the Evergreen House, which was sort of the reception center for Johns Hopkins, they had a large room where the reception was held in that old mansion. In the middle of the room were two or three long exhibition cases filled with gold coins. I knew next to no one there in the society membership. There was this one distinguished man standing there and he started talking with me over the display case and we talked for over an hour. He was Archer, the Custodian of Chapin Library and he told me all about his library. Right then and there I made up my mind I had to explore this more and I got a hold of the published catalogue that was done in 1939 on this library and the contents up to that date, and I was so impressed I said this is the library I’m going to direct some day. That was always in the back of mind and Archer lasted another 14 years in the position and I fortunately noticed that it was opened and got the job.

CA: Had you ever been to Williams before?

RV: No.

CA: Tell me about how you got the job here.
RV:  The only way I got the job was I sent in my application.

CA:  Of course.

RV:  I said would you consider me as a candidate for it. I wasn’t solicited for it.

CA:  Did you come up here?

RV:  Then I came up for it in February. The job was to begin July 1, 1977 and I liked what I saw. The first thing I did when I looked at the schedule – it was a two-day committee, a faculty search committee – so the Chapin Library has a certain position within the structure of the College and so the Custodian’s position is taken fairly seriously. I didn’t like the arrangement because they had me meeting with people from the very beginning. I said I can’t do anything or say anything intelligent until I have some time with the Library. Visiting with the Custodian at the end should be put first and then put some spare time in there for me so I can just look around the Library on my own first and then I’ll go and meet the CAP and other groups. They agreed to the change. It was very fortunate I asked for that because it allowed me to make some comments that I think got me the job. I wasn’t so sure at the time because for the final farewell they took me out to Howard Johnson’s for supper. I didn’t know at the time that if you sat under the pewter chandelier at Howard Johnson’s -- here at the Brundage’s Howard Johnson’s -- that was the best place in town to go to for a good meal. That wasn’t a put down that they weren’t going to spend a lot of money on a loser. It was actually a compliment. I found that out after I came back. It was a few days later I got the offer for the job.

CA:  Okay. Who was president at that time?

RV:  John Chandler.

CA:  I see. Did you have a chance to meet him?
RV: Yes.
CA: When.
RV: As part of the job interview procedure.
CA: Did you have some time with him?
RV: Probably. I’m not sure if it was 15 minutes or a half hour but it was more than just shaking his hand. I remember one thing very specifically – the direction that he wanted. He said what I want is the Custodian to put Chapin Library back into the academic process of the College. That’s the one directive that the Custodian will have. And that means you have to get it into the curriculum as much as possible and work with students as much as possible. So that’s what I considered my sole charge as Custodian but that covers a multitude of sins. In order to do this you have to do so many things.
CA: So Archer was in charge.
RV: Right. Archer had been very good. Archer had good experience out at UCLA at the Clark Library and he had his Master’s Degree from there and then he went on and moved to Chicago and was made Librarian of the R.R. Donnolly Corporation’s library, which they had a great reference library in the history of printing there at the Lakeside Press on the south side of Chicago. At the same time he got his doctorate in Library Science from the University of Chicago. Then the opening came here and he recognized a good library when he saw it, too, so he came out here and served for 20 years. He was here from 1957-77. He had a heart attack that set him back fairly severely after 10 years and his last 10 years were a little more restrictive than his first 10 years. He tended to be a little less outgoing and I think that was what was meant when John Chandler said I wanted to put it back into the academic process. Archer was a little defensive when it
came to readers coming in. They almost had to prove themselves sometimes. We tried not to give into those – it’s very easy at times to want to get back into that mode when you have such a small staff and you get too many people coming at you. You feel you’re not doing justice to any of them and so you just wish you could hold back and say, okay, you came first or you seem to have your wits about you, you know what you want and I can help you substantially as opposed to the next person, that student that comes in who’s just fumbling around yet. But with rare books and manuscripts – primary source material, in other words – it’s naïve to expect them to be conversant with them and how they work. That’s our particular teaching role here is to show them how they can extract, not only information, but ideas and spirit, out of these things.

CA: I’m curious whether or not anything in your training with the Jesuits would have directed your interest in library science?

RV: Well, I knew in the Jesuits that I would be able, and I was told that I would have no problem, pursuing this after I had finished the basic course of studies that the Order requires, that I would be able to get a degree or pursue that because there certainly would be openings within the society in the various universities and colleges that the Jesuits in America run. I would have no problem being placed. So that was nothing. The thing was that down in Springhill I was able to work on Saturdays at the college library cataloguing under the direction of the cataloger of the college who liked to work on Saturdays when the head librarian was away, when Miss Jumell wasn’t around. She was a lady over from New Orleans who was something of a task master. So he enjoyed one day that he could work without her over his shoulder. We would catalogue books and finally he said, look you don’t need Library Congress copy to do this, learn some on your
own and I’ll give you direction on doing original cataloguing. We’ve a group of old books here that are here from when the college opened in 1830 that have never been catalogued yet and there’s an empty room downstairs that have wooden oak bookcases in it so why don’t we make a little rare book room. And so as I would catalogue these things they would go down there and we started also a little rare book room.

CA: What university was this?

RV: This was at Springhill College.

CA: And where was that?

RV: Mobile, Alabama.

CA: Had you taken any vows when you left the Society?

RV: Yes, the usual ones of poverty, chastity and obedience.

CA: I see. But you had not been ordained?

RV: Not ordained, no. It would have been 7 years more down the road with the Jesuits.

CA: Were you a Deacon at this point?

RV: No.

CA: So you came to Williams and you replaced Mr. Archer. Who was here as your second in command or was there anyone?

RV: My present second in command was the second in command then – Wayne Hammond. He was just the clerk in the department. Archer wasn’t able to get a full-time librarian to work with him. They allowed him a clerical assistant. Wayne had his Master’s Degree from the University of Michigan just the year before – at Ann Arbor – and he was willing to take the job as a clerk because he was so excited about the library.
This is the thing that they often say about the Pierpont Morgan Library, they don’t pay but you have the prestige of having worked there, or at the Harvard Library system also, especially the Houghton Library, they don’t pay very well.

CA:  It sounds like the Massachusetts Superior Court.

RV:  Could be.

CA:  Great medical benefits as well.

RV:  Anyway Wayne was here. He had started in September of ’76, so he’s technically the senior member of our staff.

CA:  What did you find when you came here by way of the Library? It’s come a quantum leap since, but what was here that had attracted you?

RV:  I was attracted to it from afar before I actually ever visited it in February. It was just the quality of the books. That short title catalogue of 1939 revealed, if you know anything about rare books, the sheer import that you have a book that goes back to the Charlemagne scriptorium at Tours back in 800 A.D. and you have manuscripts from every century after that. Then you have all of these early printed books -- 500 or so books -- printed before 1500 and important ones, one after another, important texts. And then a great amount of 16th-century literature. A gorgeous collection of English literature. You cannot name an author or a work of any consequence in the field of English literature that isn’t represented by the First Edition in the Chapin Library. Then the Americana starting with the Columbus letter of Rome, 1493 and just going right on through the Jeffersonian period, especially with little special things thrown in such as Dimsdale’s account of the vigilantes at Montana, one of the great classics of western
literature from 1866, which was inscribed by President James Garfield. Then Garfield was just a congressman but future president James Garfield.

CA: Where did this all come from – this collection?

RV: Well, Mr. Chapin had bought it. It’s the way we still do it today, at auctions and through dealers. He worked with two dealers in New York.

CA: Who is Mr. Chapin?

RV: Mr. Chapin was a member of the Class of 1869 who went to Harvard Law School after graduation and then set up practice in New York. After 10 years or so he got involved in New York State politics and ran for the House and was elected. Then he was re-elected and the second term he ran against Theodore Roosevelt for the job of Speaker of the New York Assembly. In those days it was not seniority or your established power. I guess they were looking for some youngster that was fool enough to take on the job of Speaker. Anyways, he won, and one of our wonderful little treasures is the letter of Theodore Roosevelt when Mr. Chapin announced his plan for the library commenting to him about and reflecting on their days together in Albany. He said we ventured much and we succeeded some and I think we did no evil.

CA: How did he start his collection?

RV: Well, he himself was always very literate. I always like to say that he was probably one of the few mayors of Brooklyn – his career eventually led him up to be mayor of Brooklyn – and he was one of the few mayors of Brooklyn that could read Greek. Somebody said remember Seth Low also was mayor of Brooklyn. The great library at Columbia is named after him.

CA: Low Memorial.
RV: But he was Controller of the State of New York after his speakership of the Assembly and in New York, of course, the Controller is a tremendously important position. It’s really the second most powerful position in the state. He had several important decisions that he made and probably the most lasting one relates to he set up the Adirondacks Park Commission and selected three members that would do the survey as to what ought to be done with this vast Adirondacks area. So that was a great step forward in the eastern conservation movement. Anyways, he then retired from politics in about 1892, I believe. After Mayor of Brooklyn he ran for Congress and was elected as a Democrat but he left after one year because he was fed up with the kind of compromising that he was being asked to make. So he left before he finished his first term. Then he just resumed law and did a lot with the railroad -- the New York State Railroad Commission. This was the time that a lot of the railroad mergers were starting to take place and the formation of the great New York Central System and so forth. So there was a lot of work for the Commission to be involved with and he of course bought a lot of railroad stocks at the time too. So many fortunes of America were made through railroad stocks. And when he set up the library finally he gave an endowment of $100,000 in railroad stocks which the College kept on the books. Nowadays they don’t do that. They sell them and put it into a pool thing where they make selections to get a balanced portfolio and a safe portfolio. But then the Depression came and Mr. Chapin’s railroad stocks went down the drain and so did the Chapin endowment that was supposed to maintain me and our acquisitions and all that. But finally it has bounced back. Two years ago the little few dollars that were left finally reached the $100,000 that it was in 1922. But if that had been otherwise it would have been worth many millions of dollars
and we would have some substantial income which we don’t have now. So that was one of the –

CA: The College does provide funds for you?

RV: The College, I was told, will provide (by John Chandler) and he said, you’re going to get maintenance funds. You’re going to get your salaries paid and you will get necessary things and you can make a case for some additional funds and we will listen to you. He said, “Any money you can raise you can keep and I’ll tell the Development Office to work with you on that and not to be afraid if somebody wants to give something to Chapin Library that they should welcome the idea rather than try to redirect it to some other scholarship or some other department.” So with that blessing and so forth we were lucky. My predecessor got a heart attack in December of ’77 and died the first week in January of ’78 so Fred Rudolph and a few other local people got together and set up an endowed fund in Archer’s memory at about the same time John Kohn of the Class of 1928 died. He was America’s premier dealer in American literature and so a number of his bookselling friends in the trade got together and set up an endowed fund for American literature in the Chapin Library in memory of John S. Van E. Kohn. In my first year I got two fairly modest but two endowed funds that were set up. One was for fine printing, modern fine printer -- the Archer Fund and the other one was for American literature.

CA: How much were they? Do you recall?

RV: I think the Archer Fund was just shy of $10,000 and I think the Kohn Fund was about $18,000 at the time.

CA: Which is worth –
RV: But they’ve both grown and they both produce income each year and it’s very nice. Both of them need now to do a retrospect of 20-year, or 25-year retrospective acquisitions exhibition just to see what you can do with an endowed fund and how meaningful it really is in the long haul and why they are a great way to keep on giving by the family or whoever it is that sets it up. It’s always in memory and each one of those has a specially design plate that we clear with the donors of the fund and nicely printed and it is inserted in the front of each of the books that is acquired on the fund. So I was lucky that way.

CA: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived here. I mean, in what shape was the library?

RV: The library was, of course, in the magnificent room upstairs, very crowded, just packed to the gills. We’d just been given tier 5 of the old library stacks because the reason was the College library opened – Sawyer Library opened in 1975 and in ’76 they finished remodeling Stetson Hall for faculty offices but the whole central 1923 stack core was left for library purposes. They gave the Chapin Library tier 5 and Archer had started to put things in there but basically I had an opportunity to spread collections that were on the balcony and double-shelved in our bookcases and so forth and to spread them out and take certain types of material and move them down to tier 5. The first thing, for instance, I did, I took the American literature collection, which I knew was going to grow, and I had absolutely no room to work and it was stored up in the main hall and we moved it down to tier 5. That way I could expand the history of science collection into the area that the American literature had enjoyed right next to the history of science collection. We did a lot of that kind of thing.
CA: Let me back up a step. I asked you about the beginnings of the collection of Mr. Chapin. Did he come from money or did he make a lot of money?

RV: He made a lot of money. He grew up, until age 6, down in South Hadley, Massachusetts, down in the Connecticut Valley. Then he moved – he and his father and his mother – moved to Springfield, Illinois. His father was a salesman. But Mr. Chapin, when it came to high school, came back to prep school and I forgot the name of the prep school back out east again, somewhere in Massachusetts I believe. Then he quite naturally, with someone who was from New England and from the Connecticut Valley, could easily think of coming to Williams because of the strong connection. The Chapins and Williamses back down there in the South Hadley area both go back about the same time, back to the 1600s and he’s a descendent of the Deacon Chapin who’s the subject of that famous statue by Saint Galamus but he got no money out of it.

CA: Were they out of Deerfield at all? Were they part of a family that was in Deerfield?

RV: Not in Deerfield, no.

CA: Okay. So, how much of the collection that is there now resulted from Mr. Chapin?

RV: His total gifts were about 12,000 volumes by the time he died in 1936. It opened with about 9,000 and about 3 more thousand were added between 1923 and 1930. Basically he stopped adding in 1930 because his personal finances also went down the drain with the Depression. He got hit very hard and so he stopped acquisitions.

CA: It’s probably the first thing he stopped.
RV: Probably, although I would suspect very reluctantly.

CA: So he gave a collection and who was the first Librarian? I should say Custodian.

RV: The first Custodian was Lucy Eugenie Osborne, who was a reference librarian at the College library. Mr. Chapin saw her when he would come up for trustee meetings. He was elected to the Board of Trustees in 1917. In 1920 he and Mr. Stetson got their heads together and convinced the College that they needed a new library building and so the new library building was built. Mr. Stetson basically paid for it. Mr. Stetson’s estate paid for it because he died about the time they laid the cornerstone.

CA: As I recall Ralph Adams Cramm was the architect.

RV: It was a Cramm and Ferguson building and Cramm did the Chapin rooms and the main lobby here, which is a little departure in style from Cramm who’s usually more Gothic whether it’s Neo-Gothic or old Gothic style of architecture.

CA: Mostly Episcopal as I recall.

RV: Right.

CA: So we have the first Librarian. How long was she in the position?

RV: She stayed in position until ’46 and she had to be asked to retire by Phinney Baxter and she did not want to retire and there was actually no reason for her to retire except the age limitations that were in place in those days. Had she been living today she would have been able to continue 5 more years or whatever.

CA: How old was she?

RV: Oh, I suppose she was 65.

CA: Not very old.
RV: No. But she would not turn the keys over. She made him come over to the library to get the keys. That’s not an apocryphal story. Then Mary Richmond, who was the widow of the College librarian, Peyton Hurt, who had committed suicide, and then married one of the mathematics faculty, Don Richmond of much repute and loved by many students. She was appointed by Phinney Baxter for a six-month stint as temporary Custodian of the Chapin Library.

CA: He wasn’t taking chances.

RV: He wasn’t taking chances with a woman there. She kept getting reappointed for 6 months for 6 years. Finally she said this is enough and said I have other things I want to do. So then they got Tom Adams who succeeded her. He lasted only 2 years. Thomas Randolph Adams. He went then, he got the call to the John Carter Brown Library down in Providence.

CA: I take it one gets a call from libraries.

RV: This it is. The JCB is the premier collection in the world concerned with the development of America through roughly 1850 and his uncle was head librarian of a distinguished library for many years and his other uncle or father had been a librarian at the Morgan Library so these high powered institutions were in his blood and he loved the Chapin. He did great work in his two years here -- wonderful exhibitions and so forth and really worked with students a great deal. But he went to the larger operation and performed a very distinguished service for a book librarianship instead of the John Carter Brown Library. He was succeeded by Archer as the fourth Custodian for 20 years and now Robert Volz here for 23 and in my 24th.

CA: So you’re the fifth?
RV: I’m the fifth.

CA: Can you work your way from 1 to 5 kind of telling where the library went during those periods of Custodianship. Do you have a sense of it?

RV: Well Lucy had the enviable and difficult job of organizing a truckload of books that were delivered in hundreds of some big packing cases that had been put into warehouses in New York as Mr. Chapin would acquire the books from the Spring of 1915 on. He worked with Harper and Drake who would handle all of his transactions. Chapin would read other dealers catalogues, or auction catalogues but Drake or Mr. Harper would execute the bids. They would order the books for him from other dealers and so forth as well. Mr. Chapin would stop by once a week and see what the newest babies were and if they needed some conservation work or protective boxes made these fellows took care of that and once a month they’d each bill him. We have all of these bills with the itemized list of each book and the prices paid and Mr. Chapin noting that he’s paid it. He would pay them so many thousands of dollars each month. So we have this sort of running inventory of the acquisitions which is very special and very exciting when you see that he paid $3,500 for the Audubon *Elephantfolio* that recently sold for $8.4 million. He paid $35,000 for his four Shakespeare folios, a set of 4 in approximately the same condition as we have now would probably be about a million and a half. He paid $900 – and this is something you would appreciate, Chuck – for George Mason’s copy of the Constitution. Considering what the Declaration of Independence just sold for to Norman Lear for $8.14 million, that copy of the Constitution would be worth easily that much again. It’s the premier copy of the 13 extant examples because it’s one of the two that has the corrections made the last two days of the Convention recorded. And of
course it has Mason’s very famous objections to this Constitution because there is no Declaration of Rights and of course Mason was not going to sign it until the individual rights were guaranteed in the Constitution. He had been the author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights so he had some reason to believe that they could be written up and they could be put into a constitution because they already were part of the Virginia Constitution since June of 1776. This is a very famous document and basically he predicts 13 future amendments in it.

CA: So the first Custodian then did a lot of work.

RV: She had to organize and figure out even where to put these books, order cases and things of this sort. She had to do some quick cataloguing of all of them and she put everything on 6 x 8 cards – cards that are 6 inches by 8. She had to establish the authors. She also was very good with technical or details, what we call points in rare books. Mr. Chapin saw Lucy Osborne as a reference librarian at the College library and he took her from that position and sent her down to New York and paid her living expenses in New York for a year and a half for her to work with Lathrop Harper and learn rare books from the inside out, to work with America’s premier rare book librarian and at the same time have contact with these other collectors and librarians and so forth that would be passing through Harper’s establishment. So she learned rare books the way they have to be learned, through handling them and being exposed to them. It’s a matter of osmosis. You have to absorb details and you can’t sit and necessarily give an exposition of things systematically but as soon as it comes up then the recall is there because you have seen it before.

CA: On the job training.
RV: On the job training and that’s what I did when I came here. I’m single, of course, so I have my nights free. For the first two years I would take one of the chairs on wheels and I would go to the cases and open a case and take out each book systematically and just open it up, look at the binding, open it up, get a little sense of what it was contentwise, its physical, its printing, extra decorations, inscriptions and so forth. After awhile you start seeing that a lot of them have original bindings. A lot of them have some special provenance behind them of former owners. A lot of them have some beautiful printing in them or some terrible printing. Sometimes some of the greatest things look the worst and so forth. It was a very good exercise and because the way our books are arranged, especially with the ones I started with -- the incunabula -- which are arranged alphabetically by authors so you could be jumping all over the place subjectwise and also geographically. Then the next large group is English works arranged in two big lumps, one from the beginning of printing in England to 1640 and the second group from 1641 to 1700, but within each of those year ranges they are arranged alphabetically by the author. So you can have literary works and historical works next to religious works and so forth. So you’ve got a wonderful array of subject matters and so forth. I could have one from 1557 next to one from 1640 in the same case because they fall alphabetically next to each other as part of the STC arrangement.

CA: What’s STC?

RV: STC means English Short Title Catalogue. That’s a standard published catalogue of all printed books in the English language or printed in England or any of the English possessions up through 1640. As long as all the books have a number already we can just file them by those existing numbers. All I have to do is refer to any scholar in the field in
English history or literature knows the STC. All they have to do is reference me “I’d like to see your STC 3879” and I can go and get it for them or I can look it up in the always handy copy of the Short Title Catalogue and see exactly what book they’re talking about.

CA: What then did the first Custodian, if you were to say what legacy, leave with the next Custodian?

RV: She left the legacy that we continue very much today. I like to think I’m doing the same things that Lucy did. She worked very much with the young men, as she called them. And the young men who she served tea to every Thursday afternoon about the same time, Chuck, that you and I are sitting down here in the conservation lab, Lucy would have been upstairs serving the young men tea. She had a great brass samovar and Wedgwood cups. We still have both. I don’t know if the samovar works. We had it out on display. It looks pretty. We still have her Wedgwood cups and saucers upstairs in the storeroom.

CA: The young men being the students of Williams.

RV: Being the male students at Williams.

CA: So when did she leave?

RV: She left in ’46. So she was here from ’23 to ’46.

CA: All during the war.

RV: All during the war.

CA: And who replaced her?

RV: That’s when Mary Richmond came in on her series of temporary reappointments for 6 years.

CA: And what was her legacy? What did she do?
RV: Mary Richmond then was very active in some interesting exhibitions. She had some wonderful catalogues prepared.

CA: This is the end of side A, Tape 1. October 19, 2000. We will continue with tape 1B.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A
BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

RV: You were asking about Mary Richmond’s legacy, the second Custodian of the Chapin Library. She came as a very rigorous scholar and she did several wonderful things. She had, as you may know, a strong interest in the Shakers and her last great work in life after she retired from the Chapin Library was to compile what is now the standard bibliography of Shaker literature. This is a wonderful two-volume work but as Custodian of the Chapin Library, she for instance organized an exhibition called the “English Gentleman,” where she took some of Mr. Chapin’s great books on English culture and life, and so forth, and some completely devoted to what you might call manners and activities that gentlemen should engage in. Others you have to search into the book and find the proper chapter and so forth. So a beautiful catalogue was published of that and she then enlisted Karl Weston to work with her (one of the founders there in the College art program) to do an exhibition on Terrance illustrated. Mr. Chapin had bought almost all of the early illustrated editions of the Latin playwright and poet, Terrance, and so we have some good work up there and there’s a famous Vatican manuscript and they had reproductions done by being reproduced from this 6th Century
Vatican manuscript of the drawings of Terence to show how the tradition of the Terence illustrated has continued down through the manuscripts copied from the Vatican manuscript on into the early printed editions published in Strasbourg primarily. So it was very interesting and that’s still a much sought after catalogue partly because it was also printed by the Cummington Press down in Cummington, Massachusetts, which subsequently moved to West Branch, Iowa. It was a beautiful job of printing, so the catalogue itself now sells for over $75 to $100. We try to grab a copy whenever we find one coming out of an estate in Williamstown. Most of them were given away free to local people.

CA: Who comes next?

RV: Then comes Tom Adams. I should say Mary Richmond was very good working with students and imaginative exhibitions. She was the first one to organize in America an exhibition devoted and this is a little strange -- she was very proud of it -- if you consider the Chapin Library is concerned with letter press printing, the old printing -- she organized the first exhibition ever in America of the non-typographic book. By the late ‘40s the new technology was coming in so you could print from plates other than metal and you didn’t have to set type in the same way as you did previously. Electronic typesetting was beginning to come in. She collected a group of these books. We still have them and did an exhibition on the non-typographically printed book. It looks like the ordinary printed book but none of it was actually set with metal type, printed from metal type.

Then she was succeeded by Tom Adams who came in with his great strength and knowledge of Americana. He’s the author of the two standard bibliographies, for
instance, of both American and British pamphlets of the American Revolution and he worked very closely with faculty members in trying to get student classes to come and use the Chapin Library and give presentations. He organized several fine exhibitions. The most remarkable one was his exploration of the early religious activity amongst the Indians, among the Native Americans, primarily by the principle British foreign Bible societies, which of course played to Mr. Chapin’s strength, for instance, one of the first books that Mr. Chapin bought in March of 1915 was a perfect copy of the Eliot Indian Bible of 1661-63. It’s one that’s completely in Algonquin and with the Massachusetts dialect of the basic Algonquin language and with the title page completely in Algonquin. So this is one of the 40 copies that were printed for presentation to the trustees of the Society for the Promotion of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in London.

CA: Algonquin was a written language?

RV: It was after John Eliot got to it and phonetically made a language up from what he was hearing.

CA: Is that the only language that he reduced to writing?

RV: Right. That’s the way most of these . . . we have quite a bit on Native American linguistics that are in books. It was very common for people who were writing travel books and so forth that they also, as so many were, fairly learned at the same time. They would try to record the sounds of the words in their conversations and the meanings of words and often nuances of words and they would publish these appendices to the books of languages of a particular tribe and that’s how the Indian linguistics have been handed down from as early as the 1660s. Any number of books, Mr. Chapin has acquired most of the ones that were published before 1800.
CA: So there were books in the library of more than just the Algonquins?

RV: Oh, yes. For instance, we have the Mohawk Primer or there’s wonderful things on some of the Canadian Indians, the Iroquois and so forth, with some of the Jesuit relations and also there are some early works published, prayer books and so forth, published up in Montreal; amongst the earliest printing in Montreal was religious printing.

CA: In the language of the –

RV: Indians.

CA: I see. So is there anything more to say about Mr. Adams and what he accomplished?

RV: Well, unfortunately he left too early. He did try one interesting thing though. He was interested in seeing that the Chapin Library maybe could be a little more outgoing. And one way he hoped was to lend material. So he ran Mr. Chapin’s Deed of Gift through the College counsel and it got shot down. Mr. Chapin’s Deed of Gift says “books shall not be co-mingled with those of the College library nor shall they leave the building.”

CA: It’s pretty clear.

RV: It’s pretty clear but the problem is that Mr. Chapin’s library was set up in the same building and completely – even joint stairwell with the main College circulating library – and therefore it was to be maintained as a separate collection and they’re not to leave the building. It was a non-circulating library versus a circulating general library. It’s not that you couldn’t take a particular volume and lend it to the Pierpont Morgan Library for a special exhibition that they were going to have. It probably never crossed
Mr. Chapin’s mind and nonetheless counsel said it says, “it shall not leave the library” and no matter what he may have meant by it in context it’s what it says. He himself was an attorney and knew the consequence of words and so had to do that. I tried that myself with the President, President Payne. He liked the idea. We had a request for the Medieval Association of America was meeting in Boston and they wanted to borrow two of our manuscripts for a big show they were doing and put on at Boston College so I ran it by President Payne. He liked the idea so I told him we had better get counsel advice. So he said okay he would do it and they ran it by Palmer Dodge and Palmer Dodge came back with the same answer. Andy Heineman, who’s on the Board of Trustees, and also a good friend of the Chapin Library, he’s a contract lawyer down in New York, he said, “Bob, I fully appreciate your argument and I sympathize with you and it would be great if we could do things like that but the words say, ‘shall not leave the building,’ and even I couldn’t support this so you’re just going to have to live with it and say no and you’ll save yourself the job of packing books.” But of course we don’t borrow much ourselves so it isn’t a matter of losing things. We have so many treasures in the Chapin for exhibitions and ways you can reconfigure the same books even at times that we don’t borrow.

CA: Can’t even adopt the doctrine of cy pre on this which is a favorite court technique of taking the intent where the intent of the testator becomes frustrated the court will try to adopt as close as they can to what the testator might have wanted.

RV: Right. There is something. A little bit of that was put down was that if they needed repair work or something they could leave the building because administratively in order to be preserved they had to temporarily leave. Now the interesting thing along
that line is Henry Huntington, the same year, set up his library out in San Marino with the
same kind of a clause and it has been determined by counsel and I think even the courts
there that they cannot leave the building even for conservation so the Huntington has set
up one of the more elaborate conservation labs in any library to satisfy that clause.

CA: Adams was here for a short time?

RV: Yes, then H. Richard Archer came in 1957 and stayed for 20 years.

CA: So what would you say about his custodianship as it were?

RV: He became more aggressive in acquisitions. There had been acquisitions under
all the other Custodians, especially Lucy was fortunate to acquire a number of things
from Carroll Wilson, Class of ’07 who was a great collector of American literature but
also of other things. He would periodically give books to the Chapin Library,
distinguished books. Then he had tried to give his American literature collection, which
was the premier private collection of American literature, to the Chapin Library but he
had a condition and that was that they had to build bookcases with the same Tiffany
bronze façades as Mr. Chapin had his books in. At that time President Harry Garfield
balked at the idea and nothing happened. Finally a conclusion was made under President
Baxter, Phinney Baxter, but it wasn’t concluded until 1941. By 1941 you couldn’t get
bronze bookcases for the life of you. Anything metal was going to munitions so that
went by the side and Mr. Wilson died in ’46. Prior to that already in the ‘20s he had been
giving us his great collection of Samuel Butler and he did leave some books. He left us
his Daniel Press collection in his will but the American literature went to Seven Gables
Bookstore, which John Kohn, the Class of ’28 was a partner in.

CA: They sold it?
RV: They sold it to C. Wallen Baraden(??) who was the nucleus of the great University of Virginia American literature collection.

CA: That is unfortunate.

RV: It’s unfortunate, yes. I think what Mr. Wilson wanted was some kind of an intent from the College that they would put a little bit of their own resources into it. And he only asked that they house it in a fashion that would be as distinctive as the rest of the library. And it deserved to be that distinctive. The amount of absolutely splendid association copies of all of the great New England writers were there and the number of letters that were included in manuscripts, a two-volume catalogue of the Wilson collection has been published and you drool over it.

CA: What is an association copy?

RV: An association copy is something that belongs to another person. It may be the author’s presentation copy to the person to whom the book is dedicated in case of you like the association between -- the ideal association that do exist is Melville’s presentation copy of Moby Dick to Hawthorne and Hawthorne’s presentation copy of The Scarlet Letter to Melville. They were good friends and so one author’s most famous work being inscribed to another great author. That’s the kind of thing. It could be you inscribing a copy of your Collected Opinions of Charles Alberti to the Chapin Library and that in fact would be an association copy if you put a warm inscription inside the front cover.

CA: O.K. Anything more on Archer?

RV: Archer had very little budget. When I came here his budget for the year for acquisitions for the year was $800.00. So I hate to think of what he had earlier in his
career of 20 years. He would try to find books. He loved to visit book shops. He and Margot always traveled and they always went to book shops and they assembled a considerably private library, many thousands of volumes. He always felt he had to buy something when he went into a bookstore and you’d take these booksellers time and they’d spend an hour with you. If you’re overseas they’d probably take you and serve you some tea and so forth. And so he’d buy books, good books, but always very inexpensive books because we still continue to code our books with the prices we paid for them or their appraised value if they’re gifts. So he would be buying books that were 5 pounds and so forth because he had to stretch his budget. He also increased, because of his own personal interest, he put a new dimension on them, and that is modern finely printed books which is a phenomenon of the 20th century started in the 1890s but actually a little bit earlier with the Daniel Press that Carroll Wilson had collected. So we have a nice tradition of that type of thing. Archer built on that and he had so many connections, especially with the West Coast directors that he knew from Los Angeles, and so he was able to get a number of those as gifts as well as acquire them when they were being printed at a minimum price compared to where they’ve gone since.

CA: Anything more?

RV: No, I think, as I said, because of his health being less good in his later years he was a little withdrawn as far as his conduct of the Chapin Library, so that’s the situation I inherited.

CA: So you come in and now we get into the real interesting stuff. What did you find as the condition the place was in?
RV: It was absolutely clean and well-ordered, just packed, just far too crowded to move. When you have to get a book you have to move ones off the front because the book is shelved behind. If you have a set of books that is in six volumes, two volumes are out in front and the other four are stuck behind, that type of thing. You’re forever doubly handling books.

CA: So you were able to move some of them down to the fifth level.

RV: We were able to get rid of all this double shelving, yes.

CA: Okay. What was really new and interesting that had come in from post-Chapin? Was there anything that you haven’t already mentioned that has come into this library like – let me think of something absolutely incredible like –

RV: Well, the most incredible thing was the Samuel Butler collection from Carroll Wilson that I have mentioned. Mr. Wilson went to Mr. Chapin. They were both attorneys and practiced in Manhattan, and Wilson was international. He did work with minerals internationally. He went to Mr. Chapin and said, “I would like to build a collection of an author that would show an author in all his aspects and depth so this would be a collection of record and it would show the author working through manuscripts, his correspondence, and one person who very much interests me is Samuel Butler, the author of *The Way of All Flesh* and *Erewhon.*” Mr. Chapin liked that idea so Wilson went at it full strength and worked with executors of Samuel Butler in Britain, a series of executors, and managed to get almost anything of consequence that was not already deposited at Saint John’s College in Cambridge. He got it over here to America. Butler was a fairly accomplished painter and some of his paintings and self-portrait, which is a real coup, and his letter press of his famous *Notebook* in seven volumes. Mr.
Wilson got the – it was called the A copy, in other words the original copy and the letter press because he would make letter press copies of these things and of his correspondence. It’s a technique of putting thin paper, tissue-like paper, and then the original on a slightly dampened blotter and the ink leaves the original and transfers to these thin tissue sheets so you have a perfect copy. You do that by squeezing it then in this letter press, this big template and then you screw it down tight and it’s kept under pressure for so many hours and then you pull it up and you’ve got a perfect copy. This is before carbon paper. So anyways, it’s that type of thing that we have. The Butler collection is used by scholars and we have started to add to it from time to time. It had been stagnant under my predecessors because they actually had no money to be buying anything.

CA: What was your budget when you first came aboard for acquisitions?

RV: I was always told and I was told by a lady out in Northwestern, when I left, she worked in the rare book department for one dollar a year. She was a lady from the North Shore in Chicago and she had been chief buyer, woman’s buyer, for Marshall Fields. So she was a lady who had connections and also had considerable income. She said, “Bob, one thing, never take a salary that’s less that 50% more than what you have if you’re making a move, and secondly, ask for everything you can think of the first year because you have a honeymoon and if you’re going to get anything that you think needs improvement, you’re going to have to get it in motion your first year.”

CA: So what did you do?

RV: So I did that. I don’t know if I said 5 or 75 hundred dollars. I said look, $800 is a ridiculous amount. You can’t buy half a dozen good reference books for that. They cost
$100 or more apiece. Mr. Chapin had built a distinguished reference book collection in
connect with his rare book collection but it was stagnant. Nothing had been added of
significance and Mr. Chandler agreed and so we got the budget just about tenfold over
the first year. It hasn’t grown too much. I was at $22,000 this past year. I just got a
$10,000 increase this year so it’s up to $32,000. That’s for all administrative purposes
and all reference material.

CA: That’s not a big number.

RV: That’s not a big number. That includes book carts, conservation materials and so
forth. Fortunately we’ve gotten some other endowed funds on line that do give us some
extra money so now this year we’ll be having over $90,000 income from endowed funds
to add to that. The $32,000 still under the general College treasury is still a very low
figure.

CA: In the beginning, what were some of your significant acquisitions that you made?

RV: Fortunately it was an alumnus by the name of Leonard Schlosser, Class of ’46,
since deceased, who called me aside and said, “Bob, one group you should work with
very carefully is the people in the Art Department, both the graduate program and the
undergraduate, because they will be important users of your library.” And his prediction
has been very true. But he said, “I’m going to try to introduce you to a very famous
Williams alumnus who’s in publishing, Don Klopfer at Random House.” So he set up an
appointment for me to go down to Don’s apartment on 63rd and Park in New York City.
We went up there to the penthouse and visited and Don and Leonard discussed paper.
Leonard was president of Lindenmeyer Paper Company, which is the largest provider of
paper to publishing industry. They were bemoaning the fact that there was a paper strike
up in Canada and Barbara Tuckman’s *The Guns of August* was out and they couldn’t get paper for a sixth printing and when a thing is hot you have to get it in the store. Mr. Klopfer said, “Yes, and I read that manuscript and I suggested that a 35,000 copy press run would be sufficient.” He said “Usually I’m more accurate in my predictions than that.” That was my introduction to Don. Don wanted to give us books and thought we would be appreciative of some of the books he collected over the years more than would Columbia, where he said they would just go down into the great bowels of the library. He was probably right and so he started by giving us a group each year. I’d come down twice to see him, once in the spring and we’d just have a social and he’d take me out always to one of the restaurants where everybody knew him and as soon as they saw Mr. Klopfer come in with me, they’d always position him in the right way because he was hard of hearing in one ear and so no matter which corner – they’d always get him a corner – and depending on which corner they would put me on the right proper side to be by his correct ear. That was the first time I ever saw a menu that didn’t have prices in it and things of that sort. It was the first time I ever had soft-shell crabs. I would go down there in the spring and each fall he would call and say come on down around September and bring 8 boxes or 7 boxes. He could pretty well judge how much we could get in our knock-up boxes by how many feet of books he was going to have Sotheby’s come and appraise for him to be the donation for this year. We’d come down there and we’d pack the boxes and that way it gave me the opportunity to see what he was giving and then we’d go to lunch and then come back and load the boxes into a van or whatever it was and bring them back to Williamstown. They were all appraised already so we didn’t have any of that rigmarole to go through and worry about. One year he would give
miscellaneous rare books from different centuries. Other years he would concentrate on types of literature and then gradually starting over two years he gave us his Faulkner collection. He was the publisher of William Faulkner, so his copies were all copy #2 or copy #3. Faulkner always got copy #1 of the limited editions and all of Faulkner’s novels after 1932, I believe, were always issued in a limited edition as well as a regular one. Bennett Cerf, as President of Random House, got copy #2, but Don Klopfer, as Treasurer and Secretary of Random House got copy #3. When Bennett retired then Don started getting copy #2 because he went up to the president’s position. But he would tell me about publishing as we rode down the elevator in that Random House building on 50th Street and everybody would know him and it was just wonderful. He even knew, into his early 80s, he would take all the new employees of Random House each week, no matter who they were and get them together in the conference room and just talk to them for an hour about what publishing is. He was still from the tradition where publishers, authors and readers interact with each other. It wasn’t just a business. Everybody knew Don Klopfer and he maintained, even in retirement, a very elaborate suite of rooms down there in Random House full of books and portraits of him and Bennett and so forth that were all done by various artists. It was just a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about little anecdotes about things in publishing. For instance, part of the Faulkner collection that Don gave to us included a few pages of manuscripts from novels and the mansion and you see editorial markings trying to get certain points of fact correct because he says, I remember Faulkner saying, well, you know, these novels develop and between novel to novel I can’t always be consistent because my characters change too and if I’ve said he had a six-barrel gun once and an eight-barrel the next time, that really doesn’t matter.
But he liked to tell the stories of when he came up to New York, he was flying out of New York to go to Oslo for the Nobel Prize and he came in his old worn out Paris tweed coat that he wore around the farm down at Roanoke all the time. And that is what he was going to go to receive the Nobel Prize and the first thing I had to do was take him out to a clothier and get him a tuxedo. Random House kept a separate account for Faulkner, a financial account, because he tended to abuse his bank account. So that he wouldn’t become destitute they maintained a rather sizable account for him that they had an administrative authority over from royalties of his books. Mr. Klopfer had very close contacts with Bill Faulkner and various other authors. They were always interesting conversations.

CA: Did Klopfer pass on?
RV: He died in ’86, yes. He left all of his books to his daughter. His stepson, who is Tony Wimpfheimer, Class of ’44, who followed in publishing at Random House and was President and CEO of Random House for a while. He left all of his books to his daughter but with lifetime use for his new bride. Don married after Pat Klopfer, his wife of many years, died. He remarried again and married his high school sweetheart.

CA: What was her name?
RV: Lockheim, Katie Lockheim. She was active in democratic politics in Washington, D.C. He, of course, was an avid Democrat and he married her and she died a few years later, but she had this lifetime use. Then his daughter called us and said, “Katie has died now so I have to clean out the penthouse and you can have anything there but I have one condition, you have to take everything. I don’t want to be hassling with books as part of cleaning this out. I have enough with moving furniture and other things out. We want to
sell the apartment so if you agree to take them you have to take everything.” So I got a local book dealer who had a van and so forth and who likes to work and he and I went down there and spent two days packing books and hauling them out and bringing them back to Williamstown. We brought back about 2,500 volumes of which close to or over 1,500 have been added to the Chapin collections.

CA: You sold off the rest?

RV: We gave a lot of them to the College library and others we’ve traded off, yes.

CA: Is that something you do often, trading off?

RV: Well, yes. What we do is trade. We often do it with dealers. They’ll make us an offer on a book or group of books and we’ll establish a credit with them and then they have things that we want. We just did that today. One had an analysis of the Napoleonic code relating to women and it’s a very detailed legal thing but it’s a great and unusual piece of feminist literature and I’m putting that against our credit that we have with the dealer that was offering it. The credit, in fact – the other thing that Mr. Klopfer said, always, even when he would give us these books, “if it’s a duplicate or you don’t want it then sell it or trade it and do anything you want with it, I’ve gotten my benefit from the appraisal on the tax deduction and I know that a library can’t just take everything and maybe there are some things you don’t want.” Fortunately, the ones during his lifetime that wasn’t the case. But when we cleaned out the whole collection – everything that was left in the apartment, one of these big 12 room apartments in New York with a nice two-sided outdoor patio even and so forth, a roof garden – there were duplicates so we’ve gotten quite a bit of mileage out of those.

CA: So that takes care of the Klopfer collection.

CA: Was he a Williams graduate?

RV: He was Class of ’40. He started by giving us Americana, especially broadsides and letters, especially things that initially were closely associated to US presidents and then that expanded. He also started giving us things relating to slavery: various types of slave bills of sale, a great variety of such things exist. It’s unbelievable how many ways you can sell a slave or inventory a slave through different types of transaction. Brooks have given things over the years and I think his donations have exceeded a quarter of a million dollars in appraised value and he’s also set up now a fund, a maintenance fund, for the collection so that we can keep things in proper repair as well as acquire appropriate additional pieces over the years. He has a sense of mortality lately and so that fund – he’s been soliciting friends to make contributions too. That’s one thing that he’s been able – he was a very prominent gynecologist/obstetrician in Greenwich and delivered so many babies of the Fortune 500 families and so very often he’ll ask the man now, whose wife he took care of so wonderfully and whose daughter he delivered. He has this portfolio that we made of reproductions of some of his documents that he presented – “Would like to contribute to the continuation of this project,” and he’d get a check for a thousand, five thousand, ten thousand dollars or so forth from these people and it all goes to the Hoffman-Chapin Americana Fund.

CA: At some point we’re going to get to –

RV: Yes, there were other things that came along but you see with this kind of enthusiasm that you can get from somebody like Mr. Klopfer and Leonard Schlosser,
who are always in your court and so forth, the idea came when we noticed in an auction prospectus that a copy of the Declaration of Independence was coming up for sale.

CA: What year would this have been?

RV: This would be in 1983, the Spring of 1983. Unfortunately you don’t always have a long time to operate in when you see a notice of an auction. The thought came to mind that we had, as I mentioned earlier, the great George Mason copy of the Constitution. We also had one of the nine surviving copies of the official printing of the Articles of Confederation.

CA: When were they acquired?

RV: Mr. Chapin acquired them in 1917 and 1918. Both the House of Representative’s version of the proposed amendments to the Constitution and the final version, which is the House/Senate compromise version that went to the States back in September of 1789, which we now know is the Bill of Rights. If we could get the fourth one, the Declaration of Independence – none had come up for sale at the time Mr. Chapin was collecting – and the year before the Morgan Library had bought a copy, the Shue family copy out of Philadelphia because Mr. Morgan had never been able to buy a copy. None were up for sale during his collecting days. We’d be the only place outside of the National Archives that had all four of these founding documents. So we proposed that we would do a special display case then, too, where they could be permanently displayed and be accessible to children and so forth, as well as adults.

CA: So at the time Chapin collected what, the Articles of Confederation?

RV: The Articles of Confederation. That was November 1777, when they were finally passed. Then the Constitution when the Constitutional Convention ending in September
of 1787 and then the House version of the Bill of Rights, which I think was concluded on, I think, August 24\textsuperscript{th} of 1789.

CA: Did he acquire that?

RV: Yes. And then the final version of September 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1789. It could be September 14\textsuperscript{th} and August 14\textsuperscript{th}. They were just exactly a month apart.

CA: So what came up for sale was the Declaration?

RV: The Declaration of Independence. I made a proposal to the President that if we could raise the money we would be able to do all of this and it would be a real feather in the College’s cap. John Chandler agreed. He said, “I’ll even help you raise the money.” He raised the first $50,000. He was about to make a trip. There was a wealthy man who endowed in Oklahoma who was into oil and who had established a second home in Williamstown on Gale Road.

CA: What was his name?

RV: I’m trying to think of it, I don’t remember. He’s on the list upstairs. He did not stay here very long after that. He was only occasionally up here. Mr. Chandler took a plane from O’Hare down to Oklahoma City to see this fellow at the airport and to ask him for some money and the guy gave him $50,000.

CA: So there’s $100,000.

RV: No. That was the –

CA: The first 50.

RV: The first 50. In the meantime, Howland Swift from the Development Office was put in to help coordinate fundraising for it. Rees Harris – I said, “Look John, one of the things we might try is – the Declaration has to appeal to any political persuasion.
Anybody can find something to support their view of what America should be and you had turned down just two years ago Rees Harris’s gift for conservative lectureship,” (not for the lectureship itself but Rees wanted to be part of the committee that appointed the lecturers and you sent his $100,000 back.) I said, “I bet you can get him to contribute to this cause.” And he did. He called Rees and Rees jumped at the opportunity.

CA: So you’ve got $150,000 at this point?

RV: No. Rees gave $50,000 and he said let me know if you need more because we didn’t know what we would need. He said I’ll try to find some things. I know Bill Buckley’s brother, who has considerable means, I’ll try him and see and a few other people. Rees didn’t do so good with other people, finding any. Mr. Chandler tried Arthur Houghton because there’s a connection with the Houghton family and a couple of people who went to Williams. But they didn’t buy the idea. Mr. Chandler went after 5 donors of Dipwith Development I thought might be able to pay for the thing all by themselves, so he was asking them. The house estimate I think was $200-300,000.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

TAPE 2, SIDE A


RV: I can pick up, yes. The $200-300,000, you should always, at an auction if you’re really serious about it, be at least prepared to double the house low estimate. They’re fairly good in educated guesses and they weren’t sure. The Morgan copy the year before had sold for $300,000 with the extra 10% would be $330,000. They weren’t sure whether the fact that a second one was on the market so soon after that would in fact keep
the price from going higher, that’s why they put the lowest at 200 and the high of 3. The
5 that Mr. Chandler approached fell flat for any giving one big lump sum. So then they
went to various other people -- several class presidents who they knew were interested in
Americana and things of that sort and they got them involved. Three of the class
presidents said, “of course,” with the authority that William class presidents have, they
committed their class to $50,000 each. So that gave us a guarantee of another $150,000
and we went down for the sale.
CA: Where was it?
RV: It was at Christy’s in New York in April of 1983. We still didn’t have enough
money though because one of the class presidents hadn’t kick in yet. We only had
$160,000 pledged when we left that evening. I was driving down with Scott van
Hensburgen and we were going to stay at the Williams Club and meet with Larry Witten,
Class of ’48, who was going to execute our bids for us. Larry Witten was past president
of the Antiquarian Book Seller’s Association of America and had volunteered to do that
for us. He said, “1: I would know how to bid and it would be to your advantage and
secondly, I can make arrangements ahead of time for you for payment,” which he did.
He got a 90 day grace period with the College able to make the payment in three
installments since he knew this was all pledged money and would come in only
gradually. So the College was allowed by the house, with agreement with the consignor
to delay the payment as much as 90 days on 1/3 of the payment. Larry took care of all of
the paperwork for us on this. So we went down there. We stopped at the Williams Inn
because we saw Howland Swift’s van there. I just wanted to check with Howland if he
had any new word and he was over there at the bar with Larry Pomeroy, Class of ’50,
believe. They were just having a drink and Howland said, “Come here, I want you to
meet somebody.” He introduced me to Larry Pomeroy and he said, “Tell him your story, what you need.” I got down on my knee at the bar at the William Inn and told him what I
was about on my way to New York to do – try get the Declaration of Independence for Williams College and Larry said, “Well, put me down for $5,000.” So we left with
$5,000 more for that going down. The next morning we met early with Larry Witten at
the Williams Club for breakfast and he got on the phone after that to John Chandler and
we found out we had a little bit more money coming in but not enough yet. He asked
John if he could get $30-50,000 of College money committed. He said you know that
you’re going to be able to get it after the sale if you win because alumni will be so
enthusiastic, but John refused to do it. He said, “No,” -- from the beginning it was what
money we could raise is what we were going to be able to spend on this. This was the
same time they were trying to raise money to fund the addition to Lawrence Hall for art.
There was a sensitive thing in diverting attention and resources, so Larry said okay.
Howland was working very hard trying to raise money. I got in the phone booth and the
sale started at 10:00.

CA: How much did you have in your pocket at that point?

RV: When we went up to the auction house we had about $200,000 in our pocket for
sure. Then it started coming in. Howland said all these people that told you the night
before to call you back in the morning, we now know both their cell phone number and
their work number and their number at home, closest to the breakfast table, so we’re
going to get to each one of them to make their decision, yes or no, and most of them will
be “yes.” It did start coming in. I got on the phone though during the auction. This was
lot #76. It was a very short auction, only 76 lots in it. This was the last lot and it sold an hour later. It was a very quickly conducted auction. At about lot 24 Rees Harris put in $25,000 more and at lot 60 something he put in another $25,000.

CA: What’s the total for him at this point?

RV: $100,000 by this time. Then another class president came through with $50,000 and so forth. They were getting other contributions of $5-10,000 from individuals, all of whom are listed upstairs. Finally we were told that we had $420,000 – is what was raised. Larry Witten had to be calculating the hammer price plus 10% all the time. He knew he couldn’t bid $420,000.

CA: Because it would come out $440,000.

RV: Right or more than that. It would come out $460,000, no, $440,000, you’re right. He knew how to do this so he executed the bids and he didn’t start, he didn’t jump in until $200 and something thousand. I don’t know. I wasn’t on the auction floor. I was in the phone booth outside in the lobby at Christy’s trying to raise money. I was in touch with the Treasurer of the College’s office directly. And that’s where Howland was and Will Reed, who was the Treasurer-Vice President of the College at this time. They were on this open phone to me and as money would come in or the secretary would come in and say somebody else is on the line and then Scott would run back to Larry Witten and give him a new figure. He kept running back and forth between my smoke-filled telephone booth and the auction room. Finally we had enough money, well, we didn’t have enough, we didn’t know how much we needed, but it was time and the last figure Larry had was $420,000. It was going in $20,000 increments. Larry jumped in at $200 and some thousand and made two bids and then dropped out because it seemed to pick up
again and then he jumped in when it was somewhat over $300,000. The party that was
bidding against him at the end asked for a split to 10. It’s up to the auctioneer to decide
whether he wants it or not and if he’ll accept a lesser bid. In other words, they said
would you take a raise of 10 and he agreed. So Larry raised it 10 and the other fellow
raised it 10 and Larry knew then he was against his limit and couldn’t raise it another 10
and so he asked the auctioneer if he would accept a raise of 5. The auctioneer, Steven
Massey, agreed. The auctioneer was also calculating by this time at $375,000 he had set
a record for the price of a piece of American paper which the auction houses like – to set
new records -- because it’s a good gimmick to get other consignments, choice materials.
So he was willing to consider it and obviously both parties were getting tired and running
short of funds. It went up in 5s. The other party had exhausted themselves by their last
raise of 10 and they couldn’t counter with this $5,000 or weren’t willing to counter with
this other 5 so we got it for $375,000 plus the additional. It came altogether to $412,500.
As it works out we didn’t really have that much money. It was a miscalculation in the
Treasurer’s Department by $5,000 or $10,000, I’m not sure. The sale wasn’t rescinded or
anything like that. That was something they were able to find from gifts that come in,
unsolicited gifts.

CA: To the College?
RV: Yes. To funded the difference. That was very interesting. We thank God for
mistakes at the highest level because if they had given us the true figure Scott would not
have been able to run to Larry Witten with that last $5,000 which came in when lot 74
was being sold.

CA: That must have been an exciting day of your life.
RV: It was exciting because I still had not even seen the Declaration of Independence. I was told by Larry to keep away from him because people there would know him and know me and they would make the association and they’d say/, Williams’ deep pockets, and if they were going to be bidding they might start recalculating what they were going to be doing. So he said, “Don’t let anybody know that I’m with you or that you’re with me.” So that’s why we entered the auction house separately even.

CA: So Witten was bidding for an undisclosed person?

RV: Undisclosed person at the time. He disclosed it promptly afterwards.

CA: Of course.

RV: We had no problems announcing who it was for. Afterwards if somebody said we were wondering there was this young man going back and whispering something to Larry Witten all the time and then disappearing.

CA: That was Scott.

RV: That was Scott. We were all wondering what Larry Witten was doing there because this was all Americana. Larry Witten’s specialty field was Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and early printed books and he never dealt in Americana.

CA: He knew how to bid.

RV: But he knew how to bid. He knew all the ropes of auction house procedures. He sat on his hands for the whole auction and finally on lot 76 started becoming the player.

CA: Was Andy Heineman part of this process?

RV: He had given, I think, $5,000, yes. So after the auction Steve Massey came out and said, “Let’s go upstairs.” We went up to his room and Larry said, “I’ll take care of the paperwork here.” So we went upstairs and Steve Massey had the champagne and he
popped the cork and we drank some champagne and all of sudden Rita Wright from *The New York Times* called, who runs the antique column all the time. She wanted to talk with me about what it was and what we were going to be doing with it and whatnot. She wrote a nice little piece and then *The Philadelphia Enquirer* called because there had been one sold in Philadelphia in 1969 for so many hundreds of thousands and that lady had quickly calculated that the difference in currency values between ’69 and ’83 meant that we really didn’t have a record. Theirs was less actual dollar figure but in adjusted currency that one that sold at Freeman’s in Philadelphia was more expensive. She did a nice piece too in the Philadelphia paper as opposed to just a press release that others picked up. So then we went in and we went downstairs to pick it up and Larry went back to New Haven. He said to Scott and me, why don’t you go and get yourself something to eat so we went up to 60th Street and ate at an Italian restaurant and got something to eat and then came back to the auction house to pick up the Declaration of Independence. By that time they had it all wrapped in brown paper. It had been in a mahogany frame, double framed so you could see front and back, double glazed, but I still hadn’t seen it. So I said I want to see it. I made them unwrap it there. The wrapping department has carefully done a precious thing like that so carefully and I made them undo it all. I just started to cry when I saw it finally.

CA: It was in wonderful condition.

RV: In beautiful condition. It’s one of the 4 best copies condition-wise and it was nicely done and that’s what this was all about so I asked them to rewrap and we took it with us, got in a cab, went up to the Williams Club where Scott had the car parked in the garage next to the Williams Club. I took the Declaration out of the cab and stood on the
street there while they brought the car down and we got into the Pontiac that had an open roof window and put it in the back seat and started driving out of New York. By this time it was getting close to 4:00 and the evening newspapers were being pushed in the face of motorists by people selling them as they run out into the street. The headline on the paper that night was *Hitler Diaries Discovered.*

CA: The phony diaries?

RV: Those were the phony diaries but we didn’t know it at that time. Here I was being hit with Hitler’s diaries and the Declaration of Independence about 5 feet apart from each other. The contrast was emotionally overwhelming to me. Anyway, we drove back and called John Chandler when we got here. He came over to the Chapin Library to look at it and said, “Let’s try to get it displayed as soon as possible.” And so we managed within a couple of days to have some kind of a temporary case for it. That’s basically the story of acquiring the Declaration of Independence. A lot of effort from many people and a lot of goodwill and as we like to say, it’s a document that is not more important than the Constitution but it’s a document that has sex appeal. It’s like the Gutenberg Bible. It makes people want to come to the library. It’s been a real draw for the public of having these founding documents altogether headed by the Declaration of Independence. We not only get our readings each year on the Fourth of July for the people in town and visitors but we’re in the AAA guide, we’re in Mobil guide, we’re in a couple of the others, Michelin, plus so many other articles, but when you get in a AAA guide those are used by people who arrange their destination for the day. They’re going to see this and this and that so we get people who want to come to see it, which means they want also to talk with us and want to ask why the “eses” look like “f” and what is this writing on the
back about and things of that sort. This is a very special copy which was not promoted by the house sufficiently, thank God. This is the only copy of the 26 extant copies that belonged to someone who voted for American independence. It has the docket of Joseph Hughes of North Carolina on the back in his handwriting in the docket position. You know what I mean by that because it’s folded in half and in half and then in thirds and filed just as your wills and other legal papers are. You write on the outside there on one of the flaps what the piece is, the upper part of it. He wrote “Declaration of Independence,” Joseph Hughes has a very distinctive handwriting and it came down by descent from him so we know it’s hold history until it was put up for sale. The important thing is when we opened it up and there was a little soil on the two outside parts where it’s folded, light soil though. We had the conservation lab relax a little fold because of the way it was folded it distorted a line of type so by putting humidity in they were able to relax the paper fibers and get that sharp fold out. We told them not to do any cleaning or any flattening of the other folds because part of the history of this piece and how that docket got there by someone who voted for American independence was because it was folded this way. It was part of its physical history. If you look at it carefully you can see that those two panels at the upper left-hand corner are slightly grey on the back side from a little soiling. And the folds still are there because it hangs there. There’s still evidence of it being folded. It has not been ironed flat. That’s part of the story of it. This is what’s so important. That point was not brought out sufficiently well and no other copy belonged to anyone who voted for American independence. Members of Congress were not authorized to get copies, not that they were unauthorized to get it. The next vote after the Declaration was a vote of the Congress directing the committee who drafted it to
superintend it at the printers and deliver the finished copies to the President of Congress for him to send to the executives of the States, the heads of the Army, which are commanding officers, and the committees of safety and security of the cities and towns. Nowhere does it say and to members of the Continental Congress. Somehow Joseph Hughes, representing North Carolina, one of the three delegates from North Carolina, did get a copy. He had been for the Continental Congress. He was head of Naval Affairs. Possibly under that position he was considered one of the “Heads of the Army” or he may have walked in on John Hancock with the big stack of them there and said, “You’ve got plenty, can I have one.” Who knows. We know Hancock sent them out on the 5th and 6th because of the number of his cover letters to the governors exist yet. Anyways, that’s how this very special copy came here.

CA: Have there been other copies of the Declaration of Independence sold subsequently?

RV: Right. Part of my proposal was the only other copy at that time that we knew of in existence that was completely in private hands was the Bradley Martin copy. Bradley Martin was a great New York collector of ornithology and so forth but also had some choice Americana. I said we don’t know whether his sons or he, even in his lifetime, he was getting on, he was in the 80s then, whether he’s going to institutionalize his copy or put it up for resale or what his estate will do. If it doesn’t go up for sale this is our last chance, now this one here is the Wood copy that was being offered. We had to get this one because we don’t know what Bradley Martin is going to do. If his copy does go public, though, everybody else will know that’s the last copy that you could get and the price will be sky high. Well he died 4 years later and the sons – he did not want his
collection to be institutionalized – so the whole thing was put out in 3 fat hard-bound catalogues and the Americana was sold and the Declaration of Independence went for $1.8 million dollars. So I was right in my thinking. At that same sale Herb Allen, Class of ’60, purchased Bradley Martin’s other great piece of Americana the copy of the Federalist Papers that Alexander Hamilton and James Madison gave to George Washington. That was the second highest piece paid for Americana.

CA: What did he pay for that?

RV: I think he paid $1.7 million for it.

CA: Did he give it to Williams?

RV: Well, he got home that night and called Frank Oakley and said, “I just bought a great book, do you think you have a place for it?” He told Frank what it was and Frank called me and I said, “Frank, we said we were going to keep this founding document shrine pure with just the founding documents but I think this one we can squeeze in because we have Mason’s objections and here’s Hamilton, Madison, and Washington in support of it 12 inches apart if we shift the stuff a little bit in the case.” And I said, “Tell Herb that we will make room for it.” And he did. A week later Herb came in a pair of shorts and sweatshirt or something like that with a little paper bag. He had just flown in from his place in Montana, stopped at O’Hare and then on to Albany and drove over to Williamstown with this copy of the Federalist Papers and said, “Here.” He said I can’t give it to you yet but I will and you can have it and do with it the way you want it. So we did. Four years later he officially turned it over.

CA: It’s in book form?
RV: In book form, right. But it was interesting because when he turned it over he wanted officially the acknowledgement to come from me not from Frank Oakley because he said, “Bob knows more about it than you do.” He said he’ll write a better letter.

CA: And you did.

RV: I did.

CA: Have there been other significant gifts to Williams since that time?

RV: There have been. In fact we’re working on one now that’s just about concluded from the nephew of a member of the Class of 1920 and that has a lot of fine 17th century English literature and law in it. Also some interesting later law and some choice 18th century Americana relating to New Jersey and Pennsylvania and some good hunting and fishing books and that so that’s a collection. The man wanted an appraisal done first -- Mr. Robert Neff -- to see if it was going to be worth his while to donate them as opposed to sell them. The appraisal for his purposes came out high enough for him to decide that he wants to donate them. He’s a very prominent -- as Al Chiavetti tells me – he’s one of the leading estate trust attorneys in New Jersey so he knows how these things work. That’s a good collection of several thousand, hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Everything is just amazing. I said “Your uncle seemed to have collected knowing what Mr. Chapin had missed.” The Beaumont and Fletcher ?? plays, only one of them duplicates what Mr. Chapin had been able to acquire. The other special thing is a modern book that we all know about is Oscar Wilde’s Salome which was first published in French in Paris in 1893. Mr. Chapin has the first edition of that but the next year it was translated into English and published in London and Audrey Beardsley did his famous series of illustrations for it. So it’s the most decadent of the art nouveau style of
illustrations and has such an influence upon other artists and that was one – Mr. Carey got one of the hundred copies printed on Japan velvet out of an edition of six hundred, one hundred of them special copies. So it’s especially nice to have and fits in with – not only our Oscar Wilde material – but it fits with our great run on illustrated books.

CA: How do you see the future of the library?

RV: I see it as something that is partly dependent upon the new initiative that Hank Payne started for improvement of faculty offices and Stetson library facilities. It’s now taken on an even further life under Morty Schapiro. It’s been put on the fast track program and it involves the College library and Archives as well because they need expanded space too. So if we can get proper physical space we basically again are getting to the position where we were when I arrived 20 years ago, that we have no room left to function. We have no room, for instance, as work space. This room down here even, as you can see, have some of our books stacked around. We had to clear a space for you to conduct your interviews with distinguished members of the Williams community.

CA: Very distinguished.

RV: If we could get space and we could get sufficient staff. Two people is not enough. The library opened in 1923 with 2 people. Believe me and you know this as an alumnus and observer in Williamstown this is the only department of the College that has not changed its complexion in 70 some years. Everybody else has subdivided and resubdivided like germs, maybe we shouldn’t use that term, like some kind of creatures. We have the same number of people now as we did when Mr. Chapin was paying the salaries in 1923. It’s too bad because the College is no longer 600 students. It’s 2,100
including a very active graduate program in Art History who are big consumers of material for us. The number of classes and faculty that we can work with. We’re regularly doing things for biology, for mathematics and for astronomy. If you think of the sciences, occasionally geology or history of science. We’re really going all over the map. Just yesterday we did the Civil War with Charles Dew. We’ve been adding considerably through the Class of 1940.

CA: When you say you “did the Civil War” what do you mean?

RV: Well, we brought out our documents relating to the Civil War, Confederate imprints. We bought a lot of Confederate imprints. Gradually we’re filling in the rungs with all of the Acts of the States of the Confederacy, which is nice because Confederate printing is a limited body of information. You know what’s been done and you know what is good and what you should be looking out for. We’ve done very well in getting good Confederate imprints. Mr. Chapin had a couple of great ones including the great Charleston Act. The Union is dissolved with the Charleston Mercury, the broadside published within minutes after the convention voted to dissolve itself from the Federal Union at the South Carolina convention. It’s always considered in all listings as Confederate Imprint #1. It’s a broadside and a gorgeous copy of it. It has big bold display type so that’s always our start for that. This is what started. We also put out a big flag, a flag with 34 stars which means that it included Kansas which came in in 1861 but still did not have West Virginia which came in in 1863. So you know what period of the Civil War this flag was used in. Parts of it had gotten torn and it’s repaired with heavy cloth old underwear of soldiers.

CA: So this is a Union flag or Confederate?
RV: A Union flag with 4 rows of 7 stars and 1 row of 6 stars.

CA: So this flag included all of the states that had seceded.

RV: Yes. They were part of the Union. They were just in rebellion.

CA: That’s right. Is there anything else you’d like to say. I’m absolutely delighted to have worked with you this afternoon. You said you’d give me two hours of your time. You gave me much more.

RV: Well you’ve got me warmed up so I could go longer.

CA: Tell me some more. I’ve got some time.

RV: No. The Chapin Library, one thing should be on record, is the most important rare book collection at any college in America. There are not more than two handfuls, if that many, amongst American universities that are superior. I always have trouble finding 12 libraries in America that have in depth and in quality superior collections to the Chapin Library. If I wanted to take bulk I could find dozens, scores of libraries that have more bulk. All I need is a library that has the New York Central Archives and they have more bulk than we have, so many tens of thousands of linear feet of boxes with the papers of a congressman or something of that sort. But I don’t consider a presidential library to have more quality or quantity than the Chapin Library where we go from Charlemagne to modern writers and from all the presidents with important, interesting letters and all the greats in literary history, not quite as strong in modern European material as we could be, but nonetheless we’re coming along and we’re rounding up wonderful gifts, a wonderful group of books from Neil Kubler’s father’s estate. Neil is in the Chinese department here but his father had been a professor of German at Cornell and had lived in Germany in the 30s and collected a lot of the national socialism literature and
we were able to get that. That’s a wonderful firsthand account of what was going wrong. That’s part of the record that can get reserved in books and documents and some day we’re planning to do an exhibition of that plus some things we’ve been able to acquire since related to that. Our great collection of stereo views that Bob Fordyce gave us, Class of ’56, some ten thousand American stereoscopic views including this past year about 1,500 devoted to New York State, New York City and New York State. You can see New York City photographically develop in the 19th century.

CA: In three dimensions.

BV: In 3 dimensions. These kinds of – Bob’s mother had collected American cookery books and her choice was to give it to the Strong Museum in Rochester or perhaps to us. Well 19th century American cookery books are far more than just cookbooks. They’re etiquette books, their social books and also they’re thinner than the modern cookbook so bulk-wise we weren’t accepting so much but she gave us 500 and some which is about half of all the known American cookbooks that were published. So right off the bat we become a major depository of American cookery books and everything with it. We have fortunately on the faculty here Dara Goldstein, someone who’s a leading participant in the culinary history movement in America and also the author of several books and is organizing a culinary conference here in Williamstown next year and wants us to do an exhibition for their thing. So the Fordyce collection will be, of course, the centerpiece of that. But Mr. Chapin had collected Hannah Glass’ two books, one on confectionaries from the 1770s and her famous first book which is a great cookbook of 1755. So it wasn’t that we didn’t have a little something in cookery already here as well as the first cookbook which dates back to about 1470 amongst his incunabula. So it’s that type of
thing you gradually see evolve here. Certainly if we could get the space and the staff, we have the material here already and others are going to come in. We have the goodwill of alumni. We have the goodwill of other people, not alumni, and gifts will come to us both in cash and in kind. As I say, endowments now have started from those two small endowments in honor of John Conin and Archer and now we have in original principal endowments that come to about one and a half million dollars and now the market value is considerably above that.

CA: What would you say the market – do you have any sense of the market value?

RV: I would say our market value now, for our endowments now, is probably about 3 or 3½ million.

CA: Good

RV: So we’re getting there. We have a little flexibility and one of those funds, Leonard Schlosser gave paper. He set up for part of his capital contribution to the College a fund for conservation, not for acquiring more books. He said, “I know paper Bob. I’ve breathed it all my life from my father and my brother and myself. Paper is going to deteriorate through use. If you’re going to have these books, which is what they’re here for, bindings will break.” He said, “If you’re getting a book repaired it’s like getting yourself a new book because you don’t want to bring out the old falling apart book because you don’t want people to use it, you don’t display it. If you get it repaired properly and good conservation work is very expensive but it can really restore a book and make it useable again and displayable again. He said, “You’re going to be getting new books from me by having your old ones repaired.”
CA: I want to thank Bob Volz for absolutely a delightful time learning about the Chapin Library. I’ve pressed him for a long time to come on tape. He did it on very short notice and I want to thank him.