

Paul Sparks
Interviewed by Bob Haft
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

[Begin Part 1 of 2 of Paul Sparks on 10-21-2021]

Haft: It's October 21, 2021, and I'm with Paul Sparks. We're going to talk about his life, and Evergreen at some point. Let me just ask you about your history pre-Evergreen.

Sparks: Oh, boy. Born in the Midwest.

Haft: Whereabouts?

Sparks: I was born in Missouri. My grandfather was a tenant farmer and a sharecropper. My dad moved to town because his father would not give up farming with horses and borrow money to buy a tractor. My mother was abandoned by her parents as an infant and was later adopted out of an orphanage. She didn't discover who her brothers and her sisters were until late in life.

My mother got out of the orphanage because her oldest sister, Ruby. Ruby was the wife of a gangster in Kansas City. She used his money and influence to see that mom was adopted. Her adoptive father was a railroad worker on the Katy [Kansas and Texas] railroad. Her mother was an assistant to a country physician.

That was the starting point. About the time I was born, my dad was working day shifts at the US Steel plant in north Kansas City, I think it was. He worked there in the foundry before he enlisted in the Navy during World War Two. After the war, he welded barrels days and at night sold pots and pans door to door.

Haft: That's what I remember you saying years ago.

Sparks: Selling the pots and pans pulled us into the middle class. It turned out he was quite good at it. So at some point, he quit the other jobs, and the company he was working for transferred him to Omaha. We moved to Omaha when I was about first grade, maybe kindergarten. Kindergarten probably.

He did well in Omaha, and as his fortunes improved, we kept moving from a smaller house to a little bit larger house and after that another little bit larger house.

Haft: Still in Omaha?

Sparks: Still in Omaha. At some point, someone discovered that his business—he trained salesmen; in addition to still selling things and became more of a manager there—that he and his salesmen sold more merchandise on credit than anybody else in the country, and they had the least bad debt loss, so they wanted to know how he did that.

It turned out that he was very, very customer oriented. Most of the customers he sold to were people like him, people who had just moved from country to town. This was an era when most women thought their role in life was going to be a mother of a family, so they thought that buying a set of pots from him was a wise purchase.

He would go back and show them how to use them, and fix them, so the company decided that he would be more useful not selling pots and pans but working for the other part of the company that financed stuff. They moved him out there, so his job became ultimately to teach salesmen in other parts of the country a better way of selling things that was more customer friendly.

Haft: On credit, too.

Sparks: On credit, yeah. When an area had a problem, he'd take a look at the problem because it was probably a customer dissatisfaction problem also. He traveled all over the country for years doing that.

Haft: Do you have memories pre-Omaha of what life was like for you before first grade?

Sparks: Very dim ones. I can remember things happening on the farm. My grandfather farmed with horses so the horse memories are strong. In the depression, he fell on ice and broke both his legs, and my 12-year-old father ran the farm by himself. When he was, I think, a freshman or sophomore in high school, he was playing football and he caught rheumatic fever. At first, they thought he was going to die. The preacher came, and the doctor told my parents to pray. He's not going to make it through the next two days, and he did.

Then they decided that he would never be anything but an invalid, and he'd never walk again, and he did. Then he decided he needed to finish high school, so he went back to high school when he was, I think, 20. He worked on the farm in the early morning. He milked the cows. They had a mixed farm. They had 16 Shorthorns that they both milked and raised for beef.

He went back to high school when he was 20. Farm hand in the predawn, then school and worked in a bakery at night. He met my mother, who was probably 17 at that time. In the process of getting through high school, he won a scholarship in an accounting competition, which he won, and Margaret Truman was the second-place finisher. He won a scholarship to a non-accredited business school. My mother won a scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute.

My grandparents on both sides opposed the marriage. Also both thought that if they went to school they could never be together. So they decided to get married, so neither one of them went past high school.

Haft: Neither one followed up on those scholarships?

Sparks: No. They were seriously in love.

Haft: Oh my gosh.

Sparks: Both sets of parents opposed the marriage. My dad butchered hogs on the day they were married. They were married at 7:30 in the evening and he butchered hogs till 6:00. The early years were pretty grim in our family.

Haft: Do you have memories of your dad and mom from your early days as being around? Your mom was probably in the kitchen a lot.

Sparks: Yeah, my mom was around all the time. My mom had health problems all through her life, so I probably quit being a kid early. I was taking care of my sister because my mom was in the hospital. She was in the hospital several times when I was a little kid.

Haft: Oh, wow. Were you the oldest?

Sparks: Yeah. I was 10 and I was taking care of my little sister because my dad worked a lot at night. That was the beginnings.

Haft: Just one sister?

Sparks: I have one sister and one brother. My brother made it through high school, but no further. He was mentally ill for a number of years. He was in the military and worked for the Defense Department a number of years. Always marginal and, on the edge of getting fired. He lives in North Carolina in a 60-year-old single-wide rental trailer.

Haft: How about you as the eldest who had to take care of your siblings? You say you grew up quickly then.

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: Did that carry over into other things in your life?

Sparks: There's stuff that's formative for teaching, which I'll unravel for you as I go.

Haft: How about schools? Do you remember school?

Sparks: Very good schools in Omaha. I loved school. Straight-A student. When I was in first grade, the school classrooms were the old-fashioned school—big, high ceilings, and the white globe lamps and big, tall windows.

Under the window in all the classrooms was a bookshelf filled with books. I could already read when I was in first grade. I don't know when I started reading. I started reading pretty early. Teachers picked up on that, so all the time, all the way through sixth grade, instead of going by the seating chart, which was alphabetical, they always seated me next to the bookshelf. It was understood that if I was on top of things, I could read those books.

When I was in fifth grade in Omaha, a sympathetic librarian realized . . . well first, Omaha had a competition. If you read six books during the summer, you got free baseball tickets to the Omaha Cardinals home game. I probably read 30 books that summer.

Haft: Did you have an old . . . what were those libraries called? . . . Carnegie library?

Sparks: Yeah. The librarian took pity on me and she said, "As long as I'm here, or that lady over there"—there were two ladies—"you can use the adult section of the library."

Haft: Yeah, because there was a Carnegie library where I grew up and where Debbie grew up, and the basement was where the kids were.

Sparks: Yes.

Haft: And you weren't allowed to go upstairs.

Sparks: Upstairs was where they put the adult books. So, I graduated from *Freddy the Detective Pig* and stuff like that to Bruce Catton and civil war histories and then discovered science fiction. Sometimes I'd read novels and not really understand what was going on. Or I'd hit a lot of words that I still mispronounce because I couldn't sound them out or they didn't avail themselves to sounding out.

That was good. I was really happy in Omaha. I got to ninth grade and then we moved. We got transferred to Pennsylvania. My dad oversold Pennsylvania to us. Pennsylvania, in his story, was a Garden of Eden and the place we were moving was its navel. In actuality, it was a mill town.

Not only that, the stuff that I had been doing in eighth grade in Omaha, they did again in ninth grade in Pennsylvania. So I had to basically retake the eighth grade. I kind of quit school in my head then. All the way through high school, I was low, middle. I still read profusely, and I tested well. When I graduated from high school, I was in the middle of a class of 700 or 800.

Haft: What were your aspirations? Did you think about going to college?

Sparks: My parents had strong expectations that I would go to college. I liked art, but art would not be something that a male in my family was supposed to take seriously. But, I also really liked history. I didn't know about political science or what it was, but I had a sense of an interest in that stuff. I think my dad had aspirations that I would become a lawyer.

When I did go to college, I started out as a history major. I did well on the college boards and scored very well in the National Merit Scholarships. Sadly, those kinds of scholarships simply weren't available to someone with grades like mine. That was a more rigorous era.

Haft: Where did you go to college?

Sparks: I went to the college that was easiest for me to get in. It was a small Christian college called Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. [Sighs]

Haft: Were you religious?

Sparks: My family was religious, yeah. We went to church every Sunday. I kind of fell out of religion there. I was really immature although I had lots of responsibility, I was sheltered about what the world really was, while my peers, more worldly peers, had an entirely different perspective on life.

Some things about Pennsylvania were great. The town I was in was all immigrants.

Haft: Working in the mills?

Sparks: Yeah. The mills were built at the turn of the last century and built up until in the '30s. The big magnates didn't think that American workers would accept jobs or do well in mill jobs. Also, they'd have to pay them more because they had unions, so they went to Europe and recruited workers, so my town was filled with first- and second-generation Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Italians, Polish.

The big events every year in the town were the ethnic picnics. The Syrian picnic was a three-day event. The Italian picnic was a three-day event. The Polish picnic was a Saturnalia. That was a whole different universe, and that was a big piece of my education.

Also, the Catholic kids got out of school for their catechism class, and the Jewish kids did too. Teachers didn't keep close track of it, so I walked with the kids to their classes and went with them to catechism.

Haft: It must have been a pretty hard transition. You were in the ninth grade when you left Omaha, didn't you say?

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: That's a hard time to shift gears as a young person in school.

Sparks: I hated it. I became very reactive in that period of my life. I still loved to learn, but I didn't really love school so much anymore.

Haft: When you got to college, were you disappointed in how it was set up?

Sparks: The school was very strict. Except for seniors, women had to be back in their dorms by 9:00. Weekends, they got 10:00 or 11:00 on occasion. If you consumed alcohol while you were a student there, it was grounds for suspension.

Several students while I was there became pregnant and were drummed out of the school... a lot of hypocrisy. But... also, a lot of good people, a lot of good teachers. I had an English teacher who was a friend of Frost and corresponded with Frost about his work, so he would read Frost's letters in class.

Haft: That's incredible! Wow.

Sparks: It was incredible.

Haft: You stayed there for four years?

Sparks: No, I became a dissipated youth. I did all those things they suspended you for. I had a job. I was a campus mailman. At that time, in the tower of the Old Main which was also where the chapel was, they had a bell tower with a 100-foot spiral staircase in it, and I would go up that every day to the roof and raise the flag. At night, I'd bring it back down. I received 67 cents for that chore.

Anyway, I flunked out for no other reason than I was just not ready to be in college, I think. But, as a freshman, I made the varsity debate team. I loved that, but there were other things I probably should have been doing instead.

Haft: What did your parents think about this?

Sparks: I don't think they realized that the walls were crumbling until they fell in. In that school, if you dropped below a C average for a semester you went on academic probation. Then if you didn't get better than C in the next semester, you were out. I didn't do that. I didn't get better than a C average in my second semester.

One factor in my going on the skids is they had required chapel. That just rankled me to be required to go to chapel. Before going to school there, I was doing all that stuff, president of Presbyterian Youth Fellowship and all that nonsense. It just bothered me that they were coercive about it.

Haft: You were raising the flag and raising hell, too, it sounds like.

Sparks: Yeah, and so they took points off your grade point average for your chapel absences, and that did me in. That, and third-year Latin. I tested well on college boards test for Latin, so they moved me right up to third-year Latin, where I was just way over my head. Although, the class was interesting. The teacher was J. Hilton Turner, this wonderful little old mousy guy. He wrote his own textbooks, and what he did is he used material like Roman tombstones and graffiti, poetry and political stuff that you don't see in other sources. It was interesting, but I was awful. History, I loved, and English class was a joy.

Haft: There was some good faculty there.

Sparks: There were excellent faculty. That worked well for me. After dropping out, I enlisted in the Army.

Haft: By choice?

Sparks: Partly by choice, and partly because in those days, there was a very good chance you were going to get drafted. There was universal military service.

Haft: What year are we talking about?

Sparks: This was probably spring of '62. I went down and talked to the recruiting sergeant, and they gave me some tests. I got a call one day and they said, "If you're willing to come down to Pittsburgh, we'd like to talk to you."

What that was—it was a big event to drive into Pittsburgh—was that that the request was from a detachment of the Army Intelligence Corps, and they were interviewing me, so I enlisted in the military to go into the Army Intelligence Corps conditioned on how I did in basic training.

Haft: They must have seen something in your records that clued them in that this guy's probably not going to be in the infantry.

Sparks: I did three years at the Army Intelligence Corps. After Intelligence School I got to choose my first duty station. Unlike other branches of the military, enlisted men in the Corps got to choose where they went if there was more than one option available. But it was a not a slam dunk. I almost failed my class. I'm too clumsy really to a master typewriter keyboard. I never learned to type, which makes for some irony regarding my use of computers today in my art. But I couldn't get 30 words a minute. I couldn't make it. I had high 90s on all my other courses, but I was failing typing. Somebody gave me a pass. They let me go.

When I graduated, I had a choice of the US Embassy in Ghana for a duty station, the US Embassy in Turkey, a station in an undisclosed location near the border in Germany, or Alaska. I grew up on outdoor magazines and outdoor fantasies, *Outdoor Life* and *Field & Stream* and stuff like that, so I said I'd go to Alaska.

Haft: Well, yeah. The promise of mountains and wildlife.

Sparks: Yes. When I made the commitment—I was not very good in basic training because all that stuff is physical, and I was never very athletic. Although one thing I learned in basic training is my capacity to do things was much more than I thought it was. The idea of helping people to learn what their real capacities are later became an element of my teaching. Why wait until you are thirty to learn to use your full adult powers? But to do that, you have to challenge people which TESC did well in the beginning but turned away from in later years.

Haft: Once you've been taught to see past your own limitations, you feel incumbent to pass that on to younger people.

Sparks: Yeah, but there is a caveat there. In basic training I struggled with authority and, as I said earlier, I wasn't good on the physical stuff. But it turns out, I'm a really good shot. I could consistently hit the silhouette of a human being at 100 yards. I think I was one of the top five shots in my battalion. The military will look past a lot of other failings if you can do that.

Haft: Yeah. Had you grown up hunting as well?

Sparks: Yeah. My dad and his brothers hunted, ran hounds, and they all trapped, my dad especially with skunks. He went to a one-room schoolhouse, and he never missed a day of school through eighth grade, so can you imagine what it was like being with him in a one room schoolhouse? Anyway, I ended up in Alaska and in in an operational intelligence unit.

Haft: Whereabouts?

Sparks: I was stationed at Fort Richardson in Anchorage. Alaska was still a frontier then. That would vanish in the next decade.

Haft: Were you happy with your decision once you got there?

Sparks: Oh, yeah. Even though I never liked the Army much.

Haft: But Alaska you liked.

Sparks: Yeah, Alaska, I loved, and I loved some aspects of what I did in the Intelligence Corps.

Haft: What did you do? Can you talk about that?

Sparks: The part of my job I can talk about is that I coordinated an office that did investigations, several different kinds of investigations. The most common investigation we did was for security clearances.

Haft: You did that for how many years?

Sparks: I did that for three years.

Haft: When you were done, were you ready to get out of the service?

Sparks: I was ready to be out of the service. I got out early.

Haft: Yeah, because usually it's a four-year stint.

Sparks: I had to go back to the Lower 48 to get my discharge. Then I returned to Alaska. I had a hard winter without a job, living off my savings. Almost ran out of money. I signed up for the smokejumper school at the Bureau of Land Management. As the big thaw came, they transferred some smokejumpers from Montana to Alaska as a money saving thing, because it looked like there wasn't going to be much of a fire year in the Lower 48. Smoke jumper school went away as an option for me.

My friend, Kate, who worked at the Bureau of Land Management, went and talked to somebody. She apparently told some lies about me that impressed them, so she said, “You need to go in and talk to this person.” I went in, and they looked at my academic record, and I got a job working on a survey crew in the bush running a chainsaw.

Haft: Had you been actively looking for work yourself? Were you pounding the pavement trying to get a job?

Sparks: I didn’t find out about the cancellation of fire school thing until the last moment. I was lucky to have a good friend in the right place at the right time, in Alaska, as soon as breakup, everything happens fast. Before then, I had done nothing. I thought I was secure. It was probably just as well, I was petrified at the idea of jumping out of an airplane.

The survey job looked good, and as soon as ice went out that year, I went out with a guy whose name was Curly West. We flew into a lake on the other side of Cook Inlet called Redshirt Lake. He was not a good leader of men, but he was a very good teacher. He started teaching me some basic survey skills, but basically, I had been hired as a laborer and my job was to run the chainsaw.

Haft: Just cutting down trees?

Sparks: Just cutting down trees...a mile a day in easy going. When you go across country with a survey line in a dense virgin forest, you can’t see where you are going. So, I would cut down every tree that was on line, and blaze trees above eye level as I went so the line would be marked for as long as the trees were there. If we went down into a gulch, I had to cut out the overhead on either side. At that time the area north of Cook Inlet was densely forested with black spruce, white spruce, and birch. Probably the biggest stand of birch in those days outside of Siberia. It was a good place to be. The lake was full of lake trout. There were lot of bears. It was my first prolonged experience living under canvas, and my introduction to living in the bush.

I settled in and enjoyed the work. I had learned to fall and buck trees by hand from my dad so the adjustment to using a chainsaw was not that hard. Although the chainsaws of that era were heavy and real man killers. Didn’t know it at that time but I really had been signed up for another guy’s crew, a guy named Henry J. Grimonpre. Henry J. was a child of the Depression. He was a CCC—Civilian Conservation Corps—kid, and they taught him to be an engineer... taught him how to survey. When he was drafted for World War II—they also did military training, the CCC—he went right in and served in the Army Corps of Engineers and served in Europe.

So that would become another piece of my education. They sent me up to work for him. I flew into that camp. Most of what I did in the army I learned hands on. Ditto for woods work and

engineering. In both instances my mentors were veterans of the second war or two war guys who also had served in Korea. This also carried over into my teaching; the idea of learning by doing and that an education should be purposeful.

You want to stop for a minute?

Haft: Yeah, let's take a break here.

[End Part 1 of 2 of Paul Sparks on 10-21-2021]

[Begin Part 2 of 2 of Paul Sparks on 10-21-2021]

Haft: Okay, this is part two of our talk and we're in Alaska.

Sparks: I transferred up to Camp 3. We flew in on an elderly Grumman Goose to Susitna Lake in the Nelchina Basin.

Haft: Whoever's transcribing this is going to have a heck of a time with those names.

Sparks: S-U-S-I-T-N-A.

Haft: We'll work it out.

Sparks: I joined Henry J. Grimonpre. Who was a mentor and friend. He also was a good old school cadastral engineer. I also met these people I worked with for a number of years after that. I had a homesteader's kid named Mark Poe working for me. Mark, at that time, was 16 years old.

Haft: Working for the BLM?

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: He displaced me and became the chainsaw man for the crew. Also, he was usually the guy on the crew that carried a weapon, although I sometimes carried a gun.

The head chainman, Bill Andreanoff, was a Tlingit from Petersburg, Alaska in the Southeast. Bill was probably early middle age at that time and another WW II veteran. He was a good woodsman and good on the water. Mark was a skilled boat handler and also ran our boats. We worked out of a boat on the upper Susitna Lake, we worked on Crosswind Lake, Ewan Lake . . . oh, golly . . . Seven Mile Lake, and Lake Louise. Henry taught me to be an engineer and introduced me to the drudgery of double meridian distance calculations. I also got promoted to assistant party chief over the heads of some of my peers who were working in some of the other camps.

Haft: Was that what you were thinking of doing when you quit, or when you went back to school?

Sparks: The BLM was strongly encouraging and would have made it easy to return to school for an engineering degree but I did not go that way. I decided to go back to school several years later, while working somewhere else. I was on a transit station in a giant muskeg swamp about five miles from a

Yupik village called Manakotak. The latter is on the Bering Peninsula, just below the Bering Sea. It's on the river of the same name.

I was out in the middle of the muskeg, maybe a mile-and-a-half from any solid ground. It was blowing, cold and snowing. Every time I moved or shifted my weight, the bubble of my transit would move with me. Basically, I was on top of a mass of vegetation floating in the muskeg. I decided there's better ways to make a living. [Laughter] So, I decided to go back to school.

Haft: You hadn't grown tired of Alaska, though?

Sparks: No. We've been back and forth to Alaska a lot. Morgan (Paul's son) did his master's at the University of Alaska in the Fisheries program before he went to Purdue for his PhD.

Haft: But when you decided to go back to school, were you thinking of going to school in Alaska?

Sparks: Yes and No. I convinced myself that what I really wanted to be was an outdoor writer. To sell my stories, I thought I would be better off if I was a photographer. Also, I had this faint nagging thing about art. The reasoning for the next step was a bit tortuous. In my mind, the best place to learn photography might be in an art school, so I could become the guy who painted the deer jumping over the log on the cover of the outdoor magazines. I had little exposure to real art and, in truth, backed into a life as an artist.

Haft: I've seen that cover. [Laughter]

Sparks: I was just a very conservative person trying to keep all those fantasies afloat, so I applied to all the big-name art schools. I applied to Philadelphia Museum School. I applied to Art Institute of Chicago. Pratt, and the Kansas City Art Institute. I got accepted by all of them, but even with the scholarships, I couldn't afford to go to any of them.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: My best friend from Alaska was going to school in Sacramento. He says, "Why don't you look at the California University and college system? They're really good," which they were in those days. I looked up the Art Department at San Francisco State. Went to the library, because you did that in the library in those days. They looked pretty good on paper, and they were affordable for me. If I was there for a year, I'd be a resident, and I would go to school for practically nothing except my housing. I applied there and got in. I arrived at San Francisco State right when their photo program was peaking.

Haft: What year, do you know?

Sparks: This might have been about '64-'65. Simultaneously, it was the birth of the hippie era. I was living in the Haight Ashbury.

Haft: Wow. What a switch from Alaska.

Sparks: Oh, yes.

Haft: Or Omaha, for that matter.

Sparks: I was probably the only guy on campus with short hair and a full beard.

Haft: You started studying art and photography there?

Sparks: This is where my teaching career begins. I arrived in an art department that had 500 more students than capacity. I arrived just as the Boomers started to go to school, and I'm just a few years older than the Boomers.

The first semester I went there, I couldn't get any of the classes I wanted because there just were no slots. Too many students. Too few classes. The upper classmen filled them in. I decided this wasn't going to happen to me again. Another student suggested, "If you're part of the advising program, you get to enroll before the other students. You get first choice of classes. So I went out and signed up to be a counselor. After a year or two, I found myself doing the pre-enrollment counseling for the whole art department. I was older than the other students and self-confident.

Haft: Counseling in what capacity?

Sparks: At first, they were doing stuff like you do for orientation. Gradually, I persuaded the Art Department that we could do some of the intake counseling by helping folks find the right fit for classes and teachers, so I started doing that. By the time I left San Francisco State as a graduate student, I was running the orientation program for the school of fine arts.

Haft: Were you older than most of the students?

Sparks: Yeah. The difference in calendar age was not that big but the life experience gap was huge. But that changed when I arrived here. I was probably the youngest faculty member at Evergreen when I came. I was 26 or 27.

Haft: Let's go back to San Francisco. I know you studied with Imogen Cunningham, did you not?

Sparks: Imogen taught part-time. Don Worth and Jack Welpott were full time faculty and were later on my Master's committee. Ansel Adams had founded the program, so I had access to Ansel and Brett Weston.

Haft: Wow. Good faculty.

Sparks: And Wynn Bullock through an encounter with his daughter.

Haft: Oh my gosh!

Sparks: Oliver Gagliani lived close at hand. So I was there in the hotbed of the old West Coast photo tradition. At the same time, things were changing. It was a time of turmoil and exploration in the visual arts. The new photography was starting. Also, there was other stuff going on, there's other art stuff

going on. What would become the West Coast style was starting. At Davis, Robert Arneson was starting his sculptural thing, and Roy De Forest was there.

Haft: William Wiley as well.

Sparks: Wiley and all of that. Wiley was still playing bluegrass in the Bay Area. There was this formative stuff. The old surrealist stuff hung on there longer than it did anywhere else and then reinvented itself. Elsewhere in the country, everyone else was jumping into minimalist styles in abstraction while a kind of hip surrealism was being reborn in the Bay area. At the same time, in our own art department the painters started to embrace photography and were inventing photo realism. Bob Bechtel was influential in that change.

Also the Fluxus movement was still alive and doing well. I just climbed into that. I started getting really interested in teaching, as I started as a graduate student. That was another thing--when I got ready to look for a graduate school, they said, "Don't look for a graduate school. We want you to stay here." I and a guy named Michael Bishop were the first people out of their undergraduate program that they let into the graduate program.

Haft: Yeah, Michael Bishop became pretty famous as a photographer, didn't he?

Sparks: Yeah. I was the underachiever. I didn't become famous but everybody around me did. Judy Dater is the best example.

Haft: Yeah, Judy Dater, I know you said she was a classmate. But what prompted your interest in teaching? Do you have any clue?

Sparks: A bad deal. The Art Department didn't have stipends for graduate teaching, so they made it a required course.

Haft: Oh, wow.

Sparks: So, you go out and teach for credit. I taught a class for Don Worth. I taught a Beginning Photography class, which forced me to learn a lot about photography I didn't know. Stuff I'd been coached on that I thought I knew, and I didn't.

In doing that, I discovered I really liked it, so I was probably the first person in the history of the department to re-up again. As I did that, I started getting interested in the critique process. What I did was that I started going to the other schools in the Bay Area, hanging out in people's classes, and sitting in on classes at the Art Institute, and other schools in the Bay Area. Dorothea Lang wasn't teaching formally, but she was successful, and had sessions, so I hung out with her some. She was very influential on me, because of her FSA images but even more by her passion. I just started looking at the process of teaching.

I would add that I have always been lucky. That extends to being in the right place at the right time and being lucky enough to be around extraordinary people.

Haft: You said you got interested in critiquing. Why? Were your own critiques good, bad? The words you got from your professors.

Sparks: We had some good critiques. Imogen Cunningham told you the truth all the time, even if you didn't want to hear the truth. She wasn't doing it maliciously to be damaging. You have to know what is not working if you want to get better. That was important. But was an important asset to me in the last couple of decades at evergreen. It guaranteed me a long waiting list for my programs.

You are not doing your job if you are not willing to say to someone, "That's not working," knowing how to give them some alternatives. "Here's this, this and this." The other thing I was learning was how important art history was. I took way more stuff than I needed to graduate.

Also, keep in mind that since I had a long time completing my degree—more than most other people did as an undergraduate—I got the equivalent of a biology degree, which I never applied for, and close to enough units for political science degree.

Haft: Were you on the GI Bill at this time?

Sparks: The GI Bill didn't come in until I was right at the end of my undergraduate career, but working in Alaska, I had income. I didn't have to work during the school, although I did. I took photographs of objects for the de Young Museum. I took slides.

I got real interested in art history. One of the things that influenced me was John Guttman. John Guttman had been at the Bauhaus. John has some small fame as a photographer, but photograph financed his escape from Germany. That's how he supported himself going across Siberia and coming eventually to the US.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: Finally, he was working for magazines like *National Geographic Magazine* and stuff like that. But he was also a good journeyman painter.

Haft: Oh, I didn't know that.

Sparks: Yeah. A larger-than-life figure than many people would tolerate today. There were other things going on. The sexual revolution. Jack (Welpott) and Judy (Dater) had an apartment down by the water in . . . I can't remember the name of the district anymore but there apartment was near Finocchios.

Haft: Oh, sure. I know that, too, because I used to live in the Bay Area.

Sparks: I can't remember the name of the district. North Bay?

Haft: North Beach.

Sparks: Yeah. There was poetry stuff going on. It was just a time when there was a creative explosion and a lot of encouragement. And I had a design teacher named Jay Baldwin who may have been the person who thought up the Whole earth Catalogue. He was really encouraging of thinking alternatively. He was really good at coming up with open-ended assignments that would really stretch your thinking or your seeing, or whatever you did. He was a real influence on me.

I had all these powerful people in my environment. For a while, I lived on Oak, off of Divisadero. Then I lived on Page Street in the Haight District. I had a girlfriend in Berkeley on Haste Street off of Telegraph Ave. All these scenes, political and otherwise. Going on and swirling around me. I was just cooked in this broth of good stuff, at a time that the stuff, not knowing that nothing like this would happen again for a long time.

Meanwhile, I'm systematically wrestling with the question of how should art history relate to teaching? How should critique relate to practice? How do you not get caught into lecturing the content and letting a mechanical approach to teaching technique dominate the process?

Also, how do you deal with two kinds of students? One kind of student is never going to be an artist, quite possibly, but needs to have an appreciation of what artists are like, and how what they do shapes their life and the passion to do their thing against the dead weight of a culture that took very little of it seriously. The other was, how do you give a student who wants to be an artist a decent chance of attaining their dreams?

If you go to a real art school, you have role models. Sometimes they actually know that they're role models and they act accordingly. Sometimes, they don't. What does a working artist look like? No one suggests to you that you are probably not going to be another DeKooning but that can be ok. By the way you need to think about a day job and, do know that you're going to be a small businessman the rest of your life? Schools aren't good at teaching that.

I just started thinking about all the spaces between mystique and craft and how to work with ideation and imagination. Meanwhile, the San Francisco State strike comes along. We didn't have any school for I don't know how many months. We had a pitched battle on campus every day.

Haft: Because of Vietnam.

Sparks: To some degree the Vietnam War. The strike was driven more by local issues. The radicals wanted a Black Studies program. They wanted graduate students to have some kind of better compensation. They wanted structural and curriculum changes. So, we had a pitched battle on campus, and the campus shut down. Some teachers taught on campus.

Out of context...I forgot to note that Steve DeStaebler was another great influence. He was a great person for hooking up work and play as covalent, as the same thing. He was also good at teaching you to use things the wrong way, which is taboo; whoever's running the woodshop today would be horrified by that concept.

Back to the strike. I had a class taught off campus by a writer named, I think, Leo Litwak. A World War II vet. He was a real stimulus. He was big on working habits. I already had a good start. I'd been out in the real world, so I had pretty good working habits. He made me start thinking about how you transmit that to other people.

Also, I started realizing how many people in college are terribly immature. I felt like an old man. In Alaska, in the bush, I had this kid Duane Oozeva from Saint Lawrence Island who worked for me several years in a row. He was a teenager but was an adult in every other way. In that world, Eskimo and Indian kids typically were treated as adults when young and were doing things to sustain their families when they're 10, 12 years old.

Again, I was chewing on the problem of why should we have to wait till we're well advanced in our lives before we become adults?

All that stuff is cooking and distilling in my head. The Art Department dealt with the strike by saying you could just go work with any teacher anytime you wanted to.

Haft: That was pretty forward thinking.

Sparks: Yeah, so I started letting other kids come into my classes. Typically the ones who were really motivated showed up whether they were registered or not. They were doing the same thing I was doing by going to the Art Institute. We were making it richer. I encouraged that for all the rest of my career.

After San Francisco State, and my MA. I wanted to be near my parents for a while. I didn't want to really go back East. My parents were in Ohio. I accepted a tenure track job at Ohio State, which was big school with a seriously constipated Art Department

I was ready to move to Ohio. Two days before I was to set out on a trek east, they sent me a telegram. "We're really, really, immensely sorry. We had a budget cut, and your position has been eliminated."

Haft: Before you even started?

Sparks: Yeah. "And we'd encourage you to apply next year, but it's no longer a tenure track position." So, I had to get a job, quick. Somehow or other, Don Worth told me about this job at a community college in southern California. Southwestern College in Chula Vista, California. It was then, at that time,

the 47th poorest community college district in the state that had 48 community college districts. It was on the border. It also had a hot young art department and an exciting place to be.

As part of a border consortium, there are three schools on the southern border—one in El Paso, and one somewhere in New Mexico, and Southwestern—that took students from Mexico on the same basis as from the US. The student body was completely blue-collar. Mexicans from Mexico and Mexicans from the US. White folks from national City and enlisted men from the Navy centers in San Diego and Imperial Beach. Working stiffs trying to improve their lives from National City and places like that. It was just rich stuff. It was.

Again, it was also a hot art department. They hired me because the photo program in the Art was a problem. Department was run by a guy who essentially had hobby-level skills who had been promoted from the local high school, owned a Porsche, and basically, using his camera as a tool for seducing girls.

They wanted me to fix and change the focus of the photo program for them. That was hard. I succeeded to a degree. It helped that the climate was right because the place was being run by a crew of hot young artists. Just before I arrived, John Baldisseri had been hired away by Cal Arts, so he was still actively involved with the people in the department. I met him very early on. He and a couple of other younger faculty got me involved with the whole conceptual movement. I had experienced the fluxus stuff, but had not been willing to turn loose of the success I was having with photography.

So, as this is going on, I was getting all these exposures to all this art stuff. The school was also in on the ground floor of the border arts movement. Stuff was going on that would congeal into Los Artista's de Aztlan and what's the other one? "Taller De Artes Fronteriza. Some of these folks were doing murals based on the Mexican Muralists and somewhere this would fuse with graffiti and explode.

There were a lot of people doing murals. That's probably the point where the graffiti movement and the mural movement moved together. Also, all along in the background for me were underground comics.

I'm just feasting on all this stuff, and I started teaching in the Photography Department, so I started experimenting with doing what I had done at San Francisco State during the strike, and saying, "In this class, I'm doing this." "In this class, I'm doing this." And "In this class, I'm doing this." "If this class is going too slow, you could come over here."

So, I started teaching beginners alongside advanced students, and discovered that I got much better results that way from both. The advanced students thought they knew how to do it, and had quit thinking about their ideas, and the beginners learned technique from the advanced students, probably

better than I was teaching it. At the same time, they threatened the advanced students because they still had ideas and tried them, so that prospered. And I made sure that we looked at a lot of art including stuff they would not normally experience in a photo class and I did my damndest to expose them to real working artists. In this process, the slide collection was the door to an alternate universe but wherever I could, I put real working artist in front of them. We started an art lifestyles speaker series within the department and the speakers ranged from Judy Chicago to outlaw bikers and Mexican Tattoo Artists.

At the same time, before I went down there, Don Worth, again—a great connection for me, one of my favorite teachers ever—had turned me over to these doctors in Portland. The doctors who were rich gifted amateur photographers who had been sponsoring a summer school program at Portland State in photography. What they really wanted was people doing traditional West Coast stuff, which I didn't do. Don Worth, somehow or other, convinced them that they needed to try something different. I drove up and talked with them and somehow they gave me the greenlight which surprised me because my photography at that time was pretty radical. I was doing all camera-less images.

So, I came up there and taught. The first or second year I taught there, I had Craig Hickman, Kirk Thompson, and Ann Hughes along with several other folks sitting in. Although, I think Kirk and Craig were probably registered. You know her (Anne) probably from Blue Sky Gallery. She and Craig with others were the founders.

Haft: What's her name again?

Sparks: I think it was Anne Hughes. Also, Terry Toedtemeier. These people were all sitting in on my class and probably the summer before I taught at Southwestern.

Apparently, just after this, Craig Hickman and then Terry would be being hired to work in the Photo Services.

Haft: At Evergreen.

Sparks: Yeah, and Kirk Thompson was an Evergreen first-year faculty. Kirk Thompson came back and told Charlie Teske that he needed to hire me, so sometime during that winter, I got a call from Charlie. Charlie Teske said, "There's some people here who are interested in what you do. Are you interested in Evergreen?" I said, "I don't know what Evergreen is. What's an Evergreen?" He said, "Are you willing to come to Los Angeles to talk to me?" Basically, my students were behind the recruiting effort.

I went to Los Angeles to the Hilton Hotel, where he was staying, and we talked for a while about Evergreen. We also talked an awful lot about the Yale Glee Club's trip to Russia . . . on and on about the Yale Glee Club. You've had conversations with Charlie.

Haft: Yes.

Sparks: All the while, Charlie was just probably using that to draw me out and size me up. Right?

Haft: You couldn't have talked to a better person than Charlie.

Sparks: He said, "If you had a chance to work with people from different backgrounds, what kind of class would you design?" Road trips—the whole hippie migration thing—was going on then, so I said, "I think you ought to call this the "On the Road in America." It would be a group of students who are doing writing, visual art and film, and performing. What they'd do is travel around America, stay for a while in campgrounds, and do the performance, and make their audience part of their product of the performance." Charlie kind of liked that idea.

Haft: I bet he did.

Sparks: He said, "I think we may have an opening for you in two years. Would you keep us in mind?" Two months later, he called me up and says, "I think we can get you in now. Come up." He said, "You need to come to Evergreen and be willing to teach a course. Can you teach a workshop or something?" I said, "Yeah."

I came up to the photography studio and I taught a class. If I really thought about it, it was a way to use photo tools differently. I taught them paper negatives. I said, "I've been engrossed with art history, and I realized at some point that we make the same old variations of images over and over through history, so what I've been doing is going through the slide library at San Francisco State and taking slides, and making high contrast negative images from those slides and using those as paper negatives collaged with my images. Every image that's ever been made through all time can belong to you that way. You could work with anybody."

That's the part of the workshop I taught, and I said, "Where do you guys live?" A lot of them said they were living on the east side. I said, "Let's go over to that neighborhood and walk around and see what we can see." You know where that ended up.

Haft: Yes.

Sparks: It took a few more years.

I had a little exhibition in the library. About 10 color pictures. Whatshisname? The video artist? The Japanese video artist? They did a faculty show at Cal Arts, and John Baldessari invited us up. I decided to come up early. Oh, Kim . . .

Haft: Korean artist maybe?

Sparks: I'm trying to remember his name. He was a video artist.

Haft: I'm blanking.

Sparks: Nam June Paik! What he did was he was doing was manipulating TVs. I came up to Cal Arts a day early, and he had an installation in the gallery that was going to be part of a faculty show. Great faculty show. Gawd, what great people they had. All of them Disney fired within a year or two. Nam June Paik had a brace of video cameras and was shooting color, and then was manipulating the screen with big electro-magnets.

I was shooting images right off the screen. We were running back and forth to the cameras and stuff, and just having a great time. I had a series of color prints from that session that I exhibited at Evergreen

So they called me back in a month or two and they hired me! The first year, I worked with Kirk Thompson, my former student. He and I clashed almost immediately.

Haft: Oh, my gosh! [Laughing] That's typical Evergreen. You're teaching with Kirk and who else?

Sparks: Sid White. And whatshisname, from the library? Gordon Beck.

Haft: Oh, really? Oh, my gosh.

Sparks: And Bill Winden.

Haft: Five faculty.

Sparks: And each quarter, a visiting artist/filmmaker.

Haft: Oh, man.

Sparks: The most anal program I've ever been in. Just constant friction. Oh my, it was awful. Everyone was at everyone else's throat. It was the first program in the history of Evergreen to break up. I was blamed for the breakup.

The filmmakers couldn't stand any of the Evergreen faculty except Bill Winden and myself. Bill Winden got along with people.

Haft: He was great. He really was. I talked to Hiro about this, too, how we'd have those Expressive Arts meetings that would just tie my guts up in knots because they were so fractious. Bill would just clear his throat, and everybody would calm down.

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: He had that effect on people.

Sparks: Yeah. Bill told me later that that program was the worst experience he ever had at Evergreen until he became a dean. When he became a dean, he realized how everyone was backstabbing all the time. [Laughter]

So, the program broke up, and we became little satellites. The program did a few good things. Some film students just soared. Steve DeJarnatt worked with me on contract made a film called *Out on*

the Periphery that got him into the American Film Institute. It ran for six weeks in Boston. I was in his film. For years after that, people would stop me on the street and say, “Are you Professor Q?” That was the character’s name. Professor Q smoked dope continuously through the film.

Jim Cox did *Neptune* also in an individual contract. While he was an Evergreen freshman, he got a bid from the University of Iowa to come and do a residency there.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: So, an Evergreen freshman rising sophomore went and started his next film at the Cinema Lab at the University of Iowa. He came back and then he did *Eat the Sun*. again on contract.

Haft: That’s one of my favorites.

Sparks: Some careers got launched there. At the same time, I’m hanging out with students because I’m the youngest faculty member. I’m closer to the students than I am with faculty.

Haft: Is Kirk older than you are?

Sparks: Oh, yeah.

Haft: Really?

Sparks: Yes. In later years, when we quit competing with one another, I came to have a tremendous admiration of him as a teacher and an anchor for important stuff at Evergreen.

Haft: That’s cool.

Sparks: He was one of the best advocates for writing the school ever had. When he retired, that was a big loss for the school.

We started planning the curriculum for the next year. The program broke up. There was already little satellite things going on. I proposed the program that I designed with Charlie Teske. In the meantime, the deans had gotten upset—some had gotten upset—about we’d used the handball court in the Rec Center to shoot *Out on the Periphery*, and someone had spilled water on the floor, which got mopped up. No damage done but after the breakup of my previous program I was probably viewed as a radical and a less than benign influence.

I had proposed that program, and in that year, they did something they never did again. All the drafts of programs, they put out to the students, and they said, “Which ones interest you?” (Evergreen never did that again.) More students were interested in my program than any of the other programs.

Haft: Do you remember what it was called?

Sparks: “On the Road in America.”

Haft: You did that program. Oh, my gosh.

Sparks: I did that. At least I proposed it. While I was an undergraduate, Don Worth gave me . . . New Mexico painter . . . Georgia O'Keefe. He gave me her mailing address and said, "Talk to her. You'll find her interesting." This was after I'd told him I really liked her work.

So I corresponded with her. I had envisioned the idea of truck stops where we would stop with a person who's somebody important in the art world of arts and ideas, and we'd stay with them for a while, and weave that into it. We were talking about making her ranch in New Mexico one of the truck stops.

I met Buckminster Fuller in Oakland through Jay. Buckminster Fuller had done a lecture. He just lectured on and on for like three hours and drove most of the audience out of the room. He said, "Now, you've noted they've left. The real people left are the ones who are interested. What's your favorite bar?" We spent the rest of the night in a bar with Buckminster Fuller. [Laughter]

I had talked about having him as a truck stop, although he wasn't sure because of health issues. Merv Cadwallader, who was a dean, had talked to me about my program, and he said, "We could let you teach this program if you will agree to resign at the end of the program." I said, "Yeah."

Haft: Why?

Sparks: I think they considered me a loose cannon. The year before that, one program taught that year, one of the things they asked students to do was hitchhike to San Francisco without money.

Haft: Gawd.

Sparks: ...and survive for a week in San Francisco before they came back. What was that? America something. They saw something like that happening. Evergreen faculty, living with the students out on the road. No control. I said, "Yeah, I'll do that." Apparently, the deans were very upset that Merv did that, but I thought it was a great idea because at that point, I decided that I was doing well enough as an artist then. And, when I first came to Evergreen, I was only going to stay for a year. That was in my head. Evergreen was a side-stop before I moved back down to live in LA or New York and be more of a mainstream artist, although the siren call of teaching was still tugging at me.

Apparently, the deans had a big powwow about it. The notion was I deserved a second chance. It was never clear whether they were going to fire me without doing that program, but many of us at Evergreen during the first two years, half those folks had been fired, or had been threatened to be fired. So we were willing to stick our necks out.

Haft: Oh, yeah.

Sparks: They said, "We'd like you to stay on. In your student evaluations, the students speak highly of you." That's always been my history. I am good at what I do.

Haft: To me, you have always been capable of—you mentioned this earlier—pushing students into places they don't think they're capable of going.

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: And getting a lot more work out of them than anybody I'd ever seen. That always struck me as one of your fortes.

Sparks: What happened was they gave me a second chance. There was a program with Willi Unsoeld. Willi Unsoeld came around to me and talked to me. He said, "We'd like you to join our team. We don't know if you're going to stay here or not, but if you stay here, join us." It was another one of those monster teams. There was Willi Unsoeld, Sig Kutter . . .

Haft: What field is it?

Sparks: Oceanography. Business before that. Nazi concentration camps.

Haft: Yeah, Niels Skov.

Sparks: Niels, Sig Kutter . . . Willi . . . I forget who the coordinator was . . . and this geologist who's an alcoholic. The alcoholic geologist became a problem so early that—

Haft: Linda Kahn told me about this guy.

Sparks: We got rid of him, so the program was reduced from six faculty to five. Oh, and Bob Sluss was in that program.

Haft: Oh, wow. Man. That was an all-star team.

Sparks: Niels's model was he didn't care if students made cottage cheese, but they had to make the best cottage cheese in the world. That was a great program. It was a really good program. I did really well in that program and had a good time doing it.

Haft: What was that one called?

Sparks: "Man and Nature." They never could teach that program today at Evergreen with that title. [Laughter] Willi brought in a strong Outward Bound theme into the program, which combined science, writing, art, outdoor education.

Haft: Did you sail, too?

Sparks: No, no. That would be a year or two later. Sluss and I would hook up with Pete Sinclair and without intention ended up being the coordinator Vancouver and Puget and convener of the Marine History area. Vancouver and Puget was another good one. We did math. Even though I've worked with surveying, I'm not really hot in math. The first day that, we started working with calculus and pre-calculus. I said to my seminar, "Look, here are my limits. I can get through this stuff and do moderately well on my own. I'm not competent enough to be good at teaching it, so who's hot here?" We

organized ourselves as a math commune and the students worked together to create schemes for us to teach each other.

That's another feature of my teaching--I organize my seminars to take care of a lot of the running of the program and hold each other accountable.

Haft: Yeah, giving students some authority and some recognition that they often have skills that we don't. Right?

Sparks: When we did our final exams on calculus, my seminar had the highest scores. Kort Jungel was a big factor.

Haft: Kort?

Sparks: Kort was in my seminar.

Haft: Oh, my gosh.

Sparks: Kort was very good in math, among other things. Our program retreat at the start was a big deal, the whole program went to Rainier for two weeks.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: We showed up in the rain. Willi had told the students he'd buy the food, so all these early Greener types show up and they discover that the food that Willi has purchased for the first week consists of dehydrated vegetables and frozen beef hearts. [Laughter] I have Alaska bush standards, so I always had a week of food stashed in the car. I had chili, Dinty Moore beef stew and Beanie Weenies, hard candy, candy bars and a few c-rations. Survival stuff. Meanwhile the students were near mutiny, wet and cold.

We started with basic climbing technique and a week of Outward Bound initiative tests. Petrifying for me. I'm a bit of an acrophobe and I had to—everybody did a Tyrolean traverse across the Nisqually canyon, and to hold my own—I couldn't face my seminar if I dodged that, or if I didn't do it with some bravado. I was petrified the whole time. And we rappelled on the cliffs and all that crap.

Haft: But you had Willi as one of the faculty. He's a mountaineer.

Sparks: Willi's teenaged kids ran a lot of that stuff.

Haft: Oh, man.

Sparks: The kids loved it. We started classes there, too. But the second week, my seminar—there's a power line that comes in from Ashford. I forget what that big first campground was. It was a big campground. My seminar brush-cleared it. It was maybe a hundred and twenty feet wide and I don't know how many miles it was, but we cleared that all the way up to the campground.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: The rest of the program was building trails and stuff like that, so we were bonded as a group by that time in the program, so I saw a lot of value in program retreats. Building stuff together.

In the spring, Bob Sluss and I did Desert Ecology together. We took a group of students down to French Glen/Page Springs in the Oregon desert, down at Malheur. We were down there for six or eight weeks, I forget how long.

The first two weeks—I took clay with me, and the clay was frozen—I was going to work with the students on doing primitive pottery, which I knew little to nothing about other than researching it beforehand. We were going to fire it with stuff there and dig clay there, which was a bit shocking when we found out how alkaline the clay was. The clay was so alkaline that if you fired it, it was going to melt.

I fortunately brought a supply of raku clay. Sluss had all the students doing little projects on biology, and Sluss and I did a population survey together on a little stream that came out of a spring in the canyon wall, and Sluss made pots.

Haft: Really?

Sparks: We started having a bit of success when we figured out to fire pots with cow dung. We had this van. We got a pickup later. After that, I taught summer classes at Malheur for several years at the field station. We had these giant plastic bags filled with cow poop, dry cow poop. We trucked a bunch of students over into the Owyhee Canyon and they did a traverse of the Canyon. We trout fished in the Donner and Blitzen River. There was a hot springs right there at Page Springs. It had a ranch.

Haft: It just strikes me that so much of this is Outward Bound-ish.

Sparks: It was Outward Bound heavily laced with educational expectations. We picked this little stream that was like less than 100 yards long. It came out of the springs in the side of the canyon wall and meandered down to join the Donner and Blitzen River. You could step over it anywhere but we found hundreds of species there. I showed the kids how to survey the stream and make an accurate map of it. Just a simple, baseline survey. Just all sorts of good stuff came out of that and a lot of lifelong friendships that held up for over a half century.

Haft: Yeah, it sounds like it. I'm going to have to stop because I've got to get back home, but we will continue this later on.

[End Part 2 of 2 of Paul Sparks on 10-21-2021]