

Interview with Dr. Mervin P. Hanson

Interviewers: Yvonne Wilson and Josh Farrell

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- Dr. Mervin P. Hanson*
- HSU Undergraduate class of 1961*
- Cornell University—Graduate program*
- Returned to HSU in 1965*
- Remained until 2000-01*

If you could start by stating your name.

Mervin P. Hanson. I was an undergraduate here first in 1956, fall of '56. Graduated in '61, went to Cornell for four years and returned in '65 with sort of all-but-degree.¹ And then I went back the following summer and finished three experiments and completed the PhD. And then I was a legal member of the faculty at Humboldt State. Stayed here until 2000-01, and then I FERP'd for five years², and after two years decided that if was I going to retire I should retire, and so now it's been ... since then I've been without gainful employment.

What was it like during your time here, from the beginning to the end?

It was, I don't know . . . you'll find out as time goes on that you look back and you think it was a magic time because I think I was 19, and it's different when you're 67. There was I think an attitudinal sort of thing . . . it seemed like every year things got better, like every generation did better than the previous generation. My sister and I—no, actually it was my brother, my sister and I—were the first in my immediate family to have bachelor's degrees and my father was sixth grade education and my mother finished high school. It was just . . . everything seemed to be getting better . . . when I first came to Humboldt it was I think under 2000 students. I'm pretty sure I remember us going from whatever to above 2000, and that was again '63, somewhere in that time frame. And then when I left—what did I say, '63? No, that should have been '58-'59, that's more like it, and then when I returned in '64 I think we were like 5000 and I always thought that was the size Humboldt should've stayed forever because it was just big enough to where you almost knew every student on campus and you certainly knew all of the faculty and the place was as pretty as it is now but there was more open space, instead of the buildings being so close together, but as I say I think you always think things were the way they should have been when you were young. On campus things were always getting better, the budget was increasing every year, in contrast to your experience here. We were always adding staff and we were always adding departments, and we were always adding majors. It was just wonderful and then there was probably the 80's maybe when things sort of started to plateau out and then the 90's all of a sudden I guess the money ran out is what it was. It still is a wonderful

¹ A reference to ABD status, given to a doctoral candidate when they have completed all doctoral work except the dissertation or final project.

² A reference to the Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP), where faculty can retire, receive retirement benefits, and then continue to teach half-time for a maximum of five years while receiving half of their previous salary.

place. It got to be ... it was obvious that I should be doing something else and the youth should come in with their energy and their enthusiasm and carry the torch on and they so do.

What were the high points as a student here? Or the pitfalls, whatever is easiest to remember?

It was all good. What do I remember? The first semester I was here I was new to the area and I was living with my cousin and I didn't know many people, and so most of my time I would spend studying. I'd say it was for no good reason, but that's not exactly the function of the institution. I was studying and working really hard and I remember checking my grades at the end of the first semester and in General Chemistry I had an A and then I went to this math class and I got an A in it and I thought, "god damn!" And then I went to the Physics course and I got an A in it, and I had a 4.0 and I couldn't believe that. I never thought I would see a 4.0 on a semester. So that was a certainly a high point of the time. It was all good, really, the time was great, the weather was fair enough, the sun came out sometimes in March and you always appreciated that. The beach was readily accessible, new courses were opening up. Chemistry there were just Larry Wesmore, myself, and I've forgotten the other guy, we became the first majors in Chemistry. That was in '58, I guess. I can't remember specific instances of great exuberance other than just the general era of comradeship with the students that were there. Chem classes were always small, a big class was 13 people, 14 people, something like that. You knew everybody. Homework assignments, I mean we'd always get together five or six of us and somebody would work on something, somebody would work on something else, and you would just go "ah, here's how to do this" and on and on. And I guess that really was the high point, the people I met. It was a general attitude of not trying to one up anybody. It was all of us just trying to figure out what's the answer to this problem and we would all attack it from different directions. Some one of us would get some insight and away we'd go and it was a feeling of conquering, I guess, as a group, the mysteries of science and the times, I guess, I don't know. And there were no real low points that I could remember and maybe that's the filter of age, I certainly hope so.

What about your career as a professor?

I keep talking about this magic time again, and I think it really was. My second semester here I had General Chemistry from Professor Russell, John B. Russell, and he just started on the faculty that year—and I can't remember why I had Smith the first semester and him the second semester—he was just a really impressive guy and the book we used was by a pair of guys from Cornell—Sienko and Plane—and it was the first sort of P Chem approach to General Chemistry and it just opened up a whole new way of looking at this field and the combination I think of that book, and Russell was such an impressive instructor, it just turned me into a Chemist immediately. So I decided that what I really wanted to do was to get a PhD and come back to Humboldt State and teach P Chem.

Well I went and completed my degree here, got accepted to Cornell, and I completed the degree there. In the spring of '64 Humboldt needed a P Chemist and so I applied for the job and they gave it to me and it wasn't always that easy in those times, but it was pretty close that if you were a science major with a PhD you could almost say that you like Southern California and you would find some institution there that was looking for you. Everything was just exploding in

higher education at that time and finding positions was not difficult, but the fact that this position opened up for me at that time is certainly one of the high points in my life and it was like somebody said Shangri-la is over here, the gates opened up and I walked through, and it was that way all the time. I had the best time of my life here. One of my colleagues asked me how long I had been here and I said thirty-seven years and she said that's a long time and I told her that it didn't seem like it, it just disappeared and all on this enormous pleasure plane of doing what you like to do and generally well received and there is always the problem of having to grade students and I was given access to some really outstanding talent that I really enjoyed having.

What about the students here? What's the difference from when you first started until the end, when you left?

There is some quote about that. I have to just paraphrase it: "the youth have no respect for their elders, the center can not stand and everything is collapsing" and that's the sort of overstating the way I see things now. But the quote is from I think Cicero in about 200 B.C.³ and it always has been that way so it may be not as bad as I see it. With that preamble, as I recall when I was an undergraduate we were so dedicated as I told you before, working three nights a week: one night on chemistry, one night on physics, and one night on math, trying to get all our homework done and just all the time working. When I first came back it was not quite the same, it didn't seem to me students were working nearly that hard. And then when I finally retired it seemed that they didn't work at all. I have a feeling I am missing something in there someplace or other, but it does seem to me that there became too much of a desire for—and the characteristic question was—"is this going to be on the exam?" It wasn't that there was any interest in the subject at all, it was just "do I need to know this?" That was an attitude that became more prevalent it seemed to me in my later years here, the '90s, something like that. I'm not sure, but that maybe I am just getting too crotchety in my old age and I focus on the negative students and I would have ignored in my early days and spent all my attention, not all my attention, but focused my memories on the students who were dedicated to finding out the answers to questions that we were posing.

Was there a change or difference as far as school spirit of students and faculty? Was there a lot school spirit than there is now, or is it more now?

I think the school spirit has always been pretty good. It's because of who we are and where we are. We are so isolated that when you come to Humboldt—or behind the redwood curtain, I love that expression—you feel cut off from the world and pleased about most of us, but we're pleased about where we were and what we were. We always had a great sense of Humboldt State and the faculty and the student body I always though got along really extremely well. It was often enough that the students would have parties and invite us to them and the faculty would try to have some sort of a thing, at least at the graduation at the end of the year to invite the students and their families to share in the joy of the graduation, and what was it, for a couple of years it was the "Geeks on the Beach" festival at the end of the fall semester. The students put it on. The idea was that you would bring some beer and meet at the mouth of the Mad (River) and build a fire in the sand and just generally carry on a bit, it was really nice. They

³ The paraphrase could actually be from a sonnet of John Donne's or from W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming."

had a less formal, informal event than most interactions between the faculty and the staff. But that was only for a couple of years, but the idea of that sort of interaction was widespread, within Chemistry at least. And for about ten years we had a Chemistry and Physics picnic with a baseball game. At Camp Bauer there's a baseball field there at Patrick's point and then we just quit doing it. I don't know but I think we all just got old and no longer swing a bat or pick up a ball if it bounced towards us, so we just fell by the wayside. But the trophy for that is in a sort of trophy case. Actually there's a bunch of crystal structures on it, is in the P-Chem lab floor of the science building. And be noted that Chemistry won most of those games, by fair margins. Good memory. That's a high point—taking Physics down.

What about the diversity among students?

In Chemistry there wasn't as big a diversity as on the campus, it used to be just overwhelmingly white here. I was trying to remember, I think as an undergraduate there might have been one black guy that I remember seeing on campus, maybe there were a few more than that. I don't think there were any Latin Americans at all and but then in the 60's and forwards towards diversity just grew enormously, and any time you looked out the window it looked like California so it's really nice to see that. In Chemistry—the undergraduate General Chemistry and P-Chem, the junior class, are the courses I taught—in General Chemistry you would see a little bit of this diversity, not so much as campus-wide it was just seemed ... I don't know what the selection was, but generally, I don't think there were ever more than say one black student in my General Chemistry class of say a hundred. The Latins were better represented, but still not anywhere near the campus average.

Was there often tension?

No. I mean there is always tension between students and faculty and I think there is some good to that. I mean you always have to have some hurdle or mountain to climb to improve yourself and that part is all right. But there was certainly never a feeling of racial tension or something like that to where it was “the man keeping you down” sort of thing at all. It was just this is tough stuff and we tell them that. Speaking of low points, this comes to mind— you would always tell the class, “Look, I've got an office hour this many times a week. Make use of it.” And the biggest class was like 140 students and I would get two students a week to my office hour and they would go to some stranger who certainly knew less chemistry than I did and ask them and get the wrong answer and for some reason they wouldn't come and talk to me, and that was something that always bothered me, why it was that they feared me or something—there may be something there that kept them away and I'm not sure what that was. It disturbed me then and it disturbs me now, though less now because I don't have office hours, but it seemed to me that all the money that they were spending on an education, they should have made better use of my time. And that was too bad ... oh and now I've forgotten the question...oh yeah tensions between the students and the faculty. In P-Chem there was one black student one time and he was just ill-prepared and that was just unfortunate because at the beginning of the class we all had high expectations, but his math background was just really inadequate and it just killed him. And so he dropped out in the middle of the semester, but other than that ... No, no, I had a Latin, I think just one Latin in 37 years that I was here in P-Chem. Other than that, it was all just Caucasian.

What about female and male ratio?

In the early days, the mid-60's to the 70's, there would be overwhelmingly male. The group would be five guys and maybe one woman, but there was one year there were only, it ended up with only two women in the class. P-Chem is really tough at Humboldt and that year I probably only started with only five or seven students in all, and all but two of them dropped out except for Debbie Leckbann (?) and Angela Colken (?) and both of them did quite well in the class and as I said the rest of them were males and they dropped out. It was a special time when you could have a full professor teaching two students and nobody minded that. I don't think you could do that anymore. I think in the last decade it's been pretty much fifty-fifty in terms of male and female in P-Chem. In general chemistry it has always been sort of fifty-fifty, you never looked out and felt you were overwhelmed with either sex there.

With all the political action that was happening here in the 60's, do you think that same sort of mindset or seriousness was being reflected in the 90's during the Iraq war when all those demonstrations were going on?

The student body has always been politically active and divided in—well, I don't know if divided is quite the right word—but the diversity of the campus has always been quite broad and I think it generally has reflected the times that we live in or lived in, so there are lots of similarities between what's going on now on campus and what was going on in the 60's with the same sorts of feelings, whatever side it was you were on in terms of the two wars.

Were there lots of demonstrations and protests up here? Or was that just more at Berkeley?

There was nothing as extreme as the Berkeley protest, but there were actions on campus and off, substantially, in the 60's. The then-Governor Reagan shut the CSUs down because of the incursion in Cambodia and there were major things on campus that were shut down because of the shut down of the system. There were substantial actions going on at all times, fortunately not only the two extremes that we see now and we saw with the Vietnam conflict.

Were there a lot of people being drafted here during Vietnam? Did you notice half of your class disappearing?

Everybody knew whether or not if they had a high number or a low number and if they were going to disappear in six months or not, and anybody who was leaving within months just didn't come to class, so there was no way to tell how many of the students were there in any semester and didn't come to the next. P-Chem was just a year course so you wouldn't know, and anybody who was going to be drafted wouldn't have signed up for that course. The general chemistry course changed every semester to a whole new group so if anything happened to someone one semester unless they were somebody you knew closely, and as I say two students a semester would come and see me so I didn't get to know my class that well. In lab I saw them more than the lecture, but the lecture had the bigger numbers. So you didn't know if some of the students, the males were drafted for the next semester. It was always a fear, a cloud you lived under, it wasn't noticeable to me that students were under a pressure because of the draft.

I have a question about the airport expansion, actually.

Arcata-Eureka? Sure.

How was it different? Do you think it will be different now? Will more people come in, compared to what it was before?

There is a mindset that my cousin's wife always gives me the devil for, that when I came here first in '56 , about '57 I decided that what we needed to do is blow up all the bridges on the 101 and 299 and never let anybody else in here at all, so I get the feeling with someone like that when they talk about expanding the airport and straightening the mountain on 299 and expanding industry.. . (Here the first side of the tape ends) ... so on changing things in Humboldt I have a strong inclination in leaving things alone and keep industry out, but at the same token somebody had made the point that Humboldt county's biggest export has been our children. Both of mine have left the area—one's in Illinois and one's in Louisiana—and that's sad when you can anticipate instead of your children following somewhat in your footsteps they're gone from your day to day life. So I understand the motivation for doing more and better things, industrial ... or more jobs. The loss of the timber industry is one of those bittersweet sorts of things. The children of those people in the timber industry have to find something else to do, and there's large numbers of them. The children of the fishing industry have to find something else to do and, again, fair numbers of them. There are no sheep in Humboldt county except for three, I think. Times are changing and the diversity in the county, or diversity in general, is good and we don't seem to be doing anything to increase that diversity. Just tourism is not enough. So I don't know. I think my general feeling is that I'd like to keep us isolated, and I know it's selfish but that's the way I am.

What about the environment on campus—because from the football field you can see the forest—how has it changed throughout the years?

A little bit as I said earlier that when we first came here there were very many fewer buildings on campus and you could see ... I mean Siemens Hall was not there, it used to be a Co-op. This building was a dorm (Nelson Hall); the bookstore and the UC (University Center) were not there. Where the Siemens Hall is there was a maybe 700-square foot old house that we called the "Coop."⁴ It was the Co-op and you just went there to get coffee and donuts, and it was plenty for 1500 or 1000 students and it's not the same now. But you could see everywhere, and the groundskeeping was done with the same level of enthusiasm then as it was now and so with the bigger open space, all of which was essentially manicured, it was really pretty. But it's pretty out here now, I mean this is a pretty campus and it always has been. It's a wonderful thing to leave your building and just walk to the library, or just walk around and look at the flowers coming out this time of year, it's just a wonderful place to be. It would be nice to have better views and one suggestion would be to eliminate a couple of those fir trees just down from Founders Hall so that you could see the north bay. You get up there now and there's this hedge, but I can live with that and most likely everyone else can too. It's a beautiful place.

⁴ Here Dr. Hanson, to indicate what students called the building, pronounced it like a chicken coop.

During your time here I know that you made lots of connections with students. Did any students stand out in your mind?

There has been a number of exceptional students and I can think of a few, but instead of mentioning their names, because there is a number that were truly outstanding, that I'm afraid that I've forgotten some of them, and if I mention a few I don't want to pick a few and leave out some others that should be mentioned at the same time. But I have been blessed with a significant number of really good students and it's just been a joy to have them as part of my past. And in general I don't want to focus on particular individuals, the classes in general have just been, they had to work like the devil and did so, and with almost, in fact I can't think of an exception—they would grouse about how much work it was and I knew it was a lot of work—but they took it in good spirit and they benefited by it I believe. Every group of people, some are better intellectually than others in some things, and that showed up in P-Chem as everywhere. So I'd rather not mention the best of the students I had in the years I was here. As I say, there were a serious number of them, but I fear I will forget too many of them if I start to enumerate.

The budget cuts, how do you feel about them now?

It was time for me to leave, there was no question about it and I could blame the Governor and the budget and everything else, but it was time for another generation to take this on, but it does hurt to see the restriction in class sizes and the elimination of support personnel and faculty from the programs on the campus, especially FERPing (last word unclear). For me, when I started we didn't have much money, but we didn't have many students and every year we had more and we had more and we had more, and it became just expected of us—"Don't worry about that being gone or missing, we'll get it, just wait a year or two and that money will become available, and we'll take care of it." And that's what happened but that's not going to happen anymore. Now what we are trying to do is "can we just hang on for little bit longer" That's sad to see. That's really sad to see.

Are you still involved with the campus here?

Not really, I mean I come around once a month to see if I've got some mail and I will mention Carol Lasco on the faculty. Every time I stop by my mail to see her, she looks at me and says "Oh Merv what are you doing here? You're coming in and your face is smiling, it's all tanned and you look like a million dollars, and we're just being hammered. I hate to see you ..." I kind of look down the hall and if she's around I kind of hide, but it is that sort of thing that I really was blessed with a magic time that is no more, and it's difficult to get to optimistic about the future. I don't know. Times are bad here and it's hard to get too optimistic about the future.

If you could change one thing out of your career here, what would it be? Besides having students come to your office hours?

I can't think of a thing....I can't think of a thing that I would change. It was just all good.

Was there any situation where a student was not getting a passing grade and they offered anything to you, maybe money or maybe sexual favors?

There's scuttlebutt always going around like that, and I always wondered what was wrong with me because I never had the opportunity to sin and I always felt somehow cheated that I

never got tested that way (laughter). Maybe that's one of the things that I would have changed. The question never came up and I saw a large number of students. General Chemistry was always 170, and that was twice a year. P-Chem it was a never a question.

Anything else..

Not that I can think of. It still is great place and I feel blessed that I got to spend my life here, and I was.