

David Milne
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
February 16, 2023
FINAL

Fiksdal: This is Susan Fiksdal. I'm here with David Milne. Today is Thursday, February 16, 2023. It's a pleasure to see you, David.

Milne: Nice to see you, Susan.

Fiksdal: We're going to start by talking a bit. I want to know a little bit about your early history—where you grew up, whether or not you had siblings, and a little bit about any major influences you had before you went to college.

Milne: Okay. I was born in 1939 in Highland Park, Michigan. My parents were David and Mary Milne—David Milne and Mary Hall. Dad was always interested in engineering and science. He went to Wayne University and earned a master's degree in chemical engineering.

My dad and mom both went to a special high school in Detroit where they met. They were married May 22, 1938. I was born in 1939. We lived in the Detroit area—downtown Detroit a little bit when I was very young, and then moved out to a suburb, Ferndale. Dad's parents and Mom's mother continued to live in Detroit, so we were close to them.

I have three other siblings—brother Bob, two years younger than me; sister Mary, six years younger than me; and brother Mike, 10 years younger than me. Mary, unfortunately, is now deceased. She died in an automobile accident—a hit-and-run driver—in Ypsilanti, Michigan 10 years ago.

Fiksdal: I'm sorry to hear that.

Milne: I can remember being interested in living things and the living world from being a kid in grade school living in Ferndale, Michigan. At the end of our street, there was a bunch of railroad tracks that were a mainline in and out of Detroit. Two things about that. One, it was really colorful because they always had tank cars going off the rails and all the kids would go running down there to see.

Fiksdal: You mean that close to your house they were off the rails?

Milne: It was down at the end of the block.

Fiksdal: Yeah, but it was a tank car full of something.

Milne: Lots of tank cars full of benzene and things like that.

Fiksdal: It sounds really dangerous.

Milne: They were going to the Reichhold Chemical Company, which was a few blocks farther than that, and they had a fire a week.

Fiksdal: Oh!

Milne: And whenever the fire engine started up, we knew where they were going, and all the neighborhood kids flocked down to watch. Sometimes it was really quite colorful. Flames shooting up chimneys and windows blowing out.

Fiksdal: I just have to interrupt. Your father was a chemical engineer. Is that right?

Milne: Yeah.

Fiksdal: Chemical.

Milne: But that's not where he worked. He worked for General Motors.

Fiksdal: I wasn't actually worried about his life. What I was thinking about is that he must have understood the danger, and yet, you lived there. To me, it seems a little hard to . . .

Milne: I don't recall that he ever said anything about it. But really, there were times where there would be a blast and equipment would drop in the backyards of kids down the street.

Fiksdal: It sounds like an amazing childhood. [laughing]

Milne: That part of it is just incidental. Because on the other side of the tracks, there was this gigantic swamp, with standing water and trees and bushes and frogs and bullrushes and caterpillars and birds and things, and that was the place where we kids always went. That meant we had to get across the railroad tracks, and through the couple of cyclone fences, but kids can always find a way.

I used to bring home polliwogs and raise them and see them turn into little frogs and hop away. I was really interested in that. My dad and mom encouraged me in whatever I wanted to do, and that was it.

Eventually, just before I went into high school, our family moved out to Rochester, Michigan. It's a little town that was about 30 miles out from Detroit. We had a little house in the country. For my interest in nature, it couldn't have been more interesting.

One of the astounding discoveries I made was that all of the birds shown in this gigantic book of paintings by John Audubon were real. You could see them in nature. There they were—towhees, catbirds—and that was my first connect, I think, between books and reality.

The other interesting thing about that was we had some neighbors that were very elderly people, and the man up the hill, a guy named Will Comins, a farmer—had a big farm; he lived down in an old house—I'd like to go back and try to retrace whether this was really possible, but he was very, very interested in Abraham Lincoln and talked like he had actually seen him.

Fiksdal: Interesting.

Milne: The house down the road was another big, old farmhouse. While the owner was cleaning out the basement one day, he discovered all these old newspapers, including a description of the Custer battle in Montana, where Custer was killed off. That started a connection with human history for me. I didn't realize it at the time, but that became strong.

I graduated from high school. Went to Dartmouth College. My dad and I talked a little bit about where to go, and he liked that one. He had studied it more than me. It was part of the Ivy League.

Fiksdal: He wasn't an Ivy Leaguer himself?

Milne: No. Wayne State University, downtown Detroit.

Fiksdal: He went there for undergraduate and graduate school?

Milne: Yes, he did.

Fiksdal: Okay, now I understand.

Milne: And he taught there a little bit before he went to work for General Motors. I don't think I was pressured to go to college, but I think we just understood that I would. That understanding didn't work so well for a couple of my siblings, but it worked for me, and it worked for my youngest brother, Mike.

Dad encouraged me to apply to several Ivy League schools—Princeton was one, I remember—and also the University of Michigan, which was going to be my backstop. I was rejected by Princeton. The University of Michigan said yes. All my high school friends were going there, so that was okay.

Then all of a sudden, there came this letter saying I'd been accepted at Dartmouth, so I went there. That was amazing. One of the amazing things I remember—first of all, I was now out of Michigan. I was away from my class. I was away from the landscape that I was familiar with, and in the company of boys. It was an all-male school then. That was good and bad. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Strange, for sure.

Milne: For a bunch of wild young yahoos, it was the place to park them for a few years. I was looking at the mountains of New Hampshire. In Michigan, I'd never seen mountains. Wow, here they are. They're rocky. They have trees on them. They have cliffs. I had heard a couple of guys from Colorado saying, "Pretty flat around here, isn't it?" [laughter] I knew then that the world was bigger than I thought.

I took my interest in biology with me, and I thought, well, it's been fun. I've really enjoyed it. But you can't make a living at it. I'd better major in something that I can make a living at, so I became a physics major.

That was the right choice for me. It really was. It introduced me to all sorts of things like being at ease with mathematics and calculations. Being at ease with electricity, knowing what it is. Later on in

life, I wired houses and knew what I was doing. Air pressure. Tides. Astronomy. Just the physical setting that we live in. I came away completely at ease with it. It was not a difficult major, but it wasn't an easy one either.

Fiksdal: I think it was difficult. I had a lot of trouble with my one required physics class. [laughing] So, I'm impressed.

Milne: People have said that.

Fiksdal: We're all good at certain things.

Milne: Yeah. But it was very, very time consuming. That isolated me and my fellow physics majors a little bit from the social life of Dartmouth College. Football games and road trips away to women's colleges and road trips to New York, or wherever. I did some of that, but I was very preoccupied with physics, and I liked it. I really enjoyed it. In fact, my college roommate, Steve Merrill, was a physics major, and he and I still correspond.

Fiksdal: That's terrific.

Milne: We're still in touch. Not many others. However, I did try to maintain a connection with biology as best I could. I had to ask the dean if, as a senior, I could take freshman biology. The dean looked at me with great suspicion. He was a nice young guy. He was probably about 28 when I was an undergraduate. We got talking and he said, "Yes, of course you can do it." It turned out that he was always beset by upper classmen who were flunking out and wanted to take an easy course so they could get a C.

Fiksdal: And graduate. I see.

Milne: I was not one of those. I came away with a strange warp in my worldview that all problems can be solved by science. The person who cured me of that was Carolyn Dobbs, [laughing] who I met when I came to Evergreen. She made perfect sense. I hadn't seen that.

Anyway, I took a class in fossils, and this one was an upper-classman class, so I didn't need the dean's permission, and it didn't have any prerequisites, so I took it. That was mind blowing. One, I was interested in the biology and how it had changed over time, but also, just the incredible amount of time that the earth has been here. I remember spending several days trying to get my head around that.

I graduated. I was looking for something that I could apply science to and happened to come across an oceanography program at the University of Washington. I went there for the master's program and that was a different kind of thing. It was a much, much bigger university. In the master's program, you're more constrained by the things that want you to take. That was okay because they were all interesting.

I had a major professor, Karl Banse, and I think his son still lives in Olympia and has been a radio announcer, Tom Banse. Have you heard that name?

Fiksdal: Not that I am aware of.

Milne: Karl Banse was a strict, proper, German professor and I was this character from a men's school with a mathematical, scientific bent. His specialty was very careful, detailed observation. Those two things were not really on the same page. Finally, I was looking for another place that could use the science more, so I left. I did all the coursework. We parted company amicably.

Fiksdal: It just wasn't what you wanted.

Milne: Yeah, and he had proposed a master's thesis project, which was not uninteresting. He wanted me to try to figure out why there are no echinoids south of the Tacoma Narrows. Echinoids are sea urchins. Down here, they would be little, burrowing ones in the mud, not the big, spiny things.

I went to Purdue for a PhD program, and there, they were very interested in modeling populations of pest insects and the factors that enable their populations to go up and down—weather, predators, applications of spray, abundance of food, the crops that they eat. They were very, very interested in that and very welcoming.

That was a project that I ended up doing there with a major prof—observe this insect, see if it's a new species and describe it.

Fiksdal: I hate to say it, but it sounds like science to me.

Milne: It's observational science.

Fiksdal: Right, and you had been in physics, so it's a big change.

Milne: I was interested in it, and the people who do it make a huge contribution to the science, because the first thing you need to know is, what species are we dealing with here? Somebody, because of that fascination, has described it, and that's the key to the whole literature, if you can get the name of the critter that has never been described, well, you send it to somebody who can. [laughing]

I should say in 1964, Dee and I got married. She was working at the University of Washington. She was an oceanography technician. She was called an assistant oceanographer. She loved it. She had a sense of adventure and really enjoyed it.

The way in which we really got to know that we had common interests was we were out on the University of Washington's research vessel—the *Brown Bear* it's called—and it was a little coastal freighter that was about 120 feet long. It had been in the past—this was in the 1960s—making trips back and forth between Seattle and Alaska, carrying cargoes to Alaska and carrying things back. The Oceanography Department had outfitted it as a research vessel.

We were out on it. I can't even remember what we were doing—oceanography—out there measuring the properties of the ocean off Astoria, Oregon, and the Columbus Day storm came along. We were just coming in—we were right at the end—and got a message from the Coast Guard saying, "Please stay out at sea. After this is over, if there's anybody out there that needs help, please help them." So, we turned around and went back out.

Fiksdal: This was '64? I thought that was in '65.

Milne: '62.

Fiksdal: Okay, I had it wrong in my memory. I remember it really well. I was in high school coming back from a dance. [laughing] There were people out there, luckily, with chainsaws because there were trees all across Cooper Point Road.

Milne: KV [Ladd] said there were 110-mile-an-hour winds in Portland.

Fiksdal: You were outside Astoria at the time or coming back to Seattle?

Milne: No, we had wanted to go back to Astoria, but they asked us to go back out.

Fiksdal: It seems dangerous to be out there.

Milne: No, it was safer to be out there on that ship. Unfortunately, we had a couple of graduate students who had been terribly seasick the whole two weeks, and they were so looking forward to getting off. [laughter] They just had a wonderful experience.

They were on the floor of the wet lab, which was a little room that had a steel floor, and it was waterproof and a few things. The ship was rolling, and they would slide to one side of the room, and they would slide to the other. [laughing]

We were out there at night and these huge waves were coming up from behind the ship, and they were 30 feet tall. They were gigantic. They rose up and blocked the horizon. They were breaking at the top, and there were phosphorescent organisms that made the water at the top glow green.

They would overtake us, and the ship would start to rise and rise and rise and rise, and it would slide under it, and then it would sink and sink and sink again. It was exhilarating. Dee and I were shouting and cheering, and we looked at each other and said, "You like this?" "Yeah." [laughing] That was a magic moment for us.

We got married in 1964. Dee was born in the Northwest. She was born in Mount Vernon. She would rather stay in Washington State, but if I was going to Indiana, she'd go with me. We had a lot of fun there. It was just a different kind of fun.

My thesis project had to do with a tiny beetle about the size of a grain of rice. It's called the Columbian timber beetle. They have lots and lots of relatives in the tropics, but this was the only one in North America of that crowd of species.

It was invading North America. It was invading Indiana. It was coming up from the Ohio River. Every year, there were more of them. They attacked hardwood trees, and their method of attack was to burrow in through the bark and make a little tunnel. They make a little notch at the top and the bottom of the tunnel, and in each one of those notches, they would lay an egg.

The beetles remained in the tunnel. There's a little fungus that grew in there that their larvae could live on. A generation would pass, and the new beetles would come out, fly away and do the same thing.

The amazing thing about this was that they did no damage to the tree, which is really, really unusual for that group of beetles. Often, they kill the tree, but they pick a tree that was in rough shape anyway.

There you have it. Oh, and most of their tunnels are within a foot of the ground. Up the tree, there's a few more.

Fiksdal: That's handy.

Milne: Yeah, for studying. What I was doing was going through these Indiana woodlots that were being logged. The loggers would leave the stumps, and I would take a chainsaw and cut off the stump and bring it back to Purdue—a bunch of stumps.

The tunnels that these little critters made created what I thought of as a beautiful mahogany stain that spread up and down through the wood. You didn't have to find the tunnel, you just had to find the stain, and put a wedge on that, whack, and it would open the tunnel.

Fiksdal: Would more than one beetle attack the same tree?

Milne: Oh, yeah.

Fiksdal: And it didn't kill them because it didn't go in far enough? They didn't use the nutrients, it sounds like.

Milne: I don't know why they didn't kill the trees, but they're almost unique in that. You know the beetles that are killing trees around here [western states] are also bark beetles. Those are very close relatives to this one.

Each tree ring had a record for that year of how many insects had attacked it, and how many young they had reared. The record went back about 30 years in the woodlot. Before that, there

weren't any. They had invaded the state. You can see in that record a wave of attacks. Then it went down. Then another wave that was bigger. It was an amazing subject for population studies.

Fiksdal: Also, for me, it sounds amazing that you figured out to look at this lot that was already being logged. You didn't just go out in the wild and start peering around with a microscope. There was your site, and you were able, for some reason, to keep cutting. They allowed that. They didn't mind that you cut [off the stumps?]

Milne: No, I didn't cut trees, and nobody minded if I took the stump off. Anyway, that was just an astounding thesis project. That was fun.

Then I went to work for Oregon State University General Science Department. Don Humphrey was the chair.

Fiksdal: Oh, for heaven's sakes. Just for the record Don Humphrey was one of the original deans at Evergreen.

Milne: I knew him well. He was one of my best friends. We went on many fun expeditions together. Don had created this department. It was called the Department of General Science—it was interdisciplinary—in the middle of Oregon State.

If a student wanted to combine a couple of disciplines—for example, there was a gal who wanted to be a botanical illustrator; she took all sorts of art classes and all sorts of botany classes—it became a general science degree. Then the university had some requirements as well.

One of my students wanted to be a zoo administrator, so he studied all sorts of zoology and business administration. My gosh, it was fun. Every student, the whole Oregon State catalog was like a gigantic gourmet menu of education. How about a course in animal husbandry? Sure.

Fiksdal: And that was acceptable. That's interesting.

Milne: Whatever they wanted to do. I think that's why Don was approached about coming up to Evergreen. He knew that I really believed in it [interdisciplinary studies], and several others from Oregon State, so he brought some of them with him.

I was at Oregon State for four years and then came up to Evergreen in 1971—the '71-'72 class year.

Fiksdal: That was the first year the college was open.

Milne: That was the first year of classes.

Fiksdal: The campus wasn't quite ready for you.

Milne: No, it was not.

Fiksdal: Tell us about that.

Milne: Okay. We all got here. There really was only one desk—I don't know if I'm remembering this quite right—that faculty could sit in and use, and it was in a mobile home that was being used as a headquarters. [laughter] I think Charles McCann had his office in there.

Fiksdal: Yeah, the planning faculty had mobile homes out there. We called them trailers.

Milne: Trailers, yes.

Fiksdal: In the mud. [laughter]

Milne: The building still wasn't quite ready to have students, so we were all asked to take our students off campus somewhere. My first assignment was with Ed Kormondy as the coordinator. Was that what we called them?

Fiksdal: That's right, we did.

Milne: Richard Anderson, a lawyer from Arizona. Oscar Soule. He was a botanist and he had been on an expedition with Don Humphrey, which is how Don knew about him. The Rio Mezquital expedition. Horseback. Sidearms.

Fiksdal: They needed sidearms?

Milne: They carried them.

Fiksdal: This sounds like another story, but maybe Oscar has told it already in his oral history.

Milne: Don—or maybe Oscar told me this—they kept running into bandidos. The bandidos had no interest in the expedition. They had other interests. But they would impress the Americans by tossing a can in the air. Bang! Bang! Bang! Kept it in the air by shooting bullets through it.

Fiksdal: That would impress me. [laughter]

Milne: Oscar, and Fred Tabbutt came up from Reed. Was that all of us? It seems to me there were five. Me, Richard, Ed, Fred and Oscar. Boy! We went out to Goldendale State Park where we had reserved one of the big park buildings. It had a kitchen in it and an assembly area, and then there were bunkhouses or something like that. We spent a week there, and that was really fantastic. Everybody that went remembers that week. Winter was starting. It was quite cold.

Fiksdal: Where's Goldendale?

Milne: It's down almost to the Columbia River.

Fiksdal: Is it in Eastern Washington?

Milne: Not really. It's as far east as you can go and still be western. Satus Pass.

Fiksdal: I don't know it.

Milne: Denny Heck was in that class. I don't think Chris Meserve was, but she was a student at the time. George Barner was in it. Many others whose names did not become public bywords.

Fiksdal: We might want to put a little note in right now that those two—[Denny and George] were prominent Democrats in our area. Denny Heck ended up being a congressman from the 10th District.

Milne: That's right.

Fiksdal: When the 10th District got formed, he ran. That wasn't all that long ago. George Barner was a county commissioner and also a great rock 'n' roll band [member].

Milne: He was a rock 'n' roll musician. [laughter]

Fiksdal: That's what I know about them. Denny started TVW. Right? He started the local TV station here and ran it for years.

Milne: I think so.

Fiksdal: We could look up more information about Denny. But anyway, two very famous characters and wonderful people.

Milne: Both in that class.

Fiksdal: Amazing.

Milne: We came back, and we put together a tremendous program. It was called Political Ecology. We really tried to make it exactly what the planners had wanted it to be, with seminars, fieldwork, lectures, whatever else.

It was really a success. It was really great. And I learned a bunch from Richard Anderson, lawyer; Fred Tabbutt, chemist; Ed Kormondy, ecologist; Oscar—everybody—and I think they learned some from me as well.

We attended the lectures as faculty members, and then we had our individual seminar groups. The seminar groups did things together—potlucks, for example. I just thought that was a high-energy year, and it had one thing in common for my students anyway that I didn't see again till the last class I taught. That was an amazing altruism and amazing commitment to go out and change the world. That was incredibly energizing.

After that, there was some of that, a little of that, and lip service to that, but people became, I think, more focused on getting a career—getting a job—and that astounding altruism—I think they all had it intrinsically, but it wasn't their driving, motivating factor again.

Fiksdal: But we have to remember, too, that probably—for your students as well—those early students that we had at the college were usually transfers. They were coming from sometimes one or two other college experiences. They were looking for something much better, so they were a particular kind of person. A seeker of some sort.

Milne: Right, the person who would pick up and move.

Fiksdal: They were willing, and they cared about education, and that's why they came to us. They were fabulous students.

Milne: Oh, yes. I do know that some of them later—I don't remember any in the first class saying this—saying that they were not able to feel at home in the standard university setting, and they really needed the kind of freedom to choose what they were going to do, and run it by somebody, and have them say, "Okay, sounds good." In fact, three daughters of my colleagues back at Oregon State came to Evergreen. They were looking for exactly that kind of thing.

Fiksdal: That's interesting. Let's go back to how you were hired. You say that your colleague brought you and several others to Evergreen. What does that mean? Do you remember that at all?

Milne: Yes. Al Wiedemann was another guy. Phil Harding, who I didn't know very well, but he was from Oregon State. John Filmer a year after. Tom Foote. In my case—I think in all of our cases—Don encouraged us to apply, and told us what was going on, and told us it was interdisciplinary, which, for us, was a huge, huge attraction. He said, "C'mon up and interview people and see if you think it would be a good fit." So, that's what I did.

I came up and spent a couple of days. It was a chance to visit Don and Eileen, which was fun. Went around, and I think I met Merv [Cadwallader] and dean Dave Barry, from the early days.

Fiksdal: I'll have to think for a second. I know who you're talking about.

Milne: Talked to Charles McCann.

Fiksdal: And Charlie Teske. You had to have met him.

Milne: Charlie Teske, yes. I didn't really meet, I think, any other faculty candidates. It was the planning faculty. I think Fred Tabbutt was one. A couple others. Larry Eickstaedt. Bob Sluss. Some others. And I liked it. I thought it sounded good. Sounded exciting.

I do think that I had some rough edges on me that were not appreciated. Because I remember Bob and Larry showing me a layout for a typical week. "We're going to read two books a week."

Fiksdal: Two books a week?

Milne: Read and discuss.

Fiksdal: Yeah, that's a lot.

Milne: One of them was one called *The Hungry Planet* by George Borgstrom. Are you familiar with that?

Fiksdal: I'm not.

Milne: That is a dense, good book. It's a very good book. Worth reading. And I blurted out something like, "You're going read and discuss *Hungry Planet* in one day?" "Yeah, sure."

Fiksdal: They probably loved you after that.

Milne: They did not.

Fiksdal: Oh, they didn't?

Milne: No. [laughing]

Fiksdal: That's crazy to read two books a week.

Milne: Yeah, especially that one.

Fiksdal: I've never heard this before. Everybody I've ever talked to has read one book a week, and that's already . . .

Milne: That's what we were doing when we got going.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Now, I don't think anyone can do that, quite frankly. You can't demand that much of students.

Milne: Well, maybe for that reason, yeah. There are many books where you cannot do it justice without a lot of reflection time.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Milne: I think that I earned a veiled hostility of the people that Merv had invited to come to the college.

Fiksdal: Interesting. Because, of course, it was really small still, so word gets around. That's so interesting. That was because of your next programs, or who you taught with next? Or how did you feel that?

Milne: How did I feel that in later years?

Fiksdal: Yeah, that hostility.

Milne: Well . . . one was non-cooperation. For example, I wanted our ecology classes to use a device called the Gilson respirometer. It is an amazing device. It's all of these glass tubes and jars and little things where you adjust air pressure and flush a little stream of oxygen through the bottle. You'll have a crab in the bottle. There's more in the oxygen when it goes in than when it comes out, and you can measure metabolism.

It's quite an intricate thing to use. I had used it just a little bit at Oregon State, but I knew what its potential was for learning. I remember asking Bob Sluss if he knew how to use it, and he said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't know." Then it turned out he had used one for his thesis.

Fiksdal: Oh my gosh. That's astounding.

Milne: Yeah.

Fiksdal: You found that out very soon or . . .?

Milne: No, a little while later. Maybe the same year.

Fiksdal: Oh, for heaven's sakes. That's very disheartening.

Milne: I think that traces back to me being skeptical the week I came up to interview.

Fiksdal: And yet, that was on very good grounds, from an academic point of view, it seems to me.

Milne: It absolutely was.

Fiksdal: No, that's really odd. Did you get the device?

Milne: We had one at Evergreen. Nobody professed to know how to use it, and nobody was using it, but I knew what you could do with it from Oregon State, and I figured it out. In later years, Erik Thuesen came along. He was a great marine biologist. He's still there. Full of energy. Tremendous researcher. Great teacher. Cares about the students. Compassionate.

Of course, he is the modern marine biologist, so his method of measuring oxygen consumption is electronic. You put the animals in this water and put these devices in and read a meter over here and write it down. It works fine, but you do not get the sense that the animal is really using oxygen by seeing it happen. You really could see it happen with a respirator.

Fiksdal: Oh, how interesting.

Milne: In one class, we used them both, and said, "This is the old way. This is the new way. They give the same answers. This one's much less work. This one, I think, you come away with a little more of a feeling of what the animals are really doing."

Fiksdal: And Erik was open to that?

Milne: Oh, he was.

Fiksdal: So cool.

Milne: He's still there. He's still a great colleague. I'll show you this. This is post-retirement.

Fiksdal: I'm looking at a book that Dave wrote, *Bashing the Great Green Invaders: The Eco Showdown That Saved Willapa Bay*. Very cool. Plus, I like the cover of this guy mowing down something. Hay?

Milne: The green invaders. The grass is the green invaders. There's supposed to be mud there.

[laughter]

Fiksdal: It's just anyone's guess who the invader could be from an Evergreen perspective.

Milne: You're thinking maybe people. [laughter]

Fiksdal: Well, yeah, people, and especially farmers, can do a lot of damage. Anyway, very cool. Let's take a little break here.

Milne: Sure.