An Interview with

SAM L. AGRON

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

November 26, 1991
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GILBERT COHEN:  This is Tuesday, November 26, 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I am back. I am
interviewing Professor Sam Agron, professor of America’s geology in the College of Arts and
Sciences. Professor Agron started in Rutgers in 1951. And we will then be proceeding with
further background. Hey, we’re back. I was asking you before if you could give us a biographical
sketch of your academic career before and since Rutgers. [Laughs] After Rutgers. During
Rutgers.

SAM L. AGRON:  My bachelor’s degree was from Northwestern University, B.S. in geology.
And I received that in 1941. I worked that summer for an engineering construction—worked
doing geological work, on the Delaware Aqueduct in the Hudson Valley, New York. And there
was a hiatus of several years. Naval officer in World War II. Following the war, I returned to
geology studies. I did some summer fieldwork in geology in 1946 at the Colorado School of
Mines. And then entered the Johns Hopkins University in the fall of ’46. I got my Ph.D. there in
the spring of ’49. I was then appointed to an instructorship at Brown University. I had a two-year
appointment with a promise for promotion if all went well. And I thought that things were going
along pretty well teaching undergraduate and graduate work and doing research. And the Korean
War broke out, and the president put a freeze on all promotions. And my chairman said that they
could not promote me as they had promised because of the freeze, but could give me a small
grant and an increase in pay. And I said, “Well, that was not the condition that I came here
under.” And I would be looking elsewhere.

Word got around that I was seeking employment, and I was called at my home by Dean
Woodward, and he invited me to come to Newark. I came for an interview. We spent several
hours together. And Woodward, of course, was a geologist, a very, very good geologist.
Incidentally, Appalachian geology mostly, but an erudite gentleman, scholarly man. He offered
me an assistant professorship. And it was essentially a one-man department. He told me that this
is a challenge. It’s up to you as to whether you can make a go of it or the thing folds. And I saw
the urban setting of the campus, which was essentially 40 Rutgers Street on McCarter Highway.
And he described the kind of students they had there and sort of what the brief history had been.
And I saw what the man himself was like, and I thought this would be a very engaging challenge.
There was something I could do to contribute here, perhaps even more than at a place like Brown
University, where many of the students were from privileged families, had been exposed to a lot
of stimulating and fine things in life. And I could make a bigger contribution here with these
students.

I’ve never regretted it, having accepted the job. And it turned out to be just that, very,
very exciting and very, stimulating, challenging career. And I’d like to think that I’ve been of
considerable help to many people that have come through here, students as well as junior faculty.
My starting salary was $4,000 a year. [Laughter] There’s been a little inflation since then.
COHEN: Yes. And there’ve been a few promotions since then.

AGRON: And I heard some afterwards that full professors were getting $6,000 a year, and I thought, gee, you know, it wouldn’t be bad if someday I might attain that and be able to reach that salary level. So you see how modest our fiduciary skin was worth at that time. [Laughs] I taught associate all of the courses here for the geology major: the introductory course, physical and historical geology, mineralogy, petrology, paleontology, structural geology. And so on. And then other electives as they were introduced. And I was able to have a part-time laboratory assistant, Robert Finks, who was then a graduate student at City College, and he later became full professor of geology at Queens College. He’s a Columbia Ph.D. and a rather good paleontologist. Incidentally, my predecessor in the department was Robert Bates, Robert L. Bates, whose father was acting dean of the college, Squire Bates they called him.

COHEN: Madison Bates, yes.

AGRON: Madison Bates, a professor of English. And I had the pleasure of meeting him. He was a lovely, fine gentleman. And his son, Bob Bates, was a very distinguished geologist. He, as I understand it, Woodward told me, that he felt that the probability of developing geology here was not very good. And he had an offer to go to Ohio State University, which he accepted. And, of course, became full professor and had a distinguished career. I was able to hire part-time laboratory assistants over the ensuing years. And after about two or three years, I hired an instructor, an Irving Tesma [sp], who was from the Buffalo area. He stayed with us two years and returned to his home grounds in Buffalo, where he has recently retired as emeritus professor of geology.

And as the number of majors grew, the need for more help was evident. I think the first class there were 40 students taking general geology. I taught them lecture, as I said. And I was able to get six of them to major in geology. Well, that was enough to set the ball rolling, and we went on from there. Some of the other early people who were hired were Bill Wiles, William Wiles, who was perhaps the best lecturer I’ve ever seen. He was a master at the blackboard. He was a Columbia Ph.D. Did work in geomorphology and micropaleontology. Worked on the Douglas Johnson, an outstanding geomorphologist at Columbia University. He reached the rank of associate professor here, I believe, and unfortunately died in an accident, soon after an accident, in Newfoundland, where he was doing some fieldwork. Very tragic. He was a rather young man and left a widow and a son of about 12 at the time. As good as he is, I had to fight a very, very difficult battle to have him granted tenure because the then dean, Gilliland, for some strange reason was opposed to it.

COHEN: Okay, we were talking briefly—you mentioned Professor Wiles. And I’ve heard on several occasions from a number of people of his really superior teaching technique. And particularly at the blackboard. I heard that mentioned. If you could describe just what Professor Wiles did and what was his method.

AGRON: Well, Wiles was an erudite fellow. He spoke beautifully. He was a very engaging personality. He seemed to be sympathetic to students. He was a good listener. Had a great sense
of humor. A few little idiosyncrasies that I think students liked. Wiles being of Scottish descent would sometimes wear a gaudy plaid Tam o’ Shanter and things of that sort, in the field, on fieldtrips, and the kids would love that.

COHEN: In the classroom?

AGRON: No, not in the classroom. [Laughter] He was actually a superb lecturer, just held your attention. He was very good at the board and a master artist you might say. His illustrations were the equivalent of the best you’d see in textbooks—sketches and maps and diagrams, perspectives. And I think perhaps he was not as active in his publications as some people might have wanted. But maybe one can’t have it both ways fully. You cannot have an extraordinary, an exceptional teacher, so gifted, and also a very extraordinary researcher. This man had an outgoing personality. You know I think we were fortunate to have had him with us for the years that he was with us.

COHEN: You mentioned before that he was given a hard time when it came to promotion, to tenure. Could you go into that and some detail. Why he was given a hard time?

AGRON: Yes. I remember consulting with Bill Gilliland who was then dean. And his office was on the second floor of the Washington Street building. Was it 22 Washington? Something like that. Adjacent to the Newark Museum. And I had an appointment, came into the office, and there he sat with his feet propped up on the mahogany desk and his chair tilted back with his hands held behind his head, as he listened to me present arguments as to why Bill Wiles should be given tenure as associate professor of geology. And then he said, “Let me give you some advice.” And this was gratuitous advice. I never asked him for it.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

AGRON: He said, “If you want to have a good department, there are two things you’ve got to do.” Now I should interject here that in all the years that Woodward was dean, he never gave me any advice as to how to have a good department. He never would say it. And I thought up to that time the department was coming along very nicely. And we had moved into the new campus. We had a half dozen or so staff members, quite a few offerings, and fine facilities now, laboratories, collections, whatnot. And here was this newcomer who hardly knew the scene giving me advice. He said, “If you want to have a good department, in promoting staff and retaining staff, you have to be ruthless.” I was a little taken aback. And I said to him, “Well, I’ve always operated under the philosophy that if I deal fairly with each member of my staff, the department will come out all right.” And I felt we’d had a good department up to that point. And his second bit of advice was—he put it this way: He said, “I’ve been around quite a bit. And I think I’ve gotten pretty far. And I’ll tell you how you get far.” He said, “Don’t do anything if you can get somebody to do it for you.” [Laughter] It was impressions like these that helped me shape my idea of our new dean. Although he had my loyalty absolutely in all my dealings with the faculty, committee meetings and students, staff, so on, I was beginning to wonder about where this man was coming from.

COHEN: William Gilliland, yes. What was it like—what were the facilities like in the old Rutgers campus? How would you characterize them?
AGRON: Kind of…. The main building, of course, 40 Rector Street, was a converted building. Was it Rheingold? I’m not sure.

COHEN: Ballantine.

AGRON: Ballantine!

COHEN: That’s their Newark brewery.

AGRON: A Newark family, yes. Ballantine. And I think where the old library was, something like that. They had the old vats where the hops were fermented into beer [laughs] several decades earlier. The building contained in the early days, of course, the University of Newark and the law school. The law school was, I think, in what was later the library, part of it. Then it was already part of Rutgers University in the late forties. The law school had moved elsewhere, and it was the College of Arts and Sciences. It was an old brick building of about three stories, and then a tower that went up a total of six stories with 12-foot-high ceilings. So that they were really double landings as you went from the fourth to the fifth and fifth to the sixth floors. The total footage was about 50,000 square feet. And that essentially was the campus. Later some small additional buildings around the periphery were included. And I can touch upon that if you wish. The library was in the building as well as all the classrooms and laboratories and offices.

As far as geology was concerned, the facilities were all in the tower on the fifth floor. But as the landings were 20 feet between floors there, from four to five it was at least the equivalent of a six-story walk-up. We had one classroom building that filled 40 seats and one laboratory building—Excuse me. We had one classroom of 40 seats and adjacent to it a laboratory room with four square tables about five feet on a side, so that we sat about eight people around each table; we could seat, 32 to almost 40, I suppose, in that room. And that room was used as a lab and doubled as a classroom also. There was a small office in which was also contained the departmental library, largely the personal collection of Woodward, many reprints. And during the thirties, in the WPA days, when Woodward taught geology, he had student help, the federal program. Students were paid about 25 cents an hour at that time. And they would bind the reprints and put titles on them and keep the collection in order. It was a really respectable collection for a department during those prewar years.

Then we had a little closet which was perhaps at most four feet by three feet. And in there we had trays of minerals, rocks and fossils, and a workbench and a few odds and ends. And we would make up our materials for labs in that room—closet, workroom. It was a very, very congested space. And we had maybe 80 students at a time on that fifth-floor level: 40 in the classroom and approximately 40 in the lab. And those rooms were used almost ‘round the clock because, see, the labs were three-hour labs. And sometime later when more space was made available, the little brick building across the street was purchased. It was known as the Razor Blade Factory because that’s what it had been. And it was converted to the physics department. And some other outlying buildings were acquired for offices and so on. And so space became less tight. And the fourth floor, the level before mine, fifth, which was—the lab was analogous to the fifth floor, but it was used by biology. And they also had a larger third floor and a set of labs
there and offices. And they didn’t need their laboratory room very often on the fourth floor. Many students were reluctant to take geology because of the steep climb to the fifth floor. It was the equivalent of six floors—stairs. So we had to fight the difficulty. And I asked him whether it would be possible to schedule some of our lecture classes, some of the elective courses, on the fourth floor when those rooms were not in use. And we were granted permission, and I think a couple of the classes, lectures, sort of lecture sections, were scheduled there. But alas, it never came to pass because a certain member of the then biology department heard of this and stormed into the dean’s office, and flailing his hands in the air and shouting, causing Woodward to back down and rescind that permission. And those rooms were empty, and we cooped up there on the fifth floor and could not use them. This person simply did not want to grant any quarter to the geology department and make it the least bit more livable for us.

COHEN: What department?

AGRON: It was a combined biology department. The sterling character shall be nameless in this account. Above my department on the sixth floor when I arrived was the physics department. And there was a chap there who after a year or two left for I think St. Olaf’s College in Minnesota, and Charlie Pine took over the job as chairman very capably. And very soon moved across the street, and that space became available. And the Animal Behavior Institute was located up there for a number of years with Danny Lehrman, the great founder of the institute, who was for a number of years the only member of the National Academy of Sciences of this university. And I remember the countless birdcages that they installed because they did their early researches mostly on the dove. And as we didn’t have an elevator, they had to carry the endless sacks of bird feed up to the sixth floor [Laughter] equivalent to eight flights of stairs. And you can imagine the odor. It’s the equivalent of having a chicken farm up there, you know. [Laughter]

COHEN: Above the library.

AGRON: Yes, above our department overhead. But Lehrman was a wonderful neighbor nevertheless. He was just an extraordinary person and, again, tragically he passed away much too soon. I used to see him. He was a very heavy man. He was close to 300 pounds. And he wasn’t very tall. And I used to see him laboring up the stairs and pausing and catching his breath and huffing. I felt sorry for him. And of course eventually he did die of a coronary in New Mexico, summer vacation. I don’t know if you want me to say any more about the physical facilities.

COHEN: No, that’s a very good description.

AGRON: There’s just one thing, a little bit.

COHEN: Sure.

AGRON: At this point I might mention the safety committee.

COHEN: Go ahead. Yes. I mean I think this was really, the country it was important.
AGRON: Yes. There was little attention paid to safety in the early years. There just wasn’t the awareness that developed later. But as we came aware of some hazards—and perhaps I proselytized in that sense because my previous decade I had been in the Navy, and I was the damage control officer, among other things, on a minesweeper. And I had to learn damage control and safety measures and firefighting and so on. And I had been indoctrinated in the awareness of hazards. And I could see them around us. A safety committee was organized. Its purview was the entire Newark facilities of Rutgers, which included the law school which was then in some old wooden colonial residence, converted residence. It’s now probably where the Prudential Building is next—north of the Newark Museum. Or the BlueCross, I’m sorry. BlueCross. And also the College of Pharmacy on Broadway. We had to inspect those facilities. And we inspected the laboratories and the classrooms, the stairways, the offices. Virtually every space, storerooms, and we did find hazards. We found one secretary who used to leave her hotplate, on which she heated her lunch I suppose, plugged in. And during the day she kept it in the bottom drawer of her desk.

COHEN: Plugged in.

AGRON: Plugged in. There were papers and other things in the drawer as well. [Laughter] So we figured these are the kinds of things that the average person is not aware of. And there were—in the chemical labs and so on and so forth, we cooperated with the faculty, of course. We made monthly inspections and then typed out their checklist. And there would usually be 40 to 60 problems that we would send to a four-man committee would go on and each one saw things a little differently. And these would have been given a copy to the dean’s office and one to Mr. Clark, Edwin Clark, who was then superintendent of plant, physical plant. And bring carpenters and others. Tripping hazards, electrical plugs, whatever, broken this, broken that. They would have to try to repair it during the month. The biggest concern was the fact that 40 Rector Street there were no fire escapes.

COHEN: That’s right.

AGRON: And that central tower that I referred to, which had above the general height of the rest of the building extended up to the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors, a distance of maybe 30 feet above the rest of the structure. You had a central staircase which was like a winding staircase, although it was not curved. It was squarish. But there was this chimney, you might say, in the central space in that stairwell that was maybe at least ten feet across, square in outline, and it extended from the street floor up to the roof through the sixth floor. But remember those are really eight floors. And you have chemistry laboratories on the I think fourth floor—first floor, first floor, right down on street level.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

AGRON: Chem labs.

COHEN: And then there were biology labs, full of volatile and other agents stored in the building. And of course the library was right adjacent to the stairway with all of the paper. And I felt if you had a fire, the flames would shoot right up this well, and there would be no way of
escaping. There’d be no way we could get out. And you had people on the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors. And actually I kept track of the number of students, we figured so many per room, so many sessions in the day, there were actually perhaps a couple of thousand students a day that used the rooms off of that central stairway. And occasionally you would hear of disasters in public buildings. I was very concerned. And I asked the superintendent of plant and the dean and so on, could they get a staircase, a fire escape built? No, New Brunswick would never give us the money for that. They tried. They were turned down. And I asked Mr. Clark what—would you approve my having a rope ladder inside my office window so that in case of fire I could throw it out the window, six-story drop. He said, “No, that is not an approved way of egress.” [Laughter] Well, this problem concerned us more and more. And you’d hear of an occasional tragic consequence. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We’re back. You wrote a letter to the president….

AGRON: I wrote a letter to the president, who at that time was either Mason Gross or Lewis Webster Jones. I don’t recall. Probably Gross. And I wrote, of course, as resident, chairman of the geology department resident of that tower and as chairman of the safety committee. I sketched out exactly what the dangerous situation was, the number of people, the great number of students and staff who are at risk. And I said to him simply that if a fire did occur, he has now been put on notice the university will certainly be held to account and the administrators personally. Following that letter, in just a matter of weeks, workmen appeared to start the construction of the fire escapes. And they built them on the south wall of the building right in the classrooms. The walls there are brick, and I would say about two feet thick. And they had to break through the walls for the door and then to put the fire escape in. Occasionally, when I drive by the building on McCarter Highway, going to Penn Station or the airport of whatever, I glance to my right and see those fire escapes. And it’s one of the minor [laughs] things that I’m proud of.

You know the building was very noisy. The traffic on McCarter Highway was extremely heavy, truck traffic, and it was right under the windows. And when we had—there was no air conditioning, and when the windows were open to get some air, sometimes our conversation was drowned out by traffic noise. The students put up with a lot, but they were good students, and they appreciated the opportunity to get a good education. By way of compensation, I would sometimes look out of my office window to the north and east, and I could see the river traffic on the Passaic River. I saw barges and tugs and boats carrying gypsum and gravel and other freight up the Passaic River. [Laughter] So that was an interesting diversion.

COHEN: What role did you play in the planning of the new campus? You were on the planning committee you mentioned before?

AGRON: Yes. I was involved from the…. Can you erase that? [Break in recording]

COHEN: Oh, you want to go back to something? Yes, sure.

AGRON: Yes, I’ll pick up this point and two more interesting things that should be mentioned. When we were in the old building, I can still remember seeing Mason Gross walking through our
hallways. He would visit the campus frequently. I don’t know if it was weekly although it could have been. He would visit with Dean Woodward and peek into other rooms and walk down the halls. And sometimes stop and chat with faculty. I once bumped into him in the hallway and said I had a story that I thought he would enjoy. And he said, “Tell me! Tell me!” And I said, “Well, a couple of weeks ago I was with my students on a three-day fieldtrip, geology students, on a three-day fieldtrip through New England. And one of the places we visited was near Boston, Squantum, where a famous tillite—a kind of rock—deposit is exposed in a cliff. And geologists thought at that time that this may be evidence of glaciation that existed in the Boston area a couple of hundred million years ago. And I thought, among other things, that students would like to see that. We made a detour, and we were surprised to find that there was a chain-link fence all around it.” I’d been there several years earlier, and it wasn’t there at the time. And it was now a Nike base, N-I-K-E, I believe. These were missiles, antiaircraft missiles, one of the earliest missile defense systems. And there was a jolly, ruddy Irish watchman standing there. He said, “No, you can’t go in there. It’s barred to the public.” And I left my students in three or four cars and was standing in front of his guard shack talking with him. And he said, “Where are you from?” And I said, “We’re from Rutgers University in New Jersey. And, gee, we came so far, and this is one of the highlights of the trip. My students will be very disappointed.” And he said, “Rutgers University, huh?” He said, “Isn’t that where this guy Gross, Mason Gross, is?” And Mason Gross was then the provost under Lewis Webster Jones. And he knew of him. I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, I watch him on the Herb Shriner Show on television.” He said, “Oh, I love the man!” He said, “Did you ever meet Mason Gross?” And I said, “Well, sure. And I’ve talked to him a few times.” He said, “You have? Oh, you people can go in.” He opened the gate wide and let us all in. So I told that story to Mason Gross and he roared with laughter. [Laughter]

At the same time, I recall, while we’re still on the building, when I arrived at Rutgers in the first few years of my stay here, and the president was Robert Clothier for whom Clothier Hall Dormitory in the men’s college is named. Herbert Woodward told me that he was rather disappointed and felt very slighted that Clothier, who was a member of the board of directors of the Prudential Insurance Company of America, used to come to the monthly meetings of the board; the insurance company would send a chauffeured limousine to New Brunswick, bring him to Newark, and take him back. And the Prudential Building, world headquarters, was perhaps a quarter of a mile away from 40 Rector Street. And in those years that he made monthly visits to Newark, he never set foot in the building. He never saw his own branch of Rutgers. And that indicated, of course, the interest that the highest administrator of the university took in Newark. And Woodward, it hurt him. He fought for Newark; he was proud of it. He started his teaching career here, and he was totally dedicated to it. And he felt that whenever he tried to present our needs to them and argue for our needs, he was rebuffed. I think he used the expression that he felt he was kicked in the teeth.

I told you that in the department we had one small storeroom in which our teaching collections were for laboratory and other supplies were kept. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We’re back with Dr. Agron.

AGRON: Just one more recollection here. In the department when I came, we had no petrographic microscopes. These are microscopes that use polarized light to study minerals and
rocks and crystals and so on and so forth. And a geologist really can’t do work without them. And even advanced undergraduate students should learn to use them. But our budget did not permit purchase of one. And then I learned that Columbia University was buying new microscopes. And they had five Leitz petrographic microscopes, vintage early 20th century. But they were still quite usable. And the petrologist there—his name escapes me, also deceased; he was a brilliant South African petrologist—offered to sell them to me for $600, like $120 apiece, which was about one fifth the price at that time. They were to be reconditioned. And I approached Woodward with this. I said, “This is a chance of a lifetime, you know, for us to acquire five of them at just $600.” Well, there wasn’t $600 in the budget. So Woodward took his case to the president of the university. [Laughter]

COHEN: Oh, my God!

AGRON: Great suspense. And came back with the good news: Newark had been given a gift of $600 to buy these used microscopes.

COHEN: This was what year again?

AGRON: It must have been in the late fifties, late fifties. And we thought we were so fortunate. [Laughter] And we did make excellent use of them. Excellent use of them. So this is an indication of what things were like.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: Now I think you wanted me to get into the building efforts.

COHEN: Yes. Well, you mentioned you were on the planning committee.

AGRON: Yes.

COHEN: What was your role in the planning process?

AGRON: I was involved in the planning of the campus from its inception. There were many meetings of department chairmen, particularly those departments that had special space needs, facilities. And that involved the sciences more than anything else, I guess. And the librarians were being asked, too. And we met with Dean Woodward again. And he should probably be considered the father of the new campus because he was in on all of the difficult groundwork that had to be done for years. And he supervised it very, very well. But almost like the proverbial Moses, he was never permitted—and mark that word permitted because I may refer to it—admitted to the enter Promised Land when this campus was completed. In the beginning we weren’t sure where it should be located. Some people argued that Washington Park would be ideal because they already owned a building on the southeast corner, I believe, Washington Street, which the school of business occupied.

COHEN: Yes, Washington Place. Yes.
AGRON: Washington Place.

COHEN: Yes, Washington Place and Washington Street.

AGRON: That’s it. And also…. And incidentally—there’s a digression—I taught an astronomy course for many, many years, beginning in the old building. And we used to have evening observations with a telescope. The telescope was a very nice refractor, four-inch, I believe, with an iron tripod which was given to us by New Brunswick. It wasn’t in use then and the observatory sealed up. And we kept it in a metal locker at the top of the roof landing, this school of business building. So we’d meet up there on the roof at night, and we’d go out on the roof, set the telescope up, and then store it again in that metal closet.

So back to the planning of that area. Woodward thought that might not be a bad location. It’s convenient to transportation and town. And then the Veterans Administration Building at one time was up for sale. And they could have bought it, but they couldn’t or didn’t come up with the money.

COHEN: That was considered adequate space for the new campus? I mean was that a consideration for the new campus?

AGRON: No, that would be, you see, on the initial phase. The buildings that…the land where the BlueCross Building is now, beside it, was owned by the university. The law school building was there, and the bookstore was there in old frame houses. And the university later swapped that land for perhaps the old YWCA Building, which was 23, I believe, Washington Street. But the university already had a foothold and several other parcels on James Street perhaps. And they thought they might be able to expand around it. And so it was like Washington Square is for NYU, this would be for us.

COHEN: Near the Newark Public Library.

AGRON: It’s possible. It’s not unreasonable. Yes, it’s not unreasonable. And then some people said no, let’s—Newark is depressing, this, that, and the other. Let’s get out to suburban Essex County. And they were considering the facilities in Cedar Grove, I think, the county institution there up on the mountain. There was a TB sanatorium or something at one time, and there were a lot of structures already present. And that would be a spacious campus and so on and so forth. Woodward felt that this, the mission of this campus, is to serve the urban center of the state, which is located here. And that we should be at the hub of transportation, which was Newark: bus lines and trains radiate out from Newark. And so they finally decided to clear slum land, which was just back of, a couple of streets back of Broad Street and Washington Street. And they razed a lot of old dilapidated wooden residences.

COHEN: You’re talking about the current campus.

AGRON: The current campus.

COHEN: Part of the current campus.
AGRON: That’s where it’s located. The ground was cleared, and of course some people objected. They were displaced and so on. But they went ahead with the clearing of the ground. And I remember when they call it groundbreaking, I suppose, although it had been underway already, and the property, there was a fence around it. And there was a huge hole in the ground because they had razed the buildings and excavated down to where the cellars stood. And we all climbed down, and there was a ceremony. Mayor Hugh Addonizzio, who was mayor at the time, he pushed a shovel into the ground. It was a photo event, and so on, in the papers. That was the official dedication of construction of the building. Of course Addonizzio went on to become a congressman and later he went to jail for corruption.

COHEN: Maybe Addonizzio was the mayor, and maybe you’re thinking of the congressman from Newark who was Congressman’s Keane predecessor, Addonizzio.

AGRON: Addonizzio…. [Break in recording] We’re back now. And then we had to work with the architects. I guess several firms submitted competing plans and bids and so on. And I think Brad Partners were the architects. And then each of the department chairmen concerned worked with the architects to plan his own department, his space. And the first science building then was—

COHEN: Boyden.

AGRON: Boyden Hall, which was to be a four-story structure and was to house botany, zoology, and geology. Geology was to be up on the top floor. And I remember very, very heated battles within the Division of Natural Sciences, particularly led by one individual who made things very difficult for me. He tried to cut geology down. He thought geology should not have a whole floor. Give us half a floor. You don’t need—and of course we used it almost immediately and this would have presented an opportunity to also grow a little. And it was a battle that needn’t have taken place. It just contributed to the ill will and so on. But I was chairman, and defending the needs of my department had to oppose the people who struggled to cut us down. We had one floor then up on top of it. In order to plan the layout, the laboratories, classrooms, lecture rooms, the prep rooms, what I wanted, map rooms, collection rooms, and also the observatory because we were teaching astronomy. No, I’m sorry, it was not that an observatory. It was—yes. Okay, observatory. Because later a planetarium matter came up, and I might refer to that. I felt I could do a better job in planning if I had an opportunity to examine facilities that other departments had built, somewhat diverse situations.

And Dean Woodward told me that there would be a certain amount of money to cover travel for department chairmen so they can go and observe. I ran into John Kelsian who was planning in charge of the biology. I went as far as San Diego, you know. Spent some time out there, so on and so forth. I went to Franklin & Marshall College because I knew that that was one of the best little departments in the East. And I knew that they had just revamped their facilities and had many innovative things put in. I was going to check with them, find out what worked best, what wasn’t so good, so on and so forth. So I stopped there. For there I went out to the University of Pittsburgh, which had—let’s see—which had new facilities. And then I went to Indiana University, which had just completed a six-story geology building.
COHEN: Oh, boy!

AGRON: Six stories! And I got all of their plans and went over everything. They were graciously telling me all the pitfalls and so on and so forth. Finally I visited Northwestern University and saw what they had to say. And I tried to keep my expenses down. I went from place to place by bus because at that time they had bus trips, and it was cheaper than rail, you know. That kind of thing. When I got back and submitted my bill, which wasn’t much—I don’t know what in those days, well, a couple hundred dollars—Dean Woodward told me there was no more money left. And I never was reimbursed.

COHEN: [Laughs] …

AGRON: You know I was annoyed. But another administrator managed to reimbursed for a trip to the West Coast and so on fully, and there wasn’t— These are the little injustices. And I’ve always felt a person who has the power should not abuse people who have less power. You know, and just swallow that. Okay. But that was so helpful. And I think we had a layout that was excellent. It served us very well. It’s flexible. And it has permitted some modification. And other people later came to see it and study it and learn from it. I also tried to get money to build a planetarium for instructional use. And I applied to the National Science Foundation for a matching grant of $132,000, something like that. They were going to put up like $67,000 and the university 67. And I remember working late because I think 30 copies had to be sent to Washington before Christmas. And I think—or it had to be before New Year’s. And we worked Christmas Eve until well into the night. And I felt so badly because the secretary was helping with the typing, the collating, and got them in the mail, you know, and rushed to the post office. And sent the copies to New Brunswick and so on. And it came back the federal government was willing to go ahead, but Rutgers refused to match it.

COHEN: Oh!

AGRON: And they led me along for months. And I was planning, getting the catalogs, getting people and having the layout on the roof, the architectural plans, writing up, justifying... You know what it means for a grant…

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: And then they didn’t come up with the money.

COHEN: So the observatory that was eventually installed—

AGRON: That was built originally. That’s still there.

COHEN: It’s still there now. So what was the relationship between—

AGRON: That’s a telescopic in there, we used for observations, yea. But, you know, after we built it, they began to build more high-rise office buildings around here. There weren’t that many
as close when the campus was built. And the seeing conditions deteriorated. So that towards the latter years when I taught astronomy, it was still serviceable in helping students get oriented with respect to sky directions...altitude measurements, the brightest stars. And sometimes when you don’t see many faint stars, it’s easier to notice the constellation outlines. So it wasn’t all together useless, you see. And we could study the moon and the planets and some double stars and, you know, constellation work and the circumpolar motion around the poles. So we did make use of it.

COHEN: So this grant proposal was for a much more ambitious—

AGRON: No, it wasn’t, not at all. It was for a planetarium.

COHEN: A planetarium. I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I must have been....

AGRON: Yes, a planetarium.

COHEN: I’m confusing....

AGRON: And I had them build the foundation for us up on the roof.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: It’s up there, and if the cap is on them and so on, and we fully planned to have it, and they wouldn’t come up with the money.

COHEN: Yes. You mentioned Woodward—Woodward as the guiding person behind the new campus. What, in your perception, was his vision of the mission of the college once it moved to the new campus?

AGRON: Well, maybe in the back of his mind, he saw it as a sort of junior NYU. You know eventually it may be called to that kind of stature. But serving the metropolitan area of northern New Jersey. And you already had then a pharmacy college here. You had a business school, you had nursing, you had the College of Arts and Sciences. You had an engineering campus here. So there was growth potential. And indeed we were in the center of population which served an area at that time—a region of some, what, three and a half million people, the counties around here? And that’s what he felt, a special dedication, I think, to the urban student and the undergraduate. It was almost contagious, his view, what he could do to uplift the people. Now, I said he never got to see the Promised Land.

COHEN: Yes. Why? You had touched on this.

AGRON: He retired.

COHEN: He wasn’t permitted, you said.

AGRON: The last year that we were in the old campus, Gilliland became the dean. And then he was dean here, you remember.
COHEN: Right, right.

AGRON: Woodward asked me…. So the last year that we remained there, Woodward was emeritus now. And he told me, “Since I’m still fairly active in geology…” And he did consulting work, and he maintained his interest in the literature. And we had in the department a lot of his publications, his reprints, his collections, journals and so on; he gave to the university a lot of that material. He said, “Do you think it would be possible for me to have a small office? You could keep journals in there, and everyone could use them. I would like to be able to have access to the maps and so on.” And he helped build all of this, you know. And I said, “Why, of course. We’ll work it out.” This is the number one person in Newark. And I presented this to Gilliland who was then the dean, and he refused. He refused! I have, my jaw dropped. He refused to have him there.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

AGRON: And I couldn’t. And Woodward was just heartbroken.

COHEN: Mmm, yes. I can imagine.

AGRON: You know he died soon after.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: And at the dedication of Woodward Hall here, two years ago or so, I was talking to Woodward’s daughter and her husband. She was the sole survivor. And I was surprised to learn that Woodward, who was a benefactor to the department, he gave us so many collected materials and so on and so forth; but he had many specimens at home that he’d collected also: minerals and crystals and whatnot. And he gave them to Fairleigh Dickinson University.

COHEN: No kidding!

AGRON: I’d never known that. Now, I wonder, did he do that because we hurt him? And I went around with just a great sadness for a long time because I was the unwitting bearer of this awful news. But she told me, no. She said her mother…. [End of Tape #1]

COHEN: Ok. We’re back with Professor Agron, and we were talking about the gifts that Dean Woodward attempt to give to the university.

AGRON: Or rather his widow.

COHEN: His widow, yes.
AGRON: And his daughter said that her mother tried. She called New Brunswick and asked them to send a station wagon or truck over to pick up some of the collections that he had to donate to the department. And she called him several times, and they never came. So she thought they weren’t interested.

COHEN: Mmm.

AGRON: And I said to her, “Well, why didn’t you call Newark?” And she said, “Well….” Maybe she thought that’s the right department or office to call.

COHEN: Uh-huh.

AGRON: But that was the first I learned of it, and I was disappointed because I know he felt—of course, his dedication was here. But as I say, his successor treated him shabbily. Perhaps I should tell you something about the appointment of Gilliland.

COHEN: Yes. But before you get into that, I just wanted to get back to the question of the….

You mentioned before Woodward’s vision of the university.

AGRON: Oh sure.

COHEN: Of the university in Newark, serving the metropolitan, northeastern metropolitan New Jersey. Was any thought at the time given to recruitment of minority students living in the immediate area of the university, Newark and the surrounds?

AGRON: I think in the early fifties, in the early years, no. It wasn’t.

COHEN: Well, at the time that the new campus was being planned, was there any thought that you can recall given to what the university—if the university—would be making any special efforts to recruit from among—particularly among the black students in the schools in the city, that you’re aware?

AGRON: No, no, no. As far as I know, they were always welcome, as welcome as anybody. And I had the individual black students in my courses. And I was delighted, and I made special efforts to help, be helpful to them, because I felt they needed help, and I could related to you if you care, in some instances.

COHEN: Yes. Okay, good.

AGRON: Well, it may sound picayune, but this is just—it’s part of the day-to-day life of a university professor who may be, tries to be a decent human being at the same time. I’d like to think so. What comes to mind is a black woman who was in my geology lecture course, and she was taking—

COHEN: About what year was that roughly?
AGRON: Oh, it would’ve been maybe the early seventies, ’74. And she was taking a lab with one of the other professors, Dr. Garner actually. And she was a single parent with two daughters, teen-aged daughters, just junior high and high school at that age. And struggling. And I think she, her grade with me was about C. And I think at that time the departmental rule was in order to pass the course, you had also to pass lab. If you failed lab, you couldn’t—you’d have to at least get I guess D would be it—in lab to. And her lab average was one point below; it was 59 instead of 60. And she was a senior to graduate, and she came to me in tears and said that she’d majored in social work, and she was going to—she has a job as a social worker in a black area. And she struggled in school for six years or more, you know. A lot of sacrifice. And this means her job, her graduation and everything she had…. Would I please talk to the lab instructor? The average was 59.

COHEN: It seems close.

AGRON: …because I had a policy never to interfere in grading—never. But, you know, it’s by one point. [Laughs] And sometimes when you grade a paper….

COHEN: Oh, boy!

AGRON: So I did explain the situation to Garner. And he bristled with resentment at my interference.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: You know? And finally, reluctantly, he gave her a 60. But he never forgave me for having interfered. For having had the nerve…. Okay. So I’m a bad guy. She graduated, and she went to work. About two years later she visited me. Said she’s enrolled in the master’s program, Master of Social Work. Doing wonderfully.

COHEN: Here in Newark on this campus?

AGRON: I think it was.

COHEN: Uh-huh. Yes.

AGRON: Yes, they had a school.

COHEN: Yes. Sure.

AGRON: And at home one of her daughters was applying for college, and the other’s doing fine in high school. Now, that’s part of our mission, this kind of thing, you see. But sometimes you even have to fight your colleagues to get it done.

COHEN: Yes.
AGRON: And there have been others. This on the wall here, a picture of the famous alumni. This lady who—I bumped into her at an alumni function about maybe six, eight years ago. She graduated in ’55, I believe. And she immediately recognized—

COHEN: Who was that again?

AGRON: Johnson?

COHEN: Oh, okay.

AGRON: You know, ’55, it’s been a long time.

COHEN: Sure, sure.

AGRON: Her face looks familiar. But she came right over to me and told me how much—how wonderful the experience at this college was. And she’s successful, and I think she’s teaching in Morristown. And her husband’s a professional.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

AGRON: And there were others. Now there was one situation that was maybe not so good. This was years later after, you know, the takeover of the buildings and when we had charged feelings amongst some people, racial feelings perhaps. I would in class—when I returned exams, graded exams, I would—beginning of the next hour go over the test. And if they had any questions about the grading, about answers, they could ask me, and I would explain things that weren’t clear. And there was one fellow in the class. He happened to be the president of the BOS—is it?

COHEN: Black Organization of Students.

AGRON: On campus, Yes. This was in general geology class. Very handsome chap. But I had the impression he was a smart aleck and a person who maybe manipulated matters my impression of him. And so he raised his hand and asked a rather silly question that didn’t really pertain to what we were trying to do. But I answered the man as best I could. We went on. And then he asked another silly question. I think the third time he did that—it wasn’t really relevant. So I said to him, “I don’t think the questions are particularly relevant. If you want to see me in my office, I’ll be glad to go over your test with you and answer your question.” So he said in a sassy voice, “I don’t want to see you in your office.” [Laughs] And I went on.

COHEN: What kind of questions, was he asking? If you can recall.

AGRON: They weren’t to the point. They were—you could say just trying to be disruptive, funny. He failed the exam. He had about 40 so. He was trying to be uncooperative or something. So he made a rather sassy— And oh! There was a gasp from the class, you know. “I don’t want to see you in your office.” So I leaned forward over the lectern and said, “I don’t want to see you either. But if you’ll show up, I’ll talk to you.” [Laughs] And I went on.
COHEN: Was this before the takeover, the Conklin Hall takeover?

AGRON: No, it was after.

COHEN: After 1969, several years later, I think.

AGRON: And I tell you, he flunked the course. But this boy straightened out. I shouldn’t say boy, this chap, young man. He straightened out. And I met him later again at an alumni function. He was just as gracious as could be. I felt so proud that, you know, he’s a student and an alumnus here. And I thought in the back of my mind, you know, maybe this fellow needed somebody to just pull him up short. Nobody did, you see. And perhaps some people were abusing a perceived sense of power, they thought. Well, anyway, so that’s another case. But there were a number of students…. One of my students was Gary Swangin.

COHEN: Oh, yes, I know Gary.

AGRON: Alright? He was kind of drifting. I don’t know whether I should be so personal about his life. He was a student here. He took my astronomy course. And he didn’t know what to study. And I tried to assign topics for the term papers to whatever what people were particularly interested in or their major; I asked what their interests were. And he said—he’s a radio ham. I told him about radio astronomy. Oh, what is that? He didn’t know. And he did a superb paper on it—a superb paper. It was about 30 pages, the maximum I would read. But he really got into it. And he became so interested, that he went on to major in physics and took, you know, math courses. When an opening appeared at the Newark Museum Planetarium, I got the job for him.

COHEN: Oh, that was the connection, oh. I see.

AGRON: Yes. He became known in international circles among planetarium people. He was invited to Japan, to European countries. He was made a member of the Royal Astronomical Society.

COHEN: Is that right?!

AGRON: That’s what he told me.

COHEN: Oh.

AGRON: And, you know, recognized. And I think he did very fine work. Actually in the end I think they fired him. But that’s largely a personality clash with Sam Miller, the director of the museum, who, I have the impression, is interested in art rather than science. And maybe gave Gary a hard time, whatever. But his career took off. And Gary Swangin was so poor…. He was a radio ham. He lived in Morristown. His stepfather was a minister, a black minister. And he disapproved of his having a radio station in the house, transmitting and staying up late and so on. So he actually threw him out of the house.

COHEN: Oh!
AGRON: And the boy was a student of mine. He told me he was sleeping on the bench at Penn Station in Newark. He had no place to sleep at night.

COHEN: Oh. Who would’ve know.

AGRON: Yes.

COHEN: He was such a straight arrow.

AGRON: He was...And then he got part-time work... So I did what I could there. There was another chap who was of central European background. Bohemian, whatever. And got interested in geology. And he tried to study. His father was a machinist. And the father was very upset that he wanted to finish college. He said, “I’ve been a machinist. I’ve always made a good living that way. Not good enough for you?” This kind of thing. And the boy had to take the final exam. He came to me in tears in the morning. “I tried to study,” he said. “I had all my books on the table, and my father came into the room and with his arm swung them all down on the floor and...”

COHEN: Oh! Gosh!

AGRON: That’s the encouragement I got. I encouraged this chap to, talked to him. Things will be all right. He went into earth science teaching. He taught Jonathan Dayton, I think. Did very well married an earth science teacher. Did summer work in geology and gradually was hired and became, I think, a vice president of one of the biggest geological consulting—international geological consulting firms. Worked his way right up. There was another—Oh, yea, we taught geology in the evening here several years, the general course. And we taught it in summer school for seven years, I think. And the evening school I remember, you had more mature people. This woman was a girl from Jersey City, I think. Italian background. No member of her family had ever gone to college before. She worked, I think, in a hosiery store, selling, you know. And had been to night school for four years now and just drifting; didn’t know what to major in. Taking literature courses. And she fell in love with geology. She majored in it. She switched to day school and finished in two more years. She went on to take a master’s at Ohio State University. Was hired by the U.S. Geological Survey in Washington, I think. And of course later when her father died and her mother, a widow alone, couldn’t manage, she had to come home and accepted a teaching job and became head of the department or whatever in a high school. But again, the direction of her life was changed because of this. Another chap who was also chairman of the science department in a high school, came up through this way and, you know, they might not have had anyone show them that are other avenues open to you in life than being retail clerk, you know, if they have the ability they can do it. So every year you have opportunities to do things.

The summer session course, incidentally, I taught that when we first attempted it. And it involved teaching lecture five mornings a week, three hours each morning, nine to twelve. And hour for lunch, and then from one to four, three hours of lab, four days a week.
COHEN: Oh, boy!

AGRON: I think for the princely sum of $600 they paid me. [Laughter] And I had to get everything ready, have them do papers, take them on fieldtrips. Chemistry, physics, biology, they had lab assistants teaching the labs. So the lecturer got the same pay that I did, but he didn’t have to teach four afternoons a week. So when I presented that to the director of the summer session, he said, “Take it or leave it.” This is the double standard. A double standard. And then when we got an additional staff member, another one of these young people coming in, I was already there. You know, the old man. And I figured I’d give them an opportunity to earn a few hundred dollars more in the summer. So I let the younger people teach the summer courses after that. I did one or two years here. I also taught at Johns Hopkins. But by then they realized that they were unjust. They reimbursed them, they paid them for teaching labs. But I hadn’t been paid for that.

COHEN: Second, second bill…

AGRON: That was, you know, unconscionable. Unconscionable!

COHEN: Yes, yes.

AGRON: The way people were treated very often. Then of course— [Break in recording]

COHEN: I want to go back to the—you were saying…. You mentioned in passing the takeover of Conklin Hall. And I was wondering if you could…. Well, in the first place, we in your perception at the time in retrospect. What was the main grievance of the students who occupied the building?

AGRON: Well, you know, my memory on that may be hazy because there wasn’t a direct involvement of the geology department directly. I was involved as a member of the faculty on the part of the college. But there were no problems in my department.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

AGRON: What their grievance? I suppose being a white person, I cannot see it as they saw it. I just didn’t have the awareness that they had. I’m not aware of all the difficulties. From my point of view, there was no difference in the treatment of black or Puerto Ricans or what whites. Absolutely no difference. So I didn’t—as far as the functioning in my department is concerned, there’s no basis for grievance within my department.

COHEN: Sure.

AGRON: Now beyond that, I don’t know if things are justified. I always felt that our admission standards should be defensible. At the same time give opportunities to people who can make use of them. I know that there was a great deal of abuse soon after particularly this happened. People would register and never show up for class. They’d take, you know, money for books and then
they’d sell the books; they’d turn around the sell them. And all kinds of abuse. There were sharp operators.

COHEN: Could you go into that in some further detail, that you can recall?

AGRON: Just problems with students who—they’d be on the roster and you’d see them maybe the first day. And then they wouldn’t appear after that. And some of them, it was just pathetic. They just were not able to do the work. They didn’t comprehend the books, the lectures. And who are we kidding?

COHEN: Were they students that you had in geology, in your courses?

AGRON: Some of them, sure.

COHEN: Some of the students. Were they mostly black students or your students in general you’re talking about?

AGRON: Oh, you had good and bad students among all. I had excellent students. The complete spectrum of students. But if a white student can’t do the work and washes out or is struggling with it, he doesn’t say it’s because of race. You know he can’t accuse you unjustly or otherwise of discriminating. But here there was always the possibility that then they’d bring that up, and that’s not fair.

COHEN: Was that done in your experience, where race was introduced as a factor?

AGRON: I didn’t have it happen to me. But, you know, what you read in the press and so on.

COHEN: Yes. Mm-hmm.

AGRON: But obviously the schools didn’t prepare them. And, you know, it’s deception, it’s dishonest. But that’s the way they chose to go about it.

COHEN: Did you have any sense of the role of the Academic Foundations Department in preparing the students for the college curriculum?

AGRON: Well, my personal feeling is that that is not college work, remedial English and math.

COHEN: I mean but you did have any sense of—actually maybe phrase it—did you have any sense of how effective the Academic Foundations Department was in prepping the students so that they could deal with college level work.

AGRON: I make no mention as to that. I assume that they helped them. But I’ve heard from students who took remedial math and English that some of the teachers just were ripping off the system. And weren’t showing up for class.

COHEN: Teachers?
AGRON: Yes.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: Yes. Coming to class and reading the *New York Times* to the students. In a math class reading science articles from the *New York Times*. What that had to do with math, I don’t know. Maybe it is a discipline, remedial instruction. But it is not a college-level and university-level discipline. And we’re deceiving them. We’re not being honest. But who’s to say how to be honest? [Laughs] In a modern world. And we let this…. Our faculty used to vote on these things. But it was not right to regard the remedial work instructors and assistant professors as the equivalent to the regular academic instructors. And they are. Right? Salary and so on. And I think that helped to introduce problems. Faculty—there were enough problems to begin with.

COHEN: What were the big issues among the faculty on the issues of scholastic standing, I guess the curriculum and the admissions standards?

AGRON: Oh, there were all kinds of things that were going on. You know at one time people in the social sciences and humanities went on the warpath. And they resented that science courses are four credit courses without really understanding the situation. They had the votes and in the faculty, and they voted all courses in the catalog were three-credit courses now.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

AGRON: …So science labs, well, if you want to get a course for science, you have to reduce three lectures a week down to two. So science instructors—science courses—will be two lectures a week and a lab. And anyway some science labs are not college work; that’s shop work. This is the attitude that I heard among faculty. So this passed. It lasted about—I don’t know if it lasted more than a year, maybe two years. And pretty soon the accrediting organizations said uh-uh. The bio course, the chem course, the geology course, that you take two lectures a week, that will not be acceptable in med school, professional schools; that’s substandard. So they had to go back and change it.

COHEN: Oh.

AGRON: So we had meetings, strategy meetings, you know. The Division of Natural Sciences got together, big brains, and they said, Well, you know, it may be tough to get this through. Let’s not fight for everything at once. Let’s leave geology alone. We’ll keep that as a three-credit course. But the other lab sciences, we’ll ask them to make those four-credit courses as before. And we’ll give them this: Geology will be a sacrificial lamb.

COHEN: What year was this about that you’re talking? New campus, old campus? You said the division. I mean by the time the new campus was….

AGRON: I thought it was just before we moved into—
COHEN: Just before you moved into the new campus.

AGRON: I think so, yes. Probably sixties. And I said, “I will fight you on this. It’s wrong. There’s no reason to single out this course—the instructor of the course, the subject matter and so on is just the equivalent of any other. And if you do this to geology, you have no right to change the others.” And they were willing to betray me. See, they’ll sell you if it’ll do them some good. After a while you become disillusioned. People don’t have some of the, well, ethical standards that you’d like to expect. So I told them that I would fight them on this. And I will urge the non-science people to vote it down. They know where I stand. And I talked to a number of my colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, and I convinced them that justice demands that this be treated the same as the others, the other sciences, other science courses, they’re equivalent courses.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: They could see it. But my own colleagues couldn’t. And it came up for a vote in the faculty, and they voted to treat all of the science courses the same. And my own colleagues were shown up to be the weaklings that they were on this matter.

COHEN: Why did the humanities and social sciences people object to the courses carrying more credits? I don’t quite know. Whether it’s a question of staffing or—

AGRON: Well, you know, I suppose…. A lot of it is not understanding what a science course is like. Many of them maybe didn’t do well in science. Maybe they had an innate hostility to science. I don’t know. When a professor can get up and say that science labs are nothing more than shop courses, you know that he has no comprehension of science. And there is always jealousy. There was rivalry and, you know, probably lines and all that.

COHEN: I wanted to…we touched on students here and there, of course, and students being sort of the heart of the whole thing. But what’s your perception of the changes in the level of preparation of the student body through the seventies, from the old campus to the new campus? Through the seventies, the eighties.

AGRON: We’ve always had well-prepared students. We always were lucky to have those—and even brilliant students. Comparable to the best of any Ivy League schools. But from my point of view, I would say that the level declined. There was a larger proportion of students who had difficulty reading comprehension, so on and so forth. Also the percentage of the student population that went into business, economics and business, increased greatly. I think it’s close to half, is it?

COHEN: Somewhere around there, yea.

AGRON: Now this is awfully skewed, awfully skewed. So you have a very small percent of the student population who are interested in the hard disciplines. They’re what society needs. We don’t need experts on financial takeovers. And this was evident: that you had fewer students who
loved learning, who had wonder in their eyes about the world and wanted to learn, eager to absorb. Used to see more of that.

COHEN: Why was that? I’ve heard this from many people.

ARGON: Yes, yes.

COHEN: Why was that?

ARGON: Because I think money…. [Break in recording]

COHEN: I was asking—we were talking about the fact that the students’ interests have changed, and you were talking about students who used to have wonder in their eyes. You were speculating about why things have changed.

ARGON: They would come to my office after class whenever they could find… and stand next to my desk and talk about the cosmic questions that some of the lecture material opened up in their minds about the universe and the creation of life and the meaning of it all. And so you get less of that today. I think probably television has a lot to do with that. It’s superficial, things are presented in bytes, you know. Limited—little morsels of time. Money is much more important. And I guess they’re more interested in entertainment and music, …and all that, it grips them when they’re children, and they stayed with it.

COHEN: What changes…. Well, what changes did you see in the composition, the backgrounds, of the students, ethnic composition of the students? In general, if you can think of it.

ARGON: In geology ethnic composition changes? Hmm. Well, of course in the fifties, you didn’t see any blacks, I didn’t see any until probably in the late sixties. Because I guess, again, it hasn’t been part of their world in the inner-city and so on and so forth. And it’s still a problem. You don’t get enough representation. Departments are trying to encourage it. Also Puerto Ricans. There weren’t too many, few. And this location being what it is, we had a lot of representation among other ethnics: Polish people, Italian people, Jewish people, Irish, German. Whatever the mix was around here, you know.

COHEN: I wanted to touch on the curriculum, which is certainly such an important aspect of the whole thing. How did the curriculum—let’s say specifically with the curriculum in geology—how did it develop through the late sixties and into the seventies? What were you teaching and how were you teaching it? And what changes, if any, were occurring in what the department was offering?

ARGON: Yea. Well, in the fifties we were a traditional department. The students took physical geology, historical geology, mineralogy, petrology, paleontology, stratigraphy, structural geology. And then I added a course in mineral resources. Then astronomy was added. These were taken by non-majors as well. And I felt that there was a need to sort of the general student population. And if a student is interested in—is majoring in social sciences, whether it be
economics or history or political science—I felt it’s important for them to know how the world depends on oil and coal and steel and minerals and copper and uranium, gold and silver, and so on and so forth. And the role these have played in civilization, in the industrial revolution and in our world today. And indeed I would get students from—business majors, economics students, who appreciated this perspective that they got, that they would maybe not have gotten otherwise. And William Wiles taught a course in geomorphology. Then we had optical mineralogy, a laboratory course. As time went on, let’s say when we had the energy crisis, we introduced a course in fuel as an energy, which was very timely, a number of schools were giving that. Open to everybody. Then of course we also had our in-service institute which taught the equivalent of a year of introductory geology to secondary schoolteachers. And that was done outside of the college curriculum, funded by the National Science Foundation. But within the department itself we soon started a graduate program here. And I was the first director of that. Stayed in the position for, I don’t know, a half dozen years. And we were able to acquire the talents of people in the department of micropaleontology at the American Museum of Natural History, who taught courses in micropaleontology and palynology at the museum on Saturdays. Our students would go over there, and they had the laboratory facilities and microscopes.

COHEN: Oh, so they would go to the uh…

AGRON: Wonderful. And they did their dissertations there. And then we would bring in people from Lamont.

COHEN: These dissertations were at the masters level? Masters thesis?

AGRON: Yea, masters thesis…And we would be able to let them work on deep-ocean cores that required the Lamont-Doherty Observatory with ocean-going vessels, you see. And Bill Wiles also introduced a course in oceanology here, which was a very popular course. Now we introduced advanced courses to go with the graduate program in petrography, petrology, geochemistry. I introduced a course in environmental geology.

COHEN: So the faculty then went from the one-man department, namely you, to into the seventies, what was the department like?

AGRON: I think the most we had was either six or seven full time and a couple of part time, plus we had about seven graduate teaching assistants. So it was formidable…. At one time I think we had over 30 majors, and we had maybe 25 or more graduate students.

COHEN: Now, I don’t quite understand if there was that number—Well, let’s put it this way: Before the move to the new campus, to this campus, how many faculty members were there in the geology department, roughly?

AGRON: Oh, let’s see. Wiles and I think Charlie Hamilton, myself, and I think—I’m not sure if [inaudible name]. And then we had part-time instructors, a couple of part-timers, and we had some teaching assistants. So we already had four. [Break in recording]
COHEN: So was there, during that period, in the through the early seventies, was there a growing demand for geology amongst students?

AGRON: Yes, there was.

COHEN: When did that peak?

AGRON: It peaked just before the last—oh when did it peak? Probably in ’83.

COHEN: Peaked in ’83.

AGRON: I think, No, excuse me, excuse me. Yes. Probably about then. I could be wrong. But had been pretty high for several years. And then I think ’84 it began to go down. And then there was a precipitous drop not only here but throughout the country in geology, but all sciences were hit. But, you see, when the oil industry was hard hit, they started exploration, and they started hiring. And there was a diminution in earth science teaching. And then budgetary problems. And it was a nationwide problem. But the employment of geologists began to increase to compensate for that in environmental geology.

COHEN: Yes, that’s what I wanted to ask. I mean so….

AGRON: This is now the major.

COHEN: Environmental?

AGRON: Environmental geology.

COHEN: Geology, environmental geology. So interesting. Petrology…

AGRON: Environmental geology, well, you use it. You use all of the others in it. Environmental geology deals with the effect of man on the geological environment and vice versa. How many lives in this physical world and how it affects him. And you study natural disasters, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tidal storms. There’s a list of them. When you build houses, there’ve been so many disasters because they weren’t built on suitable slopes. They slide and collapse, and the ground isn’t suitable. You get settling. And when you build highways, pipelines, and our communications of all sorts, you’ve got to take the earth into account, including exploring for minerals. And now waste disposal. We have no place to put this. And where do we get rid of the radioactive wastes? You can’t do this without geology. Now, in order to help the situation that people saw coming, again, the National Science Foundation and I believe the American Geological Institute got together and set up a course for college teachers in environmental geology. It was a two-week course in the summer. And they selected 40 from all over the United States. And I was lucky enough to be one of the 40. And we went throughout the western part of the country: Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and saw all these examples of geological—of problems in the environment and how aqueducts and so on, the whole works. Well, I wanted to teach the course here. Gilliland said, “There’s no such thing as environmental geology.” [Laughter] So several students did a master’s thesis with me in environmental geology, and this
is where the jobs are now. They are eagerly sought out for consultation for waste disposal problems, you know. How to cope with environmental problems.

COHEN: It’s a real vindication.

AGRON: Well, you know I don’t need that. If I needed further proof of the other side of the coin then. There it was.

COHEN: Okay. Well, we’re approaching, I guess. Let’s see what …

AGRON: Segue from that into how Gilliland got to be appointed dean.

COHEN: Yes. And I want to talk to you…just approaching that. I want to discuss the various administrations. Start with Gilliland. Sure.

AGRON: You know Woodward then was going to retire.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: A search committee was set up. And the next thing I knew a man named Gilliland is appointed dean.

COHEN: Just like that?

AGRON: Just like that. I never heard of him.

COHEN: No search committee or—

AGRON: There was a search committee. I was not on the committee.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: I didn’t know what it was doing. They didn’t report to us. This is a geologist; I’d never heard of him. Never. Here I was chairman of the department. I had been here by then 20 years? I don’t know. I was a full professor of geology. They got a candidate who was a geologist, you’d think they’d say, “What do you think of this guy’s credentials?” Nobody mentioned him to me, nobody! Bingo! I hear his name—dean. I didn’t know about the guy. I went to a meeting of the New York Academy of Sciences, and a friend of mine there, who was the chairman of the department in one of the New York City universities, who is now a college president actually; later became dean at a college… And he was from a neighboring state, Nebraska. Gilliland was from the University of Nebraska. And I asked him about— I say, I understand so-and-so from Nebraska is here. Do you know anything about him? I’ve never heard of him. What can you tell me about him? And he just shook his head like this. He said, “I’m sorry for your department.” And that’s all he would say. He said, “Out there he was known as ‘Wild Bill.’” So this is our new dean. And, you know…. But I was very gracious to him and loyal to him, absolutely. And
later when people began to speak disparagingly of him, I would never tolerate it. Until he began to do the most dastardly things. And then I realized this man is a disaster.

COHEN: What were some of the objectionable things that you can think of?

AGRON: Well, you must understand that he was a shallow man, a kind of P.T. Barnum-type, a showman, consumed with image—image, image, image. Very insecure, an overachiever, and ruthless. That’s the guy. And he loved to drink. For a while he’d call me at the end of the day, in the dark, you know, winter, whatever, five-thirty, maybe even six-thirty, I’m ready to go home. I’d get a call in my office: Meet him at the bar for a drink. Well, you know, the first, second time when he’d have drink after drink after drink. And I don’t go in for that. Then I had to just turn him down. That’s not my lifestyle. And then, he’d start getting a little drunk… I didn’t care for that. But the point is he was not a success as a dean. As you know, he got into great difficulty with the faculty. He lost control of faculty meetings. And he had to resign his deanship. But he was made full professor of geology with tenure. Never consulted me. And I was very—

COHEN: Oh, I see that was—you were still chair.

AGRON: He was an albatross—

COHEN: You were still chairman.

AGRON: —around my neck the rest of his stay here actually—a negative, a negative. We had to carry him. Why didn’t they consult with the chairman of the department? This is unconscionable. It’s unforgivable. And people who act decently to you don’t treat a department chairman that way. You don’t act that way. They were irresponsible schlemiels, is what I call them, the members of the committee.

COHEN: What committee was that again?

AGRON: The search committee.

COHEN: Well, the search committee originally hired him.

AGRON: Yes, to look for a dean. And for the administration to appoint him full professor with tenure…. Also, he was gone for that year.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: Teaching. And he felt pretty badly about it. And I told him—this was before I had, you know just felt this tragic case. I tried to make him feel better. And I said, “Bill, you always have a home in the department.” They gave him a year off with pay. I said, “When you come back to teaching, we’ll be glad to have you.” And so on and so forth. And that year Manspeizer came up for tenure. Tenure? Or was it professor? But the thing went through. Went through the A&P committee, the section, the deans, everything. Got the word that it went through. And then in August the word is that it’s cancelled; he’s out. So I went to Blumenthal, and I said, “What’s
going on here? How come?” And Schlyter [sp] was then the provost, Syd Schlyter [sp]. I said, “On what grounds? He went through all…. We found out that Schlyter [sp] told Blumenthal that Gilliland, who was on a leave-of-absence, went to him and had him kill this appointment.

COHEN: Oh, my God!

AGRON: I went to him. On his own leave of absence. And, you know, what kind of an administration is this? How do you listen to a discredited person like that? So I thought, well, if he’s going to work behind my back, stab me like that, not even consulting me…. And the thing is, later on he denied doing it. But Schlyter [sp] confirmed to Dean Blumenthal this is what happened. I got the Committee on Appointments and Promotions together, the four of us and myself, and we demanded this be reconsidered. Went to Blumenthal, and we went down as a committee to Schlyter [sp] in New Brunswick in August. And he said, “Well, the board of governors will be meeting later, at the end of the month. We’ll bring it up again.” And it was reversed by the board of governors again. Now, you don’t do things that way. And then, as you’d expect, I was so upset with him that, you know, if classes would’ve begun, how could I look the man in the eye and feel I can work honestly with him? Sneaky like that. And then afterwards, when Manspeizer was to come up for promotion to full professor sometime later, again it went through all the steps here. But by then Garner was here. And Garner would—I would not have appointed him but Gilliland was dean. The man I really wanted was a topnotch man. He vetoed my appointment request. So Manspeizer, it was considered at the section meeting in New Brunswick.

COHEN: This is promotion or tenure?

AGRON: To full professor.

COHEN: To full professor.

AGRON: We were making this several years later. And sitting around the table there, of the section. And he speaks against Manspeizer again. And he said, “This man is no damned good! His Ph.D. dissertation is worthless.” Now his dissertation was done in New Brunswick under Mark Tems [sp], who’s a very good senior man there and is now. And he tackled such a difficult problem that Woodward—Woodward was out in the field then in Pennsylvania on one occasion—was very interested in this project. He said, “I’ve worked in the Appalachians for over 30 years or 40 years. And this problem that Warren took,” he said, “if somebody told me ‘Here, do this problem and you can take five years, and I’ll give you all the money and logistical support you need,’” he said, “I wouldn’t want to take it. It’s too formidable.” And he did it. And he got a dissertation, and it was published. Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

COHEN: Oh.

AGRON: So Gilliland sitting there says, “His dissertation was no damned good! Terrible work!” So I said, “What is the title of the dissertation?” He didn’t know. I said, “What does it deal with?” He didn’t know. I said, “Where geographically was the work done?” He didn’t know. And I lost my temper. I said, “You have the gall to sit there and say his work is no damned good
when you don’t even know what he did!” This is the kind of operator we were dealing with, you see. So head to toe he worked against me on this, and he got Garner to vote against him, too.

COHEN: For the promotion to professor, full professor. Mm-hmm.

AGRON: Because he’d promised Garner he would pull him up to Professor Two. So Gilliland’s salary scale was equivalent to Professor Two. So this man was a Professor Two. And towards the end we had almost no courses for him to teach. He was teaching beginning lab. Professor Two salary, and we had to carry him. I mean this is the bitterness of it. So I mean, I don’t know. I could go on with the machinations. And then when Garner was put up for Professor Two, Gilliland wrote that he is one of the most distinguished geologists, you know. So on and so forth. So Manspeizer and I went to the reference in the library. We pulled out the citations index, and I found maybe three or four citations for him over a period of years. And then we took some distinguished geologists. This is what he called him, a distinguished geologist. We found 40, 50, 60 citations.

COHEN: Citations to the work?

AGRON: Yes, to the work. So, you know, I wrote this up. And also my evaluation. I mean I hired the guy, he worked for me. And the chairman of the committee who was deliberating this was Leo Troy. And I saw him in front of Boyden Hall. And I said—I had this with me. I said, “Leo, I’d like to talk to you about the nomination to Professor Two for this man,” perhaps as long-time chairman of the department, and I took the trouble to get additional information on what he’s done,” so on and so forth. And I said, “You’ll find it of interest in your considerations.” So he said, “Over my dead body will you have any input on this.”

COHEN: Hmm.

AGRON: This is how things are done, huh? “Over my dead body.”

COHEN: Was he chair of the A&P Committee?

AGRON: No, it was not the A&P because only Professor Twos vote on that.

COHEN: Oh, oh. I see. And he was a Professor Two.

AGRON: He was voted in. Now Norman Samuels once told me, he said, “Why—“ He said, “Have you had trouble with Leo Troy?” I said, “Not that I can think of.” He said, “Well, why does he always badmouth you?” I said, “He does?” He said, “Yes.” Now on the surface it didn’t occur to me. I said, “Well, I didn’t think about it.” “Well, okay. I can see why.” Well, when Woodward announced that he was going to retire, I remember Troy buttonholed me in the library, the old building. And asked me to sign a petition for him to be considered as dean. I refused to sign it. And he scowled as he walked away. And I’ve been serving on more than one committees, A&P. If I voted for somebody that he didn’t want, he’d be furious. In other words, I crossed the man. This is…you’ve got personality problems there among the prima donnas. I was on the committee—I was appointed to award the bonuses for faculty for merit increments and

30
merit pay and University distributed so much to each college. And each department was supposed to nominate people—they had four from the whole college to be selected. And the dean appointed me to the committee, and I told him I don’t want to serve on the committee because I don’t think it’s possible to honestly select the four most worthy persons. So he said, “That’s why I want you to serve.” [Laughter] Okay, I served on it. You know two of the people on the committee—one of them was Leo—nominated themselves, and they got the bonus. Now it should have been understood that committee members would decide—weren’t going to consider themselves. So you see things like this going on around you, you realize that, you know, they cut a lot of corners. [Laughs]

COHEN: Oh, well! Okay. Still staying with deans, I wanted to…. Since we’re practically….

AGRON: Talbott. I don’t know if you want to—

COHEN: Yes. Definitely I wonder if you could give me your assessment of his…. 

AGRON: William Robie do you know him.

COHEN: I’d like to if you possibly could, you know, if you could possibly deal with that. But Talbott, of course, played a major role, Malcom Talbott. If you could assess his administration as vice president and acting dean. His role in the negotiations around Conklin Hall. A major, major figure on campus. What can you say about him?

AGRON: Maybe very little, but it’s in my own small point of view.

COHEN: Sure.

AGRON: I think he was a good administrator and a generally fair-dealing man. I found him a very pleasant man to deal with. And he was willing to listen. I remember when we furnished our facilities, not only did he work with the architect, you know, I had to select all of the laboratory fixtures, everything.

COHEN: For geology?

AGRON: All the cabinets, the storage, the map rooms, the dark rooms, everything. And all the office furniture, files. And in my chairman’s office…. We also had an allowance for certain discretionary things; several hundred dollars, I forget what it was. Again, for furnishings. So I bought a reclining chair for myself because very often I would say until nine o’clock, ten o’clock, and then I’d have an observation set up. I was there at eight in the morning or so. It’s a long day. And sometimes I just have to recline for 15, 20 minutes, and I could go again. And soon after we were in there, Talbott inspected the facilities, and he was very pleased with what he saw. And then he said, “What’s this recliner doing here in the office?” I explained to him how I used it. And then I said, “If you inspected the whole building, you’ll notice this is the only chairman’s office that doesn’t have carpeting on the floor. Instead of carpeting, I bought a recliner.” [Laughter] So he said, “Good decision.” [Laughter] I still use it.
COHEN: I’m sure you do.

AGRON: I mean it’s only—it’s a necessity to function well if you’re going to keep hours like that. [End of Tape #2]

COHEN: We’re back with Professor Agron. You were talking about Malcolm Talbott and his comments on your recliner. [Laughs] Anything else that you wish to say?

AGRON: About Malcolm?

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: Yea, I once had a bit of a problem with the campus patrol in the faculty parking lot. My front tire was on the white line: serious offense.

COHEN: Uh-oh!

AGRON: And they ticketed me for that. And I appealed it in the stupid court they set up, and there was a law student and some other student.

COHEN: Oh, yes.

AGRON: And they upheld the ticket. And I said, “This is just wrong, and I refuse to pay it. Is there anyone I can appeal it to?” They said, “Well, you can go to Malcolm Talbott,” the provost, whatever. And I did.

COHEN: Mm-hm.

AGRON: And he heard me out. You know it’s quite ridiculous even to talk about a thing like this. Mickey-Mouse stuff. And he said, “Okay. I’ll quash the ticket. But—“ he raised his index finger. “Someday when I call in my chips, you’ll have to be there.” [Laughs] I was surprised. That he thought that way, like a politician did. Nevertheless, I suppose he would have my support in any case. Once at a chairmen’s meeting, the desperation of the parking situation came up again. And professors couldn’t park their cars when they came to class. They had to drive on. One fellow he told me he drove in, couldn’t park, he went home. Didn’t meet his class. Not in my department, but…. And students similarly missed class. And thousands of people have been grievously pained by that. And I—this touched a rather raw nerve about this matter, in me. And I spoke up and said, “When they were planning the campus, the architects told us that they could put an underground garage under the entire plaza, and it would cost one million dollars at that time. And that was cut out as an economy move. And I said, “The people who are responsible for that decision should have been hanged from the yardarm.” And Malcolm turned red as a beet, scowled at me because he went along with New Brunswick as an economy move; they eliminated it. And at the time I wrote a letter to the administration saying, "We will regret it for a hundred years if we don’t put that in.” So I threw that in at the meeting. I had to speak up. But he didn’t want to be reminded of that.
As far as the takeover of the buildings and so on, he seemed to take it in stride and was very nonchalant about it. But I and many of my colleagues were disappointed in him. We thought he kind of just caved in to the mob, particularly when the leader of the takeover group with his henchmen stormed into Talbott’s office. And he stood on Talbott’s desk and made his demands. Well, maybe Talbott was wise to listen to these hotheads that way. But I know I would’ve walked out of the room.

COHEN: How did the— You said the faculty thought that Talbott caved in.

AGRON: Some did.

COHEN: Caved in what respect? Caved into what, I guess?

AGRON: I guess that was the expression that was used. Instead of saying, Well, let’s work out what the structure should be or whatever, I think they almost immediately granted everything that was asked of them. No negotiations.

COHEN: That was the perception.

AGRON: Wise or unwise, I don’t know. They just didn’t want to confront them. I mean around a table, a physical confrontation. They didn’t. Perhaps that was wise. Maybe they were better in touch with the—I don’t know.

COHEN: I wanted to ask...

AGRON: But let’s see Blumenthal.

COHEN: Yes, yes. After Malcom Talbott, then Blumenthal.

AGRON: Are we finished? Do you want to ask anything more about Talbott?

COHEN: Well, anything else that you have to say.

AGRON: That’s about it. Sorry the man also died too young. Blumenthal, just in a word, was a very dedicated, very fair-dealing, very compassionate, scholarly man. A thoroughly decent man. And he had to deal with people who were less than decent, and he learned how to deal with them. But he could be strong. He could be very strong. And I think the college made a lot of progress under his tenure.

COHEN: Why do you think he left after a couple of years as dean?

AGRON: Don’t know.

COHEN: ‘Sixty-nine through ’71. And then retired. Any perception of that?
AGRON: Well, he had a weak heart, you know. He died of a heart attack actually. Yes. And he lived in South Orange. I’d meet him on the street once in a while. And he was going to doctors for his heart. I don’t know if he had surgery. He did have a weak heart.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

AGRON: Yes. A very good man.

COHEN: How was…

AGRON: I’m sorry.

COHEN: Gilbert Panson was acting dean for the year after Henry Blumenthal left the position. And how would you assess his acting deanship?

AGRON: Panson was a very competent fellow. He’s bright, he’s competent, he’s cool. I never developed a warm relationship with him, so I don’t know much more about him.

COHEN: The next regular appointment of dean was Richard Robey.

AGRON: Richard Robey, yes.

COHEN: How would you assess his deanship?

AGRON: Well, Robey was a devious man, deceptive, unprincipled. When one of our people was to be considered at the section, for promotion, in New Brunswick, the day before I went down. I went to the dean’s office and asked Ro—well, I told him what the itinerary was tomorrow. And I asked him if I had his support on this. And he—see, the dean has input, on promotions. And he said, “Well, I’d rather not tell you.” I said, “Oh.” I was a little surprised. I said, “Well, I’ve been down on this kind of business a number of times, and I always knew how my dean stood.” And I said, “Well, how do I influence deliberations of the section so I won’t make known my own?” Well, I took him at his word. Big grin, great big smile, and he shook my hand vigorously. “I wish you the best of success on it.” Oh, okay. The dean approved it, the section approved, the department approved, so on. The A&P committee approved. Go down there, and the secretary representing the New Brunswick provost, who ran the meeting, passed around papers, and she passed around the dean’s vote, which she shouldn’t have done. And I saw that he disapproved. Well, why give me such an enthusiastic sendoff. “Wish you the best of success.” A devious man. And then—slippery, you know, like an eel. And then I was on the review committee that was deliberating when he resigned.

COHEN: You mean the committee won?

AGRON: Yes.

COHEN: What was the case made against him?
AGRON: I don’t think I should talk on tape because I don’t know if it wasn’t, you know, in the public record. But the committee subpoenaed witnesses. We met during the summer, July, August, a number of meetings. And I think his best option was to resign after the evidence that we had. So he was a sad man who was misguided. He used to have cronies who’d play poker with him, you know? Faculty members. They had a little clique. And, I don’t know. I don’t think he was so…. He wasn’t what he presented himself to be. That’s about it on those. Let’s see. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We were talking about some episodes.

AGRON: Oh, yes. I’d like to speak about the fieldtrips that I took that the number of resources as students in…. Well, this was an all-day trip to the Bethlehem Steel plant in Pennsylvania. And I would rent a bus. We left here about eight in the morning and got back about seven-thirty or so in the evening. And they took us on a tour of all of the steel-making facilities and rolling mills and a coking plant. And it was a spectacular experience. Something that students can’t possibly get within the confines of the university. And see how it’s made and the problems involved. And heavy industry really. And this is one of the major steel plants in the country. So it was quite an experience. And I would get the students to submit to me several weeks before what their program is that day, so that I could write a note to each of their professors asking that they be excused on that day because they’d be on this trip with me. And I got universal cooperation on this. And I would get the students to submit to me several weeks before what their program is that day, so that I could write a note to each of their professors asking that they be excused on that day because they’d be on this trip with me. And I got universal cooperation on this. But it was all done that way. And of course the arrangements were made months in advance with the people at the steel plant. Bus arrangements. An awful lot of work. And on one of these trips, the day before the trip occurred, my mother died. And I had to be in Chicago. The funeral was going to be the next day, day after the trip. But this had been arranged months in advance, and there was really nobody who could substitute for me. So I was on the bus at eight o’clock that morning, went through the whole trip. At the end of the day, I went to the airport to fly to Chicago for the funeral.

In the dossier of a certain professor in the biology area was a note that was then given to Gilliland that on a particular day I did not meet my class. And my mineral resources students were rattling around in the hall and couldn’t find me. I failed to show up for class. What business is it of somebody else? Well, I went to the files, and here I had all the correspondence with every professor that these students had on that day, telling them in advance that they’re going to be on a fieldtrip that day. You know? And this twisted version appears in a malicious person’s file, which he then passes on to somebody else to be used to say that I’m inattentive. These things hurt when they’re so twisted and malicious.

COHEN: I know it.

AGRON: You wouldn’t think people could be so sick, to invent, fabricate things like that. It never occurred. No student would be rattling around because they knew weeks in advance that this trip—didn’t make up things like that.

COHEN: And there was no one else who could take them on the trip. And therefore had to be cancelled.
AGRON: No. And this is just a sampling in life, the college. [Laughter]

COHEN: Were you able to then reschedule the trip after the—

AGRON: No, I went on the trip.

COHEN: Oh, you went. I’m sorry.

AGRON: Yes.

COHEN: But how did you manage to attend your mother’s funeral service?

AGRON: The funeral was the day after the trip.

COHEN: I see. You went right to the airport.

AGRON: I went right to the airport. Yes, I mean this was the kind of, you know, devotion to duty, I felt. And then to try to be undermined by malicious people. It hurts.

COHEN: Yes.

AGRON: Mischief. Well, if you want to wind up?

COHEN: I just want to…. Are there any topics that we’ve touched on that you’d like to go back to that need elaboration or footnoting?

AGRON: Well, now, if we maybe go back to the ancient history.

COHEN: Okay.

AGRON: This was my first year here, which would be the academic year, I guess, what? ’51-52, 1952, say. At that time two Rutgers professors, one whose name I recall, Moses Finley, were fired. The university fired them. He was a member of our history department in Newark. And the other chap was—the name escapes me. Also a history professor, I believe. They were called before the House Un-American Affairs Committee in Washington, and asked, I suppose, whether they were or had been or whatever communists. And they took the Fifth Amendment. And because they did, they were fired. A number of people in the faculty thought that was unjust because it was quite legal to take the Fifth Amendment, constitutional guarantee. And they circulated a petition that the administration reconsider the firing of these two professors. And they asked me to sign the petition, and I thought it’s a just cause and I did. And some years after that, on several occasions, a number of the faculty would tell me that they were very—they admired my doing that. They said, Here you are a new faculty member, no tenure. And you were willing to stick your neck out on something that you thought was right, when there were people who posed as friends, even, of this fellow, who refused to sign, who are established here already on the faculty.
Moses Finley, of course, couldn’t get a job anywhere in the United States, so he went to England and became a professor at Oxford University. Became a British subject and later was knighted, Sir Moses Finley. He died a couple of years ago, I believe. But was invited back to Rutgers several years ago when they established the Mason Gross Memorial Lecture. It’s an annual lecture that goes to a person of world stature to speak on something of moment, importance. And the first lecturer was Moses Finley. So they wanted, I think, to not quite undo, but to show that they realized that maybe this man had been wronged and wanted to do right by him. I thought that was a nice gesture, you know. But I never knew the man.

COHEN: Oh, you didn’t know him personally?

AGRON: No, I was new. He was a member of the faculty; he was in the history department. But just the principle of it: the man did not violate any laws. Altogether, as I think I said at the beginning, I feel that the 33 years I spent here were very rewarding. I have no regrets. And I think there were some fine people that I’ve worked with. And also there certainly were many splendid students. And I like to feel that I played a little role in changing the direction that their life took in a good way. And that’s as much as we can hope for. And I had a chance to do a little bit of research and publications. I think I’ve got 12. But if I hadn’t done as much teaching and administration as I’d done, I suppose I would have done more. But counseling, whatever. But no regrets. And that’s good.

COHEN: Do you perceive, talking about teaching and research, do you perceive a conflict between emphasis on research on the one hand and the ability to do good—excellent—teaching?

AGRON: Oh, of course there can be a conflict if it’s done to an extreme. Everything in the proper proportion. Research is essential, to be on the forefront of it. But you cannot be oblivious of your other responsibilities and do one over the other. You have to do it 100 percent if you want to do teaching. That’s perfectly respectable. But if you say you’re doing both, that would be the ideal. But then do it. Don’t misrepresent. And there has been sometimes misrepresentation. People don’t have time for the students, whatever. And I’ve seen people do phony research here, you know. Just to impress and make up phony projects and dragoon people in from the hall, to the office, to show them the wonderful things they’re doing. And then talk about it and call in the press and get written up. And as soon as they get their promotion, then the thing’s put away, and you never hear a word about it. No publications come out. Just showmanship. I’ve seen that. That’s wrong.

COHEN: Anything else that you want to address? No? Doctor Agron, thank you very much.

AGRON: You’re welcome.

[End of Tape #3]