

Malcolm Stilson
Interviewed by Nancy Koppelman:
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Koppelman: I'm sitting here with Malcolm Stilson, who was the founding Librarian of Evergreen in 1971.

Stilson: Yeah, I think I was there in '71.

Koppelman: Malcolm, you are 93 years old?

Stilson: I'm 93.

Koppelman: First, I want to ask you a little bit about your background. Where and when were you born? What were your parents like? What were their backgrounds? Just a couple of minutes about your own background.

Stilson: Okay. May 26, 1923 was my birth date. I was born in Los Angeles, California. My parents bought a home in South Pasadena, and that's where I spent all my early life. Actually, first, in Alhambra, and then we moved to South Pasadena, where I spent all my school years. I had gone to kindergarten in Alhambra, so I have sort of a balanced record down there. [laughing]

Where we lived, the other side of the road was a park with tennis courts. There was a road going through the middle of the park that went into South Pasadena proper. We were in South Pasadena, even though it was a separate city.

Koppelman: Did you grow up in a family that expected you to go to college?

Stilson: My father and mother had both had some college. Dad was an engineer. What kind of engineer was he? This is the hard part. He did surveys and all that sort of thing. My mother had some brief experiences, but no degrees. My father didn't have a degree either, because he had gone, interestingly enough, to Washington State. He did not graduate from there because it was right in the middle of—he was in the Army Reserve, and World War I took him out and took him overseas. He didn't get killed, luckily, or else I wouldn't have been . . . [laughing]

Koppelman: It sounds like your parents did respect education.

Stilson: Oh, good heavens, yes.

Koppelman: Where did you go to college?

Stilson: I started out at the University of Southern California. In the midst of my starting my second year is when I went into the Army and wasn't drafted. I, for some reason, wanted to get into the Army, because my dad had been in the Army. But he was an officer, and because of my eyes, I was never able to be an officer.

Koppelman: Did you say you were born in '23?

Stilson: 1923.

Koppelman: So that means that when the war started, you were about 20. Right? When the U.S. got involved in the war. So you were going to be drafted, no matter what.

Stilson: I tried to get drafted, but they wouldn't take me. [laughter] I didn't know any better, so I went and enlisted in the Army instead, and they took me. Strange.

Koppelman: This was after you were in college for a little while, and then you got out?

Stilson: I had one year. I had started on the second year, but then things were getting really bad, so I just threw away my chances of staying in college, and went out and enlisted anyway.

Koppelman: What did you do in the military?

Stilson: I was in the Army, in the . . . what was I in? . . . well, I was taken for training up at the Army camp up at . . . I can't remember. It's all written down. I've got it, but I can't remember it.

Koppelman: It's okay. I'll look it up.

Stilson: I have it here either way.

Koppelman: When you were done with your service, did you go back to college?

Stilson: Yes, I went back to USC, which was kind of silly of me, because I would have probably done better if I'd tried someplace else. [laughing]

Koppelman: Did you get a library degree from there?

Stilson: Yes, because I spent a lot of time in libraries as a youth. I enjoyed libraries, so I became a librarian.

Koppelman: How did it come that you ended up here at Evergreen at the very beginning?

Stilson: I had heard that they were going to start down here. I'd just come back from Pennsylvania after three years there in the library under Bill McManshee, the head librarian there. He keeps writing me letters even now. [laughing] Anyway, I wanted to get out of there, so I came out and offered myself to the Library here. I don't even remember who was in charge.

Koppelman: Charlie McCann must have been in charge.

Stilson: Oh, yeah, but I meant the Librarian.

Koppelman: Nobody was in charge. You were the first Librarian.

Stilson: Oh, that's right, I was. [laughing]

Koppelman: In fact, a friend of mine who teaches at Evergreen, I told him I was going to come and interview you. And you know what he wanted me to ask you? "Ask Malcolm, what was the first book that was ever purchased for the Library?"

Stilson: Well, it wasn't purchased.

Koppelman: I know. [laughter]

Stilson: The libraries in the area had been contributing books to Evergreen, and they were in the north warehouse of the brewery. I was selecting the books out of those that had been given to the Library.

Koppelman: Wow.

Stilson: I wouldn't keep certain ones, but I had a list of books that should be in a college library.

Koppelman: Do you remember how many books got donated?

Stilson: Oh, my gosh. We had box after box after box, but I don't know how many. A couple thousand, at least.

Koppelman: Those were donated from local libraries?

Stilson: Yeah, and from leftovers that other libraries didn't want. People kept donating books, too. In fact, I donated a bunch of books myself. [laughing] They were all stored in the north warehouse of the brewery, and I was up on, I think, the second or third floor of the Library with all those books. I was supposed to be selecting them, so I was consulting a book that said these books should be in a college library, and throwing out the other ones.

Koppelman: Do you remember what that book was?

Stilson: No.

Koppelman: But I know what you mean. There were books like that around.

Stilson: It was a book for colleges that said which books should be in their libraries, but I don't remember what the name of the book was. That was a long time ago! What do you expect, at my age?

Koppelman: I know. We'll just see what we can get, Malcolm. We'll see what we can get. So, when this all happened, I guess the founding faculty had met for a year. Is that accurate?

Stilson: Well, I was in there when the founding faculty was being put together.

Koppelman: Were you at those meetings?

Stilson: I was there a year or so, maybe two years, before we even started the school.

Koppelman: What do you remember, if anything, about that time; what it was like being with that group of people, and their conversations about what a college should be?

Stilson: I wasn't really with them. I was in the north warehouse of the brewery, sitting there cold and miserable . . .

Koppelman: Poor baby! [laughter]

Stilson: . . . sorting books, deciding which books should go into the library and which shouldn't. Because I had a guide of what college libraries should have in it. I think I snuck in some. [laughing]

Koppelman: That you thought should be there.

Stilson: Yeah. Those were interesting times.

Koppelman: What made it interesting in the first year? Once the doors opened, then you were more involved with other people.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: What do you remember from that time?

Stilson: Most of the time, we had a bunch of meetings with the president, to determine what kind of library he wanted. Of course, he was basing his on these books that had been published about what should be in a college library. And then, throwing in a few extra things on our own. [laughing]

Koppelman: What was the atmosphere like then? Did people get along?

Stilson: Well, when I was first there, I was in that north warehouse in the brewery, so that I didn't see any of the other people. Once in a while, the head Librarian would come over and see if I was doing my work. And I was getting it down all right, yeah. But it was a lonely experience.

Koppelman: Once the Library was established, and you'd picked the books, and you were all there, and the doors opened, and there were several hundred students starting their education, and nobody quite knew what it was going to be like, because it was brand-new.

Stilson: We had a big meeting out in the . . . what was that first big meeting we had, with all of the faculty and staff and early students all got together . . .

Koppelman: And that's where? In the Library lobby?

Stilson: No, this was up in a mountainous area. There was a camp where we were all up there together.

Koppelman: Like a retreat you had?

Stilson: Retreat, yeah. Of course, everybody was arguing for their favorite book material to be in the Library, and it was all up to me to decide whether we . . . [laughing] But when it came from faculty and things like that, why, of course, they got what they wanted. The students, who were all brand-new, got a chance to get their favorite material in, too. Oh, boy.

Koppelman: What do you remember people being most enamored of? What would people want books about, and why were there arguments?

Stilson: The faculty wanted books that were bookish. [laughter]

Koppelman: I love that! Like *Great Books* kind of thing?

Stilson: Yeah, that was all standard. The books that went into the Library were all pretty well-selected books by the faculty and students.

Koppelman: What kind of books did the students want? Do you remember that?

Stilson: Actually, I don't remember that.

Koppelman: But you remember there were more requests than there were resources?

Stilson: Well, and a lot of the book requests, of course, of their favorite books were not necessarily suitable for a college library. I was basing myself on books that the faculty had given me that said which books should be in a college library.

Koppelman: So Evergreen's identity was already "we're not like other colleges"?

Stilson: Oh, boy, right.

Koppelman: But it sounds like they did want to be like other libraries.

Stilson: That's very true.

Koppelman: Why do you think that is?

Stilson: Because most of the faculty had favorite material that they had used in teaching. You can't depend upon it all being all independent. It just didn't work that way.

Koppelman: That's interesting, that as alternative as Evergreen was, the Library wasn't so alternative.

Stilson: No, it wasn't all alternative. And we had a lot of requests that we didn't want to fill.

Koppelman: What do you remember about the general atmosphere at the college in the early years?

Stilson: It was all excitement.

Koppelman: Tell me what that was like.

Stilson: It was exciting, let's face it. Of course, I was stuck out in the north warehouse in the brewery.

Koppelman: Not forever, though.

Stilson: No, but for about a year there. I didn't get a chance to be on campus, and be in a place there—a basic library was being set up—until the second year I was there. Yeah, it was exciting times. A lot of fun, some of it. Some of it was pretty nasty, too. [laughing]

Koppelman: Somehow you came to be known as one of the fun people. You found your niche in writing plays, and poems, and songs, and parodies, many of them.

Stilson: Oh, yeah, parodies.

Koppelman: What inspired you to write parodies of Evergreen?

Stilson: Well, I'd done some of that at the other places I'd been, too.

Koppelman: So it was just your way?

Stilson: Yeah. And putting on musical comedy was a way to have a lot of fun, too. Many of the faculty and staff, plus the students, were really interested in putting on musical events, and putting on musical comedies, and other types of plays.

Koppelman: How do you think those plays and those efforts for people to get together and do that, how did that contribute to the atmosphere on campus?

Stilson: It made it good times, and we had a lot of good times. But also, there was a lot of complaints, too.

Koppelman: What were the complaints about?

Stilson: They were not used to what the faculty wanted to do. They'd come from typical schools.

Koppelman: Oh, the students?

Stilson: Yeah, the students had come from typical schools. Well, the faculty had, too. There were all new ideas coming, and some of the new ideas didn't seem to fit.

Koppelman: Do you remember any new ideas that were tried, failed and rejected?

Stilson: Of course, I paid more attention to the ones that succeeded. [laughing]

Koppelman: Sure.

Stilson: But I think that the ones that succeeded were ones that created an atmosphere that they wanted to learn in. Didn't follow their own ideas about how it should go, but that always didn't work out, of course.

Koppelman: Of course not. You take a risk.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: Do you remember which of those ideas that did succeed do you feel were most important, or unusual or interesting that made Evergreen different? There were so many things.

Stilson: There were so many things going on at the same time, I just can't pick out any particular one.

Koppelman: Or, two or three. It wouldn't have to be just one.

Stilson: Actually, I don't remember. I mean, it just happened.

Koppelman: Well, try this. Maybe here's another way to get at that question. Do you have any particular stories of memorable events, or specific people at the college where you thought, this is really . . . well, the place was coming together?

Stilson: I wrote all this stuff down. Everything I was thinking about it, I wrote down. The only way I could tell you would be to go back and look at what I wrote.

Koppelman: Did you keep journals during the years at Evergreen?

Stilson: Yeah.

Koppelman: Where are those journals now?

Stilson: They're over there in the Archives. I started the Archives, but that was at the behest of the faculty. Of course, every one of the musical comedies that I wrote became part of the Library. And the recent flooding of that building . . .

Koppelman: I know.

Stilson: . . . was very sad. Of course, my son. Of course, my son was running it, but he was very unhappy about that.

Koppelman: Yeah, that was a terrible thing. But they all did a great job of rescuing all the paper there.

Stilson: Yeah.

Koppelman: You were at Evergreen for 40 years, all together? How long did you work at Evergreen?

Stilson: I worked until I was . . . it don't remember whether it was 63 or 65. It wasn't 65. I left a little earlier than 65. I think it was 63. At the time I went there, I was 40-something, so it must have been 20 years.

Koppelman: A lot of years.

Stilson: Well, it's more than 20. I don't know. I wrote a lot of stuff down.

Koppelman: Well, I'll look in the Archives and see what you wrote down.

Stilson: Yeah, I've got some up here, too. If we don't have it there, I think I have that material, too. Of course, I was adding my own ideas along the way.

Koppelman: Of course.

Stilson: As long as they get laughs! [laughing] Well, I did a bad thing at the end. The last musical I wrote a flop.

Koppelman: What was the musical?

Stilson: It was about a young lady, who came from a foreign land—and this actually happened when I was back in Pennsylvania—she came from a foreign and had to get adjusted. Went to college, in fact, at Pennsylvania. I think I called it by her name, *Sylvia*. She was, until recently, was calling about every year. She had several kids, and was now married. She was a good character for something like that, being a foreign student. She was from South America, I think from Chile.

Koppelman: But you thought this last musical was a flop, though, you said.

Stilson: Oh, yeah. It was too long, in the first place. So right in the middle of putting it on, I had to sit down really quickly and write shortened scenes. [laughing]

Koppelman: By that time, what did you feel people were expecting from you by then? Because obviously, you were a legend in your own time by then.

Stilson: Yeah. They were expecting me to write, you might say, a sarcastic look at the college as it was. I had to sit down, right in the middle, while we were doing it, and cast out lines and things like that.

Koppelman: Well, you were still working in 1984. I came in '83, and that's when I met you was in '84. So you were still there then.

Stilson: Yeah, I was still there then.

Koppelman: And that was 30 years ago.

Stilson: And then, of course, having written the *Geoduck Fight Song*. [laughing] I'd always wanted to write—well, particularly for Evergreen, they didn't want to do anything with football and all that kind of stuff. So, I wrote the *Goey Duck Fight Song*, and the *Alma Mater*. And they still sing it . . .

Koppelman: . . . at orientation, and at graduation both.

Stilson: Yeah. But, of course, all the audience is gone by the time it's over with, so nobody . . .

Koppelman: No, they're not. They're all still there.

Stilson: No, no. What I mean is that most of the time, when the graduation is over, they all split out real fast. But we put it on anyway.

Koppelman: Do you feel like your work at Evergreen contributed to your life in any special way?

Stilson: Well, it was kind of satisfying, in some ways, being able to put on musical comedies like I did. The smaller ones were very good. *Ida May* was very good. It seemed very good. But the last one I did was not. Well, I wanted to write about this one student coming here, and trying to get accustomed to Evergreen life. But it wasn't very successful.

Koppelman: Well, everyone's entitled to a bad day.

Stilson: Oh, sure. It was too long, in the first place, so I had to cut several scenes out of it, because it was running too long.

Koppelman: There are not so much questions of your memories. But I'm just struck by—I remember back then, when I first met you, do you remember the kissing booth, Malcolm, which we did together in 1984? Do you remember that?

Stilson: No, I don't.

Koppelman: In 1984, I was a freshman. I had come out to Evergreen from the East Coast, like you, to be a student. And one of the things I noticed at Evergreen right away—two things. I noticed that people weren't laughing enough, and people weren't flirting enough. There was a very sort of boring

atmosphere around that. So a couple of friends of mine and I decided to have a kissing booth in the CAB on Valentine's Day, and you played the piano for us.

Stilson: Oh, I played the piano! I don't remember.

Koppelman: You don't remember?

Stilson: No.

Koppelman: You played the piano. You were absolutely game to get involved in doing that. And my impression is that you could see that laughing, and having a good time, and being kind of silly in that way, is good for a place.

Stilson: Oh, definitely.

Koppelman: Yeah. It might interest you to know that it's been harder for people to be that way lately.

Stilson: Yeah, I imagine so.

Koppelman: It's kind of a serious, grim atmosphere, in some ways.

Stilson: That's too bad.

Koppelman: What do you think we can do to change it?

Stilson: I haven't the slightest idea.

Koppelman: Where can we find another one of you?

Stilson: Well, I don't know. None of my grandchildren are ready to go into that. [laughter] And great-grandchildren. I don't know.

Koppelman: It sounds like you came in with that kind of tendency already.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: You'd already been writing parodies and things like that. So you were going to just put Evergreen in your mill, and grind us up.

Stilson: Yeah. Of course, things like that can also be sour.

Koppelman: They can. It's a risk. Definitely, it's a risk.

Stilson: I mean, the first one we did. Who was that one we kicked out, who became a . . . [taps on table] . . . he did some faculty work, too. The one that got kicked out of everything.

Koppelman: When was this?

Stilson: Oh, that was 10 years, 15 years ago.

Koppelman: Are we talking about Joe Olander?

Stilson: Yeah, Joe. I did a nice satire on him. [laughter] Boy, what a mess.

Koppelman: Yeah, that was a mess.

Stilson: I played for his wedding, too, when he got married on the campus for the third or fourth time. He was a character.

Koppelman: Yeah.

Stilson: How he ever got hired, I don't know.

Koppelman: You know, it's funny. I've been on enough hiring committees that I know that by the time you get down to the last two or three people, and you've seen people mostly on paper, and just in these little glimpses, you don't really know what the whole person is.

Stilson: You think about somebody like Olander, who was a big liar in the first place, and he really should never had been . . . let's see . . . I played the piano for his third wedding, I guess it was something like that.

Koppelman: Yeah, that's what you said. But you said it was very satisfying to work at Evergreen for all those years.

Stilson: Yeah. Oh, gosh. They were doing something entirely different from the way I had gone to the University of Southern California. What else? Well, even being in high school.

Koppelman: What did you notice were some of the major differences, just in what the places was like compared to other schools?

Stilson: It was fun. For me, it was fun. I was playing piano and . . .

Koppelman: You were going to have fun no matter where you were.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: But it seems like the place itself was fun.

Stilson: You know, I had to resign from teaching, because they got up in the back country up here, before I went to Evergreen. That was real hell. There were five students in the class. Boys.

Koppelman: Was it public school?

Stilson: Yes, up there in the backwoods. They just didn't want to be in class. They wanted to be out in the field doing . . .

Koppelman: . . . physical things.

Stilson: They were woodcutters and stuff like that. All physical. And I didn't last in that. I had to quit. And I think they were glad to get rid of me. [laughing]

Koppelman: You said something before that you felt like Evergreen people wanted to learn. Did you feel like the teachers wanted to teach in a way that was different than you were used to?

Stilson: Yeah, I think so. Because they're the ones that planned the curriculum. And knowing all the traditional, having graduated from a traditional university, and all that sort of thing, why, it was fun. [laughing] Oh, dear!

Koppelman: So it must have felt, each year, especially the first 10 or 15 years, must have felt like a whole new beginning some ways.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: I even remember that. Because when I came in '83, the college had only been open for 12 years. It still felt like the paint was wet, in a way. Just the way people talked about the college.

Stilson: Yep, it was really fun. And it wasn't going to be a traditional college. It wasn't supposed to be. I think it started edging that way, though, during my stay here. How long did I stay there?

Koppelman: Well, you were still there in 1984, when I was a student.

Stilson: When did I get there?

Koppelman: '70, '71. So you had been there for about 14 years by then. So maybe you left in '91, or something like that?

Stilson: Yeah, I suppose so.

Koppelman: Do you remember the times when the college was threatened with being closed?

Stilson: Oh, yeah. That was standard procedure. [laughing] Not the faculty, but the people connected with the state, we had been having a good time. [laughing]

Koppelman: Having too much fun? That's not what education is supposed to look like.

Stilson: Yeah, exactly. And I was contributing to it. [laughing] After all, I wrote the *Goey Duck Fight Song* when we had that first big retreat, and it was really a hit. What really brought it about was the guys that worked on it, and wanted something different in the way of the college.

Koppelman: Do you remember who they were?

Stilson: I wrote it all down. I don't remember exactly who they were now. I can kind of see their faces, but I'm having trouble remembering their names.

Koppelman: Do you remember which faculty you felt the most simpatico with, or made friendships with that lasted, from your career? I could throw some names at you.

Stilson: Okay.

Koppelman: Beryl Crowe. Rudy Martin.

Stilson: Oh, Rudy Martin and I always got along fine.

Koppelman: Richard Alexander. Pete Sinclair. David Marr. Nancy Taylor.

Stilson: Yeah, I remember the names.

Koppelman: Richard Jones.

Stilson: But I can't remember who was closest. And I still have all the scripts and everything. I think probably, nowadays, they don't do the same things anymore.

Koppelman: No, it's a much more serious business, in a lot of ways.

Stilson: Well, when they have a president like Olander, why, yeah. He was terrible.

Koppelman: He's been gone a long time.

Stilson: I know he's been gone a long time, because they couldn't stand him. [laughing] He was very easy to satirize. I remember I played at his third wedding, played the piano.

Koppelman: Do you still play the piano?

Stilson: Actually, no. I'm beyond it now. I probably should be, because I can still play it, but I haven't played in a long time now. Well, except around Christmastime, when somebody comes around and wants to do some Christmas carols or something.

Koppelman: When you think about, if you could say something to the current Evergreen about how to maybe bring some humor back into the . . .

Stilson: You don't have any humor?

Koppelman: Not a lot. It's a kind of ironic, rueful humor. What was humor good for? What would you tell people humor was good for?

Stilson: Actually, the faculty were doing some crazy things, and it was easy to poke fun at. [laughing] I don't know what the faculty does nowadays.

Koppelman: What kinds of crazy things did people do?

Stilson: I can't remember that, but I think it's written down in my memoirs.

Koppelman: But there was lots of material, it sounds like.

Stilson: Oh, yeah.

Koppelman: And people were open to being made fun of.

Stilson: Well, yeah. Maybe some of them didn't like it, but they were far more open than later recruits.

Koppelman: I think people are less open now.

Stilson: Yeah, it was very easy to have silly things going on in those days. I was trying to think. There were so many things I had involved with. I can't remember right now. It's all written down anyway. I've got it all written down.

Koppelman: Is there anything special you'd like to make sure is remembered by people, your own message to Evergreen today and in the future?

Stilson: No, the things that they will remember will be the fight song and things like that. [laughing]

Koppelman: That's true. Absolutely.

Stilson: Do they still sing that at graduation?

Koppelman: Oh, yeah. And orientation both. They teach it to the new students at orientation.

Stilson: [Laughing] Yeah, things like that. I'll be remembered by things like that. Also, I did a lot of work on the Library and things like that.

Koppelman: Of course. Well, I really appreciate you talking to me. We got some nice ideas down. Definitely.

Stilson: I hope so.