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Interview with James Myers, March 28 & 31, 2011

James P. Myers Jr.
Gettysburg College

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Interview Participants

Interviewee: James P. Myers, Jr, Professor of English, Gettysburg College
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Description
James Myers was interviewed on March 28 & 31, 2011 by Brad Miller about his childhood, collegiate years and teaching at Gettysburg College. He also discussed Carl Arnold Hanson's presidency, the political unrest during that time, and how the college has changed during his time here.

Length of Interview: 103 minutes

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Disciplines
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Miller: Today is March 28th 2011, in Dr. James Myer’s office in room 420 of Bridenbaugh Hall, and we are going to talk about the life of James Myers. You were born in Syracuse, New York?

Myers: Right.

Miller: And the date?

Myers: July 22, 1941.

Miller: Describe Syracuse for me growing up as a young child?

Myers: It was a very curious city. It has lost population since I grew up, it was about 250,000. It’s about 200,000 now; that might have changed. But of course to a child it was a vast territory, huge. I lived in the middle of the city, well the north side near the center, which was the German section, well German-Italian, and my great grandfather had built four or five or six houses on my end of the street. It was pretty much of a German enclave even then, and next to a place called Schiller Park named after the poet Schiller; there was a statue along with Goethe in the park.

Miller: Was the city divided through cultures?

Myers: Ethnically, one section was given over mostly to the Eastern Europeans, mostly Ukranians and Russians and Polish. That was on the South side. My side was mostly German and Italian, was originally a German enclave; in fact the city was predominantly German during the 19th century. I was amazed to discover how many German newspapers and breweries there in the 19th century, early part of the 20th century. Then the Italians began coming in and began taking things over. There was a lot of mild conflict, but not really deep animosities. There was also an Irish section adjacent to the Russian and Ukrainian section. It was an industrial town, a lot of industries there: steel industry, manufacturing, air conditioning. But very much of a blue-collar industrial city, notwithstanding the fact it also had a university –Syracuse University and the newly founded Jesuit college: Le Moyne College, which I went to later on. My own
ancestors had helped found Syracuse and the area around it; they came there as a result of the Revolutionary War, land grant in compensation of their services. They came from the shore in New Jersey, east Jersey around the city –well they came from North Brunswick and that area. They were Scots-Irish, and settled in Syracuse in 1793-94. They were salt boilers, which was the founding industry in Syracuse. It was the major source of salt in the colonies of early America. It had a salt lake, salt springs, which the Jesuits had known about back in the 17th century. So we had roots that went all the way back; our German ancestors came in at about 1850. So it was a pretty interesting place for a kid to grow up in: ethnically complex, rich in music, food, and other cultural traditions.

Miller: Could you describe your parents, their careers, and interactions with them as a child?

Myers: My father was involved in the automotive industry in various ways, and in later years he became an insurance adjuster. My mother worked at Crucible Steel; she was a secretary. I had other relatives, a great uncle who also lived with us. He worked at Continental Can Company. The family was fairly small, both my father’s family and my mother’s family. We didn’t have a lot of relatives in the area. I don’t know what else to tell you about that. I was an only child.

Miller: Only child?

Myers: Yes.

Miller: So you didn’t have much interaction with your cousins because you didn’t have that much family in the city?

Myers: At that point I didn’t have that many cousins. My father’s brother had a daughter; they didn’t live in Syracuse though. They lived in Ohio at that point, I think. My mother’s brother didn’t have children until much later during the years I was growing up. My cousins were very
young and they lived out of town too, so no there were no interactions with cousins or relatives because the family was very small.

**Miller:** What were some hobbies as a child throughout elementary school and middle school?

**Myers:** I began writing at the age of 10; I would put on little plays and make my friends enact them. We were also very much into the kind of child games that involve military activities. The French Foreign Legion was one of our favorite games. We had forts built up in Schiller Park and it all sort of climaxed one year when we had a huge block war, a chestnut battle. We used to gather chestnuts from the chestnut trees and then get together and shoot them at each other.

**Miller:** [Laughs]

**Myers:** We had these two vast armies in which I was finally wounded in the eye with a chestnut, but still look [Removes glasses to show difference in prescription due to eye damage] the difference in my glasses.

**Miller:** An injury that will carry on.

**Myers:** We also had tournaments, medieval re-enactments with homemade weapons: lances, swords, maces. We would make shields out of 50-60 gallon drum containers or we would actually cut them out of wood, decorated them and painted them and would have tournaments up in Schiller Park.

**Miller:** [Laughs] In Schiller Park, OK.

**Myers:** This is the kind of thing we usually wasted our time doing.

**Miller:** This was late elementary school to middle school?

**Myers:** Elementary school.

**Miller:** So you went through elementary school, middle school, and into high school. How was the transition? Is it anything like we experience today as children?
Miller: No, the schools were smaller. I went to an elementary school that went up to the fourth grade, and then switched to another elementary school and went further. From that elementary school I went to, we didn’t call it middle school, it was a junior high school. From the junior high school, I finagled my way into the main high school located downtown called Syracuse Central High rather than the regional high school north, on the pretext I wanted to take Spanish. We walked, we didn’t take buses. So we walked, we didn’t have a car in our family, we would walk everywhere at that time. This sometimes involved for a little kid maybe 2-3 miles a day back and forth.

Miller: Especially in Syracuse there would be a lot of snow.

Myers: Oh you better believe it. [Laughs]

Miller: [Laughs] Any highlights in high school you can think of, teachers that stand out to you?

Myers: Probably the most interesting and most important one was a teacher I had in the ninth grade who, this was in the 50’s now, he would be defined as a kind of quasi-beatnik, an outsider. He wore a beret, sunglasses, scarf, and smoked a pipe. He was very charismatic. He introduced me to Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, and I became friends with him, in fact he just died this year. He had a decisive impact on me. The rest of the teachers were obstacles to my education, they were pretty mediocre; in fact the favorite game I had was to outperform the teachers in their own subjects to survive.

Miller: [Laughs]

Myers: He was the most engaging and the most important influence, I think, on me.

Miller: So, do you feel after having this teacher you began to delve into Shakespeare on your own outside of school?
Myers: No, that didn’t come until much later. Probably not until college, but the exposure to Shakespeare and to literature in general, and his attitude towards literature, was not an introduction to the subject by simply confirmed my already existing interest in literature. I was reading books in the adult section of the library even in elementary school, the librarians would let me go in and take things out as long as they approved the books. I had to show them the books to make sure they weren’t too sexually objectionable.

Miller: Too risqué [laughs]

Myers: Right. I was reading philosophy in junior high school, and high school itself, books that were really incomprehensible to most people. He simply reconfirmed my already pre-existing interest in these materials. So he fueled my excitement and helped me sustain it. The high school, which was located centrally, also brought together from all over the city extremely interesting people, which you wouldn’t necessarily encounter at a regional high school.

Miller: Yes.

Myers: Although a lot of us on the north side went to the central high school. It was a high school consisting of all kinds of cliques and groups of interest; there was no sense of homogeneity in which you might find at a high school these days, and we pretty much went our own way. Of course you had the jocks and the people who like to socialize in more conventional ways: dancing, picnicking, these kinds of things. The diversity there was extremely important because it allowed us to survive. We didn’t have to deal with bullying, attitudes that we were nerds or intellectual, they simply left us alone, which wouldn’t have happened elsewhere. We had a small group with interests not just in literature but also certain kinds of science and music especially. In fact, one of them tried to make contact with me years ago, one of these high school friends of mine who lives in Cortland, New York. So it was pretty important.
**Miller:** So did this clique carry over into extracurricular activities, groups, clubs? What were your interests outside of school?

**Myers:** We had a revolutionary group in which we were going to inform our own government, we went to concerts, hiking, exploring outside the city, played chess; it was the kind of socializing that went on among us even though we didn’t live to close to each other. It was kind of awkward and hard to get around, because none of us had cars and our parents were working so they couldn’t drive us. So we took buses or we walked. The only other close friend I had went to a Catholic school, he lived a block away from me; he was a childhood friend I met in elementary school. He and I continue to exchange mail and email until this day. He teaches up at Hamilton College now. He went to the Jesuit society, but decided he didn’t like the Jesuits, left, and became a secular teacher. He and I used to fight constantly about philosophy. He wasn’t really part of this group at all, although I had contact with him.

**Miller:** Going back, you said you didn’t have a car, causing you to walk back and forth from the city. Did you have any travel outside of Syracuse? Outside of the State? What were your experiences with that as a child?

**Myers:** No travel outside of the state.

**Miller:** OK

**Myers:** Outside of the city we would take a bus to go hiking. We would actually bring our backpacks on the bus and go off onto the Indian reservations south of the city, which was my favorite place for us: the Onondaga Indian Reservation, where we were frequently chased away by the natives, “What are you doing here, this is our property; get out!” Other places around town too, and some of us but not all of us got involved with the Boy Scouts during high school which allowed us then opportunities to get out camping, summer camp, things like that. Not too
many of us were involved in that. We did frequently get on a bus and go out to the countryside
and explore the area.

**Miller:** OK, did you have any jobs in high school?

**Myers:** I worked at a drug store all through high school.

**Miller:** Did you work as a clerk, or another position?

**Myers:** Clerk, delivery boy, stock boy, anything, you name it.

**Miller:** Anything they could get you to do?

**Myers:** Yes.

**Miller:** Let’s continue on to Le Moyne College, what was your reasoning to continue to college, was that a set goal?

**Myers:** Financial, I couldn’t afford to go to Syracuse University. The tuition at Le Moyne, which was run by the Jesuits, was half the price of the tuition at Syracuse University and notwithstanding the fact that I wasn’t a Catholic they let me in; much to the horror of my Lutheran congregation and my minister; “You’re not really going to a Catholic college are you?” So I was one of maybe three or four non-Catholics on the entire student body, and it was kind of challenging. But again I had to take a bus every day until I finally found a person who lived nearby who had a car and would drive me up in the mornings. The college was located outside the city limits, so it was a long hour to forty five minute bus ride every morning to get to the college and then back to where I was working all throughout college at a bookstore in downtown Syracuse. That’s the reason I went there, mostly financial, but also I had a fascination with the intellectual life of the Jesuits and the kind of cultural experience they represented and stood for; so this is a way it also attracted me.

**Miller:** OK.
Myers: It worked out well.

Miller: And it was a fairly young college, founded in 1946 correct?

Myers: Exactly.

Miller: Did it seem well established with professors and a sense of organization?

Myers: It was well organized, talk about the Jesuits. [Laughter] The campus itself was new and it was a building; it had moved from its initial location within the city to this campus outside. When I came in the late 50’s it was already unfolding pretty substantially on the hills outside Syracuse: dormitories and classroom buildings. They actually didn’t have an athletic center yet, which I thought was a benefit; I didn’t have to deal with that kind of thing. It was a lot of excitement, the newness, the novelty, the sense that we were pioneering this new educational effort, which I thought was very important in the fact that we were distinct from this old stodgy Syracuse University within the city limits. It also gave us a sense of identity, which I also thought was important.

Miller: It was also a liberal arts college, correct?

Myers: It was.

Miller: What did you believe you gained from going through the different disciplines?

Myers: We had to take Philosophy every semester, every year. We had to take theology every year; despite the fact that I wasn’t a Catholic, I had to take it. In addition to my major in English, I was also effectively a major in history. So I was a history major unofficially, an official English major. So in effect, I also picked up a major in philosophy, a strong background in theology, and we had to take several courses in social studies, which I absolutely thought was worthless. Science. It was a pretty strong core everyone had to take, whether you were a business major or biology major or an English major. It was a solid foundation that all students were
exposed to, representing the diversity of the liberal-arts education. I thought it was very, very important.

**Miller:** You chose English as soon as you got there?

**Myers:** No, I started off in political science and said this wasn’t for me.

**Miller:** OK. [Laughs]

**Myers:** [Laughs] It wasn’t interesting it wasn’t exciting, it was pretty dull. I recognized early on political science wasn’t a science and politics although interesting, wasn’t the kind of thing I wanted to investigate formally or academically. Most of the people I had met were involved in literature and we found this exciting and novel, and much more engaging then the kind of thing you encounter in political science. So I switched majors.

**Miller:** OK, so English was the only official major you had?

**Myers:** Yes.

**Miller:** Did any professors stand out to you in these four years?

**Myers:** Oh yeah, we had an incredibly diverse and crazy bunch of professors that were absolutely inspiring and engaging. They were all unique individuals; each one of them had a whole set of idiosyncratic points of attraction. From the chair who couldn’t hear and had to wear a hearing aid, he was our Shakespeare professor, who couldn’t really walk either because he had a balance issue, to our romantics professor who was a former Jesuit who decided the Jesuit life wasn’t for him and went into the secular life. Our medievalist was a Jesuit who looked like Friar Tuck in the Robin Hood stories: tall, six feet, red hair, flushed, and so on. An extremely important professor I had for theology, he had taught English at Fordham University, but he was too controversial. So he was exiled into the boondocks and put him into theology to get him out of English. He was a published poet, Daniel Berrigan, who along with his brother was one of the
first leaders of the protest of the Vietnam War. In fact one of Berrigan’s students, David Miller, was the first student to burn his draft card.

**Miller:** Wow.

**Myers:** Berrigan was a fascinating individual. He is still alive; I think they got him down in Guadalajara now. They got him really out of the way, he couldn’t shut up, and they couldn’t repress him. Yet he was too vital, too important, and too eloquent to completely silence, although they don’t allow him to teach anymore. He actually invited me to talk about Buddhism in theology class one day. He was a former Marine; he used to wear his Marine clothing over his Jesuit Cossack, as he’d come down in the winter from the Jesuit dormitory. The girls were in love with him.

**Miller:** [Laughs]

**Myers:** Very striking, very fierce, intense individual. As I said, a published poet.

**Miller:** For the record, could you spell his name.

**Myers:** B-E-R-R-I-G-A-N, I think in fact he was a local Syracuse boy, he and his brother Phillip. Phillip wasn’t a Jesuit, he taught in Baltimore and he led some groups that poured blood on draft records in Baltimore. They were very involved in the initial stages of the protest for the Vietnam War and more than simply passive-resistance ways; they were actively engaged in leading the onslaught against this war.

**Miller:** He was a fairly young professor at the time?

**Myers:** He was, I think the youngest on the faculty, a former marine.

**Miller:** OK. Through this liberal arts education and a college education in general change your outlook on life and the world around you?

**Myers:** [Laughs]**
Miller: I know it is a very broad question that can evoke a lot of thoughts.

Myers: A bit.

Miller: What were your main changes in thought through these four years?

Myers: [Long pause] Very hard, I don’t know how to answer that. Simply, the perception that my choice of English was the right one and I became increasingly interested in earlier rather than later literature. Although I didn’t turn my back on 20th century literature, but medieval and renaissance literature began to increasingly attract my attention. I sort of determined that when I went to graduate school this is what I would concentrate on. I don’t know why. My recollection is that I had no drive, no obsession with anything beyond writing or reading at that time. I could be wrong.

Miller: Were you actively following what was happening in the country, or were you focused on the smaller view of college life?

Myers: No, even though I grew up in the 50’s and the 60’s, I was never involved in what you know as the counter-culture. My friends and I simply went our own way. These were peripheral areas of interest, what was happening politically, even internationally. We never closed our eyes to it, but never really became major areas of focus or interest. There’s a sense, this really begins in high school, we weren’t really part of the major cultural sweep of events. They didn’t concern us. We had our own interests, and explored and developed those. We really didn’t remain aloof but certainly separate from the mainstream, the main currents of culture at that time.

Miller: Any clubs or extracurricular activities in college?

Myers: Well, I worked all through college; I really didn’t have an opportunity. The chess club was about it, and that was an obsession. I used to cut classes to finish chess games.

Miller: [Laughs]
Myers: Horrible to admit things like that, but it was a huge area of interest on my part, and on my friends’ parts too. We didn’t have many clubs either, we had drama club, which I wasn’t involved in directly, remotely and maybe tangentially. I didn’t live on campus, I lived at home and this made it difficult. It was a long drive to the college and I had to work, so I didn’t have much free time for this type of thing.

Miller: Did you continue writing outside of class?

Myers: I never stopped writing since I was ten years old.

Miller: Would you rewrite plays from elementary school?

Myers: No, at that time in college I was writing poetry and short stories. I had won a poetry contest, ironically, run by the Catholic Church, I can’t recall the exact title, or a certain year, I believe my junior year, for a poem I had written. I wrote mostly poetry and short stories, fiction.

Miller: At the close of Le Moyne College, what were your plans? Did you plan on going to graduate school?

Myers: Sort of, it was a sense in what I didn’t know what to do. Graduate School was a way to continue exploring in what I had already become involved in and interested in through college. Money was a problem, a couple of the places I applied to I couldn’t afford or they turned me down. A couple of the places I obtained admittance to didn’t really grab my attention or interest. Then the University of Arizona came through with a teaching fellowship, and it was kind of exotic and far removed from Syracuse. Completely different geography, weather system, and a gorgeous campus with palm trees. So I said, “Why not?” and I went. I wound up as a research assistant for a high-powered literary critic in renaissance drama, named Richard Hosley. Along with editing Shakespeare, several plays, he was also involved in rediscovering the Renaissance theaters, the buildings in which these things were staged, the knowledge of which were
completely lost, and he was involved in reconstructing as many as possible, the nine public theaters that existed outside the city walls of London. I became involved in this project, which was absolutely fascinating. I was his research assistant for the two years I was there and helped in all sorts of interesting ways and apparently he liked me, which puzzled me [laughs] because I didn’t have the perfection and the experience I thought a research assistant should have. I made a lot of mistakes, which he tolerated because as he once told me, “You see things I don’t,” which kind of interested me. He would sit as we are now and read to me articles he had written and see my response or to give himself a sense of audience which would allow him to look at the article much more critically than would be possible if he simply read it to himself. It was a very interesting, unintended educational experience in that respect; to see this scholar engaging with a pretty pathetic neophyte in the area and gaining on his end, experience and knowledge he wouldn’t have access to if he had worked alone. He had a terrific impact on me, this man.

**Miller**: So he was a fairly big mentor in your life within these two years?

**Myers**: Yeah, without being a mentor. He was a maniacal, fanatical, perfectionist; I mean it was terrifying. I remember walking in a couple times into his office and he would be so focused on a work he would look up at me uncomprehending who I was. He had to take a few minutes to readjust himself; that’s how narrowly focused the man was, how lost he was in his own activity at that point.

**Miller**: Wow.

**Myers**: His scholarship, and the efforts he put into his scholarship, were absolutely amazing; this of course indirectly became an inspiration to me. Strange, strange man, he had been in the navy in World War II. One day in looking through his filing cabinet for some stuff he had sent me for, I found his World War II diaries. He was in a minesweeper for example in the invasion
of Sicily and his attitude toward war was absolutely negative. I came across this sentence that sent shivers through me, “I will make the government pay for what they are doing to me.”

Miller: Wow.

Myers: And what he did was go to Yale University on the government ticket and got his PhD at Yale. That’s how he made the government pay.

Miller: Did he ever address these anti-war ideas?

Myers: No, it was all strictly scholarship.

Miller: Besides your research assistant job, you were doing your own studies, correct?

Myers: Yeah

Miller: Were you focused on Shakespeare at this point?

Myers: No, renaissance literature. Not Shakespeare, non-dramatic poetry; Edmund Spencer who was my major area of interest. I never in grad school at Arizona or Massachusetts committed myself to the study of Shakespeare.

Miller: OK.

Myers: That came when I began teaching.

Miller: Going back, how was the transition from northern New York out west to Arizona? Was it a big culture shock?

Myers: It was traumatic, I got married in there too, I didn’t mention that. [Laughs]

Miller: [Laughs] was this back in New York?

Myers: Yeah.

Miller: OK. Who did you get married to?

Myers: The woman I met in Syracuse. [Long pause] She couldn’t make the adjustment to Arizona; literally she would get sick walking out into the atmosphere and the heat. I gradually
acclimatized myself to it; I began to enjoy the desert. I got a car at that point. I got some money from my grandfather’s estate, his trust fund had been broken up and the first I was out there I was able to buy a Volkswagen. I would drive that car in the desert to go rock hunting and hiking around. The desert became very, very attractive; a weird place in which I had never experienced in my life. The city at that point was a strange metropolitan area, not as it is now. There was not much diversity except Spanish-Americans and of course they weren’t in Tucson the way they are now; completely running over the city. They were still something of a minority in the city at that point; the Mexicans were just becoming an area of interest. It never had the feel of a city. I feel Syracuse had more of a metropolitan feeling then Tucson did and they were about the same size, about three hundred thousand people. We used to go up to Phoenix, which was 350 miles away. We didn’t think about the distance out in the southwest. We would go up for German festivals held up in Phoenix, because Tucson had nothing like that. It was like a sprawling little village. The downtown, it didn’t really have a downtown, it was a strange place. The dominant center of the city was the university. There was a military base not too far away. Another thing that made it interesting was Joe Bonanno, you know the mafia chieftain, who decided to leave the family; the “thing” as they called it and retire to Tucson but his cohorts wouldn’t let him. So there was a mafia war going on in Tucson when I was there; bombs going off and people getting shot. A person I taught with, she was an older woman, a teaching assistant in the department lived next to Joe Battaglia who was one of his lieutenants. So Joe Bonanno, Joe Battaglia and his mafia “thing” was working itself out while I was there. It was kind of interesting.

Miller: Yeah.
Myers: It turns out my wife was related to Joe Bonanno’s consigliere. His consigliere was her uncle, although they had completely divorced themselves from that family. This I didn’t find out until later on.

Miller: Was it after you left Tucson?

Myers: Yeah.

Miller: From Tucson, was your goal to continue your education at this point?

Myers: Yes, and go for the PhD at that point. I was pretty committed to it and I wasn’t going to stay in Arizona.

Miller: So you continued to Massachusetts, was that your number one choice?

Myers: I don’t recall, it probably was because I was kind of interested in it. A guy I worked for, Hosley said I would get my money’s worth at Massachusetts. They had a very good reputation in renaissance studies and it was also in a locale that appealed to me, western Massachusetts. My wife was from Connecticut and she wanted to get back to New England too. Even though there is a history in Tucson, a Spanish-American history it never really attracted me. I wanted something more of an evocative Anglo-Saxon continuity so western Massachusetts performed that role beautifully. So yeah I think it was my first choice. I also got a teaching assistant position there so it helped me considerably in my decision.

Miller: To pay your way?

Myers: Yeah.

Miller: Was it similar to Syracuse as a city and its people, were the surroundings the same?

Myers: Which, Tucson or Massachusetts?

Miller: In Massachusetts.
Myers: No, completely different. Small towns; Northampton was the biggest –well, Springfield was the biggest but that was a bit of a drive and had nothing we were really interested in. So Northampton, Amherst, Easthampton. We lived in Northampton first and found it intolerable because our landlord, we were in a two family house, and he was a second or third generation Pole who never lost his accent and who couldn’t tolerate people who made spaghetti or drank wine. He used to go through our rubbish, our trash and criticize us, “Hey you highfalutin wine drinkers why don’t you come down to earth with the rest of us.” [Laughs] This led to a number of shouting matches. We literally had to tip-toe around the apartment at night to make sure we didn’t disturb his sleep. He used to yell at us, “I heard you tip-toeing around the apartment at ten o’clock last night.” Well, this was impossible so we moved to Easthampton, which was rather more of a drive because the university was in Amherst but really small towns which were wonderfully old towns going back to the 17th century.

Miller: Could you describe your pursuit of scholarship there?

Myers: It was renaissance literature [long pause]. How did that work? It was very complicated. I don’t recall what course it was for, 16th or 17th century poetry course for which I wrote an article on a contemporary of Shakespeare named George Chapman. I wrote an article on a poem of his called *Ovid’s Banquet of Sense*, and it was published by one of the first rate, high powered English journals and that brought me a scholarship. I didn’t have to each, it was amazing. We had a strange group of people teaching Renaissance literature at that department. The two major figures were at war with each other, which made it interesting. Bernard Spivack, I took about three courses from him; Shakespeare’s Roman plays, Spencer, and I audited a class his wife taught on Renaissance drama. They were both Shakespearians and interestingly she had just published a book on Chapman, on who I just published this article, and he told me, “My wife had
just brought this book out; you should talk with her on a dissertation subject.” So I did, and I went on to do a dissertation on George Chapman’s non-dramatic poetry which worked out well because she let me do what I wanted to do. There was very little direction, oversight, or criticism. So in the year before I left Massachusetts I simply read, my course work was done and I didn’t have to teach, so I just read. It was amazing, it was wonderful, and it was unbelievable. Then I prepared for my oral and written examinations and prepared to get a teaching job which I finally got here.

**Miller:** Did you feel at that point in Massachusetts that you began to take control of your studies in life?

**Myers:** No, you never take control but I wound up teaching Shakespeare here and I had not prepared for Shakespeare as a subject to be taught when I was in graduate school. Once I began discovering and teaching Shakespeare I couldn’t believe I had missed him in the sense that I had discovered him as I began teaching. He became, in my early years of teaching, the major preoccupation in trying to get a handle on this mastermind, this genius.

**Miller:** Was there any mentor at Massachusetts as there was in Arizona? One figure that stood out to you?

**Myers:** Well Bernard Spivack was a sort of strange, eccentric guy who was working for 10 years on Hamlet; that stood out in my mind. [Laughs] I recall when I went to my dissertation defense; I visited them in their house in Amherst. I said, “When are you going to finish your book on Hamlet?” He turned to me and said, “You know the play has been around for 350 years, there’s no hurry.” I don’t think he ever finished it, and he had been working on it for more then 10-15 years after his book on Othello.

**Miller:** Wow.
Myers: He was very strange; and older kind of scholar for whom scholarship was an obsession yet he would never show it he was obsessed on the subject. Scholarship was how you say it in Italian, “sprezzatura.” It was kind of an effortless, casual kind of thing on the outside although he may be demonically possessed on the inside, but he wouldn’t reveal it. He was Jewish, and he had taught in the South. He didn’t strike you as being Jewish; in other words he did not fit the stereotypical academic Jew at all. His wife was Jewish, too, and she wasn’t stereotypical, she was a New York stater; I believe [from] Albany. We had a lot of Jewish people in the department. The 18th century person was named Golden and he was the quintessential, stereotypical academic Jew. The 19th century person, the Victorian; was Jewish and his name was Silver. Golden and Silver. [laughs]

Miller: [laughs]

Myers: He was quite atypical too. In the sense that I looked to them as role models for scholarship, no there was no one like that there. I think Hosley at Arizona, more than anyone, was still perhaps my unconscious ideal.

Miller: Looking back on your education and your choices, were there any regrets through your choice in schools?

Myers: No. Regret nothing. [laughs]

Miller: [laughs]

Myers: Take the best out of what you do, really.

Miller: At this point do you think you were ready, I know you said you never take control but do you think you were ready to go out and start teaching and continuing your scholarship?

Myers: I don’t know what you mean. At what point do you mean?

Miller: At the point of graduating Massachusetts and gaining your PhD.
Myers: I didn’t get my PhD. I left without the PhD, and I worked on my dissertation while I taught here. The teaching load was demonic, first year here I taught three courses in composition plus Shakespeare. The teaching load here now is two course, three courses in a two three. Back then it was a four four plus trying to finish my dissertation. It took me two years to complete that so I got my PhD two years after I had begun teaching. It was a challenge to teach under those conditions right out of graduate school and finish a dissertation which kept getting more and more complex as I worked on it. So again is that a sense of being ready, no. You founder; you don’t know what you’re doing when you begin teaching, especially with Shakespeare. He is still a challenge. [Laughs]

Miller: [Laughs] So in 1968 you arrive on Gettysburg campus?

Myers: Yes.

Miller: In the fall or the spring?

Myers: I came in the early summer in preparation for the fall.

Miller: Did you put out many applications to teach?

Myers: A few. Some places didn’t want to give me enough money and some places turned me down while others didn’t really interest me at all.

Miller: What interested you about Gettysburg the most?

Miller: It was a last minute decision. It came near the end of my searching period. There are strange connections between Syracuse and Gettysburg. A lot of people I knew in Syracuse had gone to Gettysburg, I don’t know why; also to the seminary. As you know it has this kind of resonance; this association. I reached a point where things hadn’t been working out the way I had anticipated so I had sent off this letter at the last minute rather late in the year. I think it was in the winter or early spring and one of those examples of fortuity; the person who taught
Miller 21

Shakespeare died in the middle of the year. The opening was there and they didn’t get a change to advertise it in the usual way earlier in the year. They brought me in, they liked me and they hired me. Talk about fortune.

**Miller:** So you began in the fall teaching four and four?

**Myers:** Yes, which was insane. You can’t believe what that’s like, especially with three composition courses where the paperwork, the reading, the essays; my God. You don’t have a life of your own.

**Miller:** I believe we’ll stop there for today.

[End of the first portion of the interview]

**Miller:** Today is March 31st 2001 in the office of Dr. James Myers and we’re going to continue where we left off in the fall of 1968.

**Myers:** Just the fall of 1968 [Laughs]

**Miller:** [Laughs] you had arrived that summer and you began teaching. What were your impressions of the town of Gettysburg and Gettysburg College itself?

**Myers:** The town of Gettysburg is quite different from what it is now. It wasn’t very attractive; for example they didn’t have as many trees downtown as they have now, shops were pretty limited, and restaurants were limited. The only pizza you could get in town was made with cheddar cheese. [Laughs]

**Miller:** That’s not enjoyable [Laughs]

**Myers:** Right. We didn’t live in town, and we didn’t want to live in town. We lived eleven miles north of here in the middle of a 60 acre orchard. We advertised for a place like that and finally found one. It took quite a lot of trips down here to find one and get it. The town became more attractive, rather later on but initially it was really appealing. My impressions of the college, I
had already been here for an interview so I knew what the college was like and it wasn’t an immediate exposure to the campus. I met the staff in the English department; I met the dean, but not the president when I came down for my interview. My initial impressions were altogether positive, quite positive in fact; especially about the English department. The thing about the college and the department was I didn’t see this half buried conflict or anxiety about, well it wasn’t very competitive in the sense that you frequently found at small colleges or even universities. It was a very cordial place. There was a sense in that I had the freedom I needed to develop and explore my own teaching which was pretty critical. So those are some of my initial impressions. At that point the department was in Glatfelter hall, but even then there wasn’t enough room for the entire department so some members of the department, in fact I wasn’t there I was over in a building that’s no longer here. We had a room in the mathematics building called Stahley hall, which was adjacent to the library. There were three of us in the English department in that room. That’s where I spent my first year in my first office. Gradually we all wound up on the third floor of Glatfelter, which became the biology department ironically. They moved over to the new building as soon as we arrived.

Miller: How was the transition from Massachusetts down to Gettysburg? Was it difficult?

Myers: No, quite a letdown. Western Massachusetts; Northampton, Springfield, Mount Holyoke was quasi-rural not metropolitan but incredibly alive and intellectually intense because it wasn’t just the university but a number of first rate colleges such as Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Hampshire College. So it had this intellectual, academic intensity without the negative effects, I think of an urban environment. The beauty of Western Massachusetts, where are you from?

Miller: Hershey, Pennsylvania.
Myers: So you don’t know that area?

Miller: Yeah.

Miller: It’s a gorgeous place, and historically rich too. It’s got you right up against the Berkshire Mountains and you have the Connecticut River over on the East. I’m from upstate New York as I told you earlier so in that sense it wasn’t that alien to me but the shift from Western Massachusetts where we lived for three years was kind of a shock. Not as dramatic a shock as going out to Arizona, for example. It was kind of a letdown and there was a very uncomfortable sense we weren’t really in southern Pennsylvania but the South; the attitude here, the culture.

Miller: It was very southern?

Myers: Rather more southern then middle state.

Miller: OK.

Myers: That grated against our sensibilities too because these aren’t altogether positive things as a kind of parochialism and narrowness that we didn’t find in the rural areas of western Massachusetts. It wasn’t that traumatic or that great of a transition we had to go through, it just took time. My plans here were to only stay four or five years and then move on which never happened. [laughs]

Miller: [laughs] was there a sense of isolation in Gettysburg?

Myers: No. Having been in Arizona and having to drive 300 miles to some point of interest, driving to Washington or Baltimore wasn’t that arduous here. Of course there was Harrisburg up to a certain point but we went to Baltimore and Washington quite a bit. We had relatives in Washington and there were things that were attractive also in Baltimore. Philadelphia didn’t appeal to me at that point. So we didn’t feel that isolated. It was of no great effort to go down to
Washington to the Smithsonian, Library of Congress, relatives, Folger library. In fact we did it pretty frequently, less so Baltimore which is about 60 miles. Baltimore offered less in the sense of attractions compared to Washington. The simple answer is no, we weren’t that isolated. We didn’t feel that way.

**Miller:** You have a very strong sense of history, as you moved down to Gettysburg and have reached out to Baltimore and Washington, did you begin to look into the history of these areas?

**Myers:** A little bit, not much. There was nothing overt, nothing confronting us here as there was in Western Massachusetts where every town had a huge sign indicating the date of its founding, 1682, things like this. Pennsylvania was a much younger colony in comparison to Massachusetts. It wasn’t until we bought a house in 1987 that I began to appreciate how historically rich the area was. There was also a minor disaster that overtook us; my wife was diagnosed with a spinal tumor in 1974 which put her in the hospital in Hershey where she underwent surgery that lasted ten and a half hours and left her paralyzed. Unexpectedly she was able through therapy, to get back a lot of her mobility but it was an economic disaster. We had two kids at that time so it was also a trauma for them to go through and this sent us back quite a bit, too, even to be able to afford a house. This had an indelible impact upon most everything I did from that point on. In fact that I had this increasing responsibility at home to pick up a lot of the things my wife couldn’t do which became more and more challenging as the years went on. In researching the history of the house we bought, I began to discover the origins of this county which at that time was York County and soon joined the [local] historical society. I’m trying to think when I joined the historical society, probably before then. Carlisle’s up the road. I became aware of the migration patterns, religious rivalries that were taking place during the 17th century when the area was open for settlement from 1738 on. The history of our property opened itself
on to a landscape of incredibly rich, historical possibilities full of areas for further exploration.

So I became involved in the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. Unexpectedly, the sort of history I needed when I was living in a certain area asserted itself; but only after a number of years.

**Miller:** Going back, how many children did you have?

**Myers:** Two.

**Miller:** Were they born in Gettysburg?

**Myers:** One was born in Baltimore and daughter was born in Gettysburg.

**Miller:** What years were they born?

**Myers:** 1969 and 1971.

**Miller:** I remember talking to you about the burial ground on your property, is that correct?

**Myers:** Yes, that was part of the charm of the place.

**Miller:** Did you immediately discover that?

**Myers:** We knew about it before. That was one of the things the owner pointed out to use when we were looking the place over.

**Miller:** I’m sure he treated it as a downside.

**Myers:** I’m not sure because he had taken effort to clear some of the overgrowth which began to grow again but he thinned out the trees and got rid of a lot of the brush. He made some effort to not restore it but clear it out a little bit. We’ve undertaken many efforts over the years again and again to do that. I was fascinated by, nobody had any idea what this burial ground was and what kind of people were there and who they were. In researching the history of the place for about a year I was finally able to determine they were Church of England, Scots-Irish; which is kind of unusual. Part of the property we own was settled by Scots-Irish, Quaker, which was a huge
family to come over; five or six brothers, mother, father, and I believe a granddaughter. They came from County Tyrone in Ireland, and they were mostly Church of England which was weird. Two were Quakers and one was Presbyterian. They owned a lot of land in my township, and this got us involved in all the settlement around us and the curious hostilities which existed between the Quakers and Presbyterians in this area. As well as Church of England at that time. The stones in the graveyard, which were basically field stones, were only about that high. [Shows measurement with his hands] In total I found about 20 of them in that area. We didn’t see all of them because it was so wildly overgrown. No inscriptions on them at all, the only inscription I found was on a long stone cut in half, turned over in another part of the yard near the barn; put there for some strange reason. That had a date of 1801, but the earliest burials were probably from the 1750’s to the 1760’s down to about 1801, 1802. They were all Church of England. The Quakers and Presbyterians were buried somewhere else, so it was a family graveyard.

Miller: Going back to the college, what were your first impressions of your students here and did you hold any expectations entering the position?

Myers: No expectations. I had already taught as a teaching assistant at Massachusetts and Arizona a little bit. My expectations of the students were probably a little better then what I had at Massachusetts. They were pretty good students; in many ways, and don’t be insulted, they are far better than they are now. You are an exception there’s no question about that, I’ve had you in class and I know how interesting you are and what your sense of commitment is. It was much more of a student body then it is now. Unfortunately there has been a falling off which you see about the entire country, not just here at the college. They were much more committed to learning, education, and academics than they are now. This helped a lot when you were trying to find your way as a teacher; much more curiosity about things and more energy.
Miller: More interest towards knowledge other than obtaining knowledge for a career. Is that what you are leaning towards?

Myers: Yes, that certainly. The job thing came in much later, and of course there are students whose parents are responsible for that so they obtain a degree and have a decent job. It’s understandable and I have no problem with that, but it wasn’t their obsession.

Miller: Yeah.

Myers: There was more of a sense of them being students than I think you find generally as the case now at the college. Before my morning class, I had given a mid-semester examination last week and people had begun dropping out of my course because of a paper grade too. This student this morning was getting a C and she wanted to drop the course which struck me as kind of curious. I usually don’t care but I asked her why and she said, “It’s going to pull my cum [cumulative GPA] down.” So I said to her, and I was in a very nasty mood this morning, “above all don’t let your cum go down,” and I signed it and pushed her out the door. This obsession with the cum is a thing I never had in college. I didn’t care about my grades; I just did what I wanted to do in terms of reading and writing in fulfilling my needs to satisfy my curiosity. There is a real sense that students are obsessed with grades in a way that I didn’t not find when I came here. I thought that was much healthier. Grades are a real problem and I hate giving grades because they are a nuisance and a damper on things. It’s unfortunate in modern society that they have become so important in gauging achievement, while I don’t think there is much connection between achievement and what a person really knows, and drives that person. That’s one of the biggest changes I’ve seen overtake the student body since I came here.
Miller: OK. We discussed earlier you were working on your PhD while you were teaching here, could you describe the workload of your classes and when you found time to work on your own studies.

Myers: I have no idea how I did it. I told you we had a four course load per semester when I came here. The first semester was three courses in writing plus Shakespeare, and the work load in a writing course alone is almost overwhelming, but three; I don’t know how I did it. I think back on it now from the wonderful workload of two and three to that four and four and I can’t understand how I got through it and survived. One was an eight o’clock class too; you should try teaching students writing at eight o’clock in the morning. Have you had an eight o’clock class?

Miller: Yes.

Myers: A writing class?

Miller: No, I can’t imagine. Do you feel like your PhD took a back seat?

Myers: The first year, not completely because it was still the summer time and I had made a lot of progress on the dissertation already but I wasn’t able to work on it the first semester and a little more my second semester. It actually took me two years to finish the dissertation and I got it in 1970.

Miller: OK. During this difficult start in your first semester did you find any leadership in other professors or colleagues?

Myers: No, I was never looking for it and I never found it. I was a very independent person and I liked to be left alone and I was left alone for better or for ill. There was no direction provided or insisted that I follow. Things were much more free and flexible then they are now, because now there are guidelines, expectations, and all sorts of academic bureaucratic drivel. You’re supposed to suit yourself but I had never tolerated that kind of thing. I think it worked. I mean they let me
alone, respected my integrity and energy and I succeeded. In response I appreciated that and simply reinforced the positive things about the department.

**Miller:** Did you enter with a set curriculum for your class?

**Myers:** No.

**Miller:** Did you form them yourself?

**Myers:** Yes. We were left to do whatever we wanted in a writing course and the Shakespeare course as well even though I couldn’t have used some. I didn’t quite know what plays to pick. I recall briefly talking with the chair about this and he said, “I hope that the new teacher would teach this play,” which I had planned not to teach. So I stuck the play in, but I didn’t like the play and I still don’t like that play. Again it was pretty flexible, and the only courses where we had any set syllabuses were the IDS [Interdisciplinary Studies] literary backgrounds of literature; the classics in translation and there were certain works you had to teach in that class, otherwise no.

**Miller:** Who was the chairperson?

**Myers:** His name was Richard Geyer.

**Miller:** OK. As you know Carl Arnold Hanson was the president of the college upon your arrival, what were your first impressions of President Hanson?

**Myers:** He was an enigma. He was anonymous and a shadowy figure. He was very hard to get a bearing on and very, I can’t say self effacing, but he was never publically a forceful person but privately he was. He had an agenda, he had a program and he rather powerfully and insistently saw to it that the agenda was implemented. He wasn’t above a certain kind of bullying, but not in any unfair or egregiously tyrannical sense. This probably stands for most college presidents. He had come from economics, that was his background and at that time was a pretty important experience to bring with him to the presidency. Curious things I found out about him was that he
would religiously read in the *Gettysburg Times*, the police report to see if any of the faculty had been picked up or ticketed. [Laughs]

**Miller:** [Laughs]

**Myers:** He was very concerned with appearances, which I gradually learned and struck as curious. For the most part he was a shadowy figure. I kept to myself and still do to the point where I had been here for maybe three years and I went to a reception for new faculty with my wife, and he received people at his furniture store of a house compared to the presidential mansion they live in now and it was brand new at the time, introduced us to his wife but didn’t know my name. He simply said without batting an eye and with utter grace, “This is professor and Mrs. Smith.” [Laughs]

**Miller:** [Laughs]

**Myers:** Which I had accepted and walked in and probably should have corrected but it kind of surprised me that he didn’t know me. In a way it surprised me. I was still so occupied with teaching and my dissertation that I didn’t get to really know him that well, but all and all in contract to other presidents we had after him, he was pretty good.

**Miller:** OK.

**Myers:** As college presidents go, and they often don’t go well, as our last one [for example]. He worked from the behind the scenes and did so pretty effectively, but he did have a reputation for being a bit tyrannical and pushy. He secretly and without much fanfare, applied ethical codes and moral expectations to faculty that I hadn’t found in many of his successors. No alcohol was allowed on campus when I arrived here. It was completely dry, and any parties that took place on campus were dry although he did drink wine. He religiously refused to compromise at a point and he was very, very strict about it.
Miller: Going back, Hanson was sometimes criticized due to his slow response to problems or matters on campus and you talked about how he would work behind the scenes. He would gather the opinion of many faculty members before making the ultimate decision; do you feel that is true, or did you witness any professors in the department with this issue?

Myers: I didn’t know that situation to well because of my other responsibilities but I would probably agree with most of that. Most college presidents do take the time because this is one of the functions of a bureaucratic mind, not to spontaneously and impetuously enact the first things that come to their minds. It is an asset that he would seek to obtain the kind of consensus among the faculty before he would implement any policy, but this again is characteristic of a good college president. It’s when you have college presidents that act on their own, and do so again with a sense of impetuosity and recklessness where they begin to have trouble. The faculty begins to feel left out and becomes rebellious, which is what happened with our last president.

Miller: As the campus bid Hanson farewell in 1977, faculty spoke out saying Hanson found faculty as his number one priority because he believed it was crucial for any academic institution to have a strong faculty and to be in touch with him. Do you feel that is true among your colleagues and you as well?

Myers: What was true?

Miller: That he was always in touch with his faculty.

Myers: No, I don’t think that was always true more often than not. Again my problem is I’m out of things a little bit. I don’t know what went on behind the scenes, at a lot of the meetings; various faculty committee meetings. I do recall a couple of times the chair telling the department and also me that one time the department chairs could make or break the presidents at this college, but that was no longer the case here when I arrived. The president was clearly the man in
power, in authority and the various department chairs did not have this sense of authority that
eye once possessed so something had changed over the years. There was a curiously, almost
tyrannical president before Hanson who I think reshaped the whole role of college president. He
was sort of the inheritor of that, the benefiter of that.

Miller: Obviously at this time it was the late 60’s and early 70’s which was a time of political
unrest, especially among college students. Even with some of the board of trustees critical of the
Gettysburgian in particular, Hanson refused censorship of the paper. Did you witness critical
statements in the paper that seemed as though they should have been censored?

Myers: Yes, the paper had remarkable and great degrees of freedom of speech which has
become lost over the years. I don’t know where you’re going with this sense of unrest or turmoil.
I don’t know if you’re aware but at one point in the early 60’s Hanson decreed a moratorium on
classes and shut the place down academically for two or three days in which we simply went to
meetings and talked about the sources of our discontent; the turmoil at the college but also
socially and politically. All students and faculty went to these meetings, except for one faculty,
he was a religion. He was seen several times, heroically, literally lecturing to an empty room
because he refused to compromise. [Laughs]

Miller: [Laughs]

Myers: He and Hanson hated each other’s guts. The faculty was quite different at that time.
They were much more assertive, openly eccentric people who weren’t afraid to challenge
authority. Who were idiosyncratically critical and vocal at faculty meetings then is the case now.
We have an incredibly dull faculty now, they don’t want to rock the boat and they don’t want to
challenge or criticize. We had some remarkable and rather effective people, and I didn’t agree
with them but they weren’t afraid to speak their minds and they were allowed to speak. Even this
Miller: One person I referred to, [John] Loose, he would very cunningly and slyly, at the beginning of faculty meetings for example and get up, “Are there any questions on the minutes from last week?” and would go through and re-punctuate the minutes and challenge the occurrence of a word or two that was not said during the meeting. Hanson hated him for this because he was finding a way for needling Hanson’s attempt to control things through this nitpicking and insistence upon the minutiae of the faculty minutes.

Miller: This Loose, what was he a professor of?

Myers: Religion.

Miller: Was he an older professor?

Myers: No, he wasn’t that old at all. He was maybe 15 to 20 years older than I. He was probably in his late thirties or forties when I came here. A short guy who smoked, well we all smoked in class, it was wonderful. I used to smoke pipes and cigars. He died of throat cancer eventually, unfortunately; and I think he was raised Mennonite. Some of the things that happen now would never be allowed to stand as they are now silently, the fact that they would be rejected individually and as a group, and there was lots of argumentation and a lot of anger coming out of the faculty meetings which you don’t see any more. This is quite refreshing.

Miller: Hanson hesitantly acted upon discipline with the students unless further exploration showed adequate cause to continue with discipline. Do you feel as a result, the students became more vocal at the time?

Myers: Again I had limited experience there, but one experience I had of that which doesn’t support the idea; I was appointed to the student conduct board which was horrible. We used to meet in the dead of night in Pennsylvania Hall, and it was run like an Elizabethan Star Chamber. I was recently involved in a student disciplinary action last semester with one of my students in
the anarchism seminar and things have not changed that much; there have been a few modifications in procedures. At that time, it was a student of mine that was involved in this episode. He had been set upon in the parking lot behind Glatfelter gratuitously by two or three students who beat him up and he wound up being disciplined which I was outrageous. I brought up during the proceedings, “did you do anything to provoke these people?” and the student said honestly, “no, I was walking across the parking lot and they appeared and began assaulting me.” This was sort of ignored or disqualified, and about a year later at the Pub I had met him and he bought me a beer and said, “You were the only person at that hearing who asked any question I thought was just or fair.” My sense was that he was railroaded very, very outrageously and unfairly. So no, I don’t agree with that. There’s no sense of this, it was very early on and Hanson could have easily intervened and done something about it, but chose not to and allowed the faculty-student group which judges that to have its way. I felt it was a miscarriage of justice, and I refused to have anything to do with that committee after that, because of my experience.

**Miller:** Did the students voice their opinion on campus as the faculty did against the administration and such?

**Myers:** Yes, all the time.

**Miller:** Any experiences that stand out to you on that matter?

**Myers:** A lot, I can’t identify them all. There was a lot of picketing, student demonstrations; my second or third year there was a black student who was a real rabble rouser or incendiary. He called himself messiah, and he refused to obey, to discipline himself, and respect authority and made himself a real pain in the ass to most of the faculty and administration. He was a kind of extreme motor behavior that you saw a lot amongst students. I can recall him trying to bring certain issues, perceptions that he felt were unfair to the faculty as he walked into a faculty
meeting one night. He would actually accost the faculty, and this was the kind of thing that was going on then. It was extreme, but at the same time it was unique.

**Miller:** Yeah. Were these actions met expulsion or what?

**Myers:** We couldn’t expel him because he did nothing wrong; hostility on the part of some faculty, not all because some respected his right to express himself while others rejected or ignored them. It was very complex, I don’t think you could generalize. Simply demonstrating or objecting or verbally criticizing wouldn’t be ground for expulsion. There were no acts of violence. No one was throwing incendiary bombs through windows or burning books, and they weren’t blocking access to classes as other universities such as Columbia or Berkley. Everything was perfectly legal although legal in ways that made a lot of people uncomfortable and perceived in their own perception of imminence and authority.

**Miller:** Hanson retired on August 31, 1977 after two open-heart surgeries. He had asked the board of trustees to step down and retire. How did the campus react?

**Myers:** I don’t remember. I don’t recall.

**Miller:** Was there a smooth transition towards the next president.

**Myers:** Yes, I do think so. I do recall that it was relatively effortless, but of course any transition is going to be occasion for anxiety and discomfort. It wasn’t traumatic. I think [Charles] Glassick was next, a very curious man.

**Miller:** Back to your position, did you continue to teach the same classes as the years progressed?

**Myers:** Well Shakespeare is my staple, I was hired to teach Shakespeare; usually half my course-load was Shakespeare. All of us in the department had to teach composition at that point, as it is not the instance now. I also developed new courses almost every year. We were on a
three-one-three calendar year for a while, where we had three months in the fall, one month in January, and three months in the spring. Each of us would teach one course in January, which would meet almost every day of the week and it was very intensive. This really allowed us to explore and develop new types of courses. It also carried into other opportunities in the department; two hundred level courses on different subject matters, focuses, and themes. I always availed myself with the opportunity, so I had a lot of kinds of courses in my history.

Miller: Have they become to solidify within the past decade?

Myers: No, they opened up in fact. When one of my colleagues in the department died, I took over his Irish courses and I was invited to teach early 17th century literature apart from drama, which I wasn’t hired to teach. Then I began to teach the first year seminar when that opened up. The Irish course initially began as a 19th century, early 20th century and contemporary Irish literature course but it also led to other courses; a seminar on Yates for example I taught three or four times. I actually began increasingly opening up my repertoire if you will; Shakespeare, renaissance literature, Irish literature, and classes completely indefinable in chaos theory for example. There is no sense of solidifying; the repertoire was based in Shakespeare and that’s what I was hired to teach. I also had a lot of flexibility and freedom to create and explore new things which I’ve availed myself of every year.

Miller: I know you have been writing your entire life ever since elementary school. Once becoming a professor, when did you look to begin publishing not only articles but actual books and the research included in that?

Myers: I don’t know when because it was natural. Sometime, relatively early I published my first book which was a collection of essays by Elizabethan writers on the conquest and the reconquest of Ireland; the Irish question as they called it. That was in the 70’s; three of them have
focused on Irish literature. This one here [points to bookshelf] is mostly colonial American history and biography. I have articles on literature, and literary criticism as well as history and cartography. That whole shelf there [points to bookshelf] is full of my publications and essays. I enjoy writing and publishing and there was never any problem for me. I never felt that this was an impossible criterion, and unfair one we had to meet. I just enjoyed it and it has always been a delight to write and get published. I was involved in this from my earliest years on, ever since I tried to get my dissertation published and it didn’t make it but the energy and the curiosity kept me alive after that.

**Miller:** Did the subject matter of your books a catalyst for new classes or vice versa?

**Myers:** Interesting, up to a point. I had to redefine my scholarship because of my home situation, because I couldn’t travel and leave home for a month in London to do research in a British museum. In other words I couldn’t undertake research on Shakespeare or Elizabethan drama. I had to redefine myself as a person who researched and wrote history rather than literary criticism. It was a history I had to have access to, so it became local history in archives in Harrisburg, Philadelphia, or Library of Congress. So I reinvented myself and primarily published in history rather than literature; and cartography, the history of map making which is absolutely fascinating stuff. I don’t know if I answered your question or not, how did we get off on that tangent?

Courses?

**Miller:** Yes.

**Myers:** Some of the stuff I published on Ireland was historical as well as literary and this carried over into my Irish courses certainly. I also made presentations at Irish conferences which helped out with my teaching of 19th and 20th century literature. I gave up trying to publish in Shakespeare for a number of reasons. I couldn’t stand Shakespeare scholars; I went to a couple
of conferences and I couldn’t tolerate the stuffiness the arrogance, the sense of privilege the
Shakespeare scholars brought with them. They alienated me, so I gave up on them. I loved
Teaching Shakespeare but I never tried to publish after a couple of efforts. So the publications are
mostly on Irish literature, Anglo-Irish history, and Scots-Irish history in colonial Pennsylvania.
This usually didn’t carry over into my teaching, so there was kind of a gap or disengagement
between my research, not completely, but it’s not intimately connected in what you would find in
most faculty where they teach what they research and write. That is not the case with me.

**Miller:** We earlier discussed the change in the student body and students’ thirst for knowledge.
How did the academic standard change or remain for that matter, at Gettysburg College?

**Myers:** [Laughs] the kind of grade inflation which has ruined public education has affected the
college too, but it is not as drastic or as serious. People grade easier, not so much in response to
parental pressure or bureaucratic pressure as is in the case of high school, but more because they
don’t have the time or they are lazy. I know for a fact that in my own department over the years
my colleagues have not taken very serious the responsibility of teaching students how to write
through grading their papers. There is a lot of lip service paid to this, a lot of criticisms that
students can’t write but they don’t do much when they get the students’ papers and they allow
outrageous things to allow on papers without comment. They allow the grades to reflect, I think,
something other than really objective assessment of the paper. They simply pass it off and over
grade for the most part. I can even recall in the 70’s and 80’s one my friends in the department
who came in after I did would criticize me on spending too much effort on a paper, “the students
aren’t going to read this, why bother?” he told me. Even he graded more rigorously then is
generally found today, in this department through most other departments. Maybe the only other
department in the college is history, where that department had maintained some type of standard
in respect to what is written in essay writing. In fact there are probably people in the history department who grade more rigorously than in most people in my department. I’m thinking of Birkner for one. [Laughs]

**Miller:** Yeah [Laughs]

**Myers:** Some people are no longer there, Forness was another one but he’s not in the department anymore. So generally there is a relaxation in grading, I think there is a gap between what is submitted from students and how the faculty asses and grade it. [Taps desk with his foot incessantly] They have lost their concern for higher standards for the most part, and this is irksome and bothersome because I haven’t really relaxed that much. I can recall talking about this with a dean, a couple of deans ago, and I was talking about no longer being able to criticize a certain grammatical lapse in papers and the dean said, “No you can’t do that, you must respect that grammatical principal.” For the most part you don’t find this occurrence, you know, “why bother?” In a sense the faculty has given up, which really bothers me and I think it bodes ill for the future of the college and education in general because it’s not unique to this case.

**Miller:** I know when teachers give me back criticisms, and not just corrections, it is very helpful especially for the next paper.

**Myers:** And that’s what it’s for. Just recently I handed back papers in one of my courses of Shakespeare, upper level 319 for majors, this student who I had talked to before he wrote the paper to help him get his ideas straight did a lousy job setting those ideas down. I provided him with a full page of typed commentary with all my annotations, not on his ideas but on the bad job he did on writing the essay; a persuasive and well supported essay. I actually talked with him last week and he kept insisting that we had his ideas though out well but he didn’t read my commentary, which I pointed out what was truly wrong. He hadn’t read this and wanted to talk
to me about improving his grade. This is not unusual and that bothers me. There is this sense that students feel entitled to a grade, and that’s a real problem with me, because they were lied to and cheated in high school and they feel the game should go on in that level. “I always got A’s in high school,” we talked about this in the seminar. “I got A’s, I got A’s.”

Miller: Yeah.

Myers: I had a couple like this last week. You look at the paper and you see that it’s not an A paper and it’s not just me. It’s very frustrating, students are no longer pre-disposed to improve themselves as writers; very few are and when you find the ones that do you latch on to them and really encourage them.

Miller: I remember you telling me, “Writing is rewriting and rewriting and rewriting.”

Myers: Absolutely, which I’m still learning.

Miller: What are your current thoughts on the college?

Myers: That’s huge.

Miller: Is it heading in a good direction.

Myers: No, it’s getting caught up in too much ephemerality, too much cliché educational attitudes. It is the coming of things such as globalization. I’m trying to think of the clichés and the buzz words we use around here now; diversity, globalization, sustainability. We are using these bureaucratic, empty words to pervert the liberal education and becoming unfairly, socially adjusted rather than educating our students in the broadest educational sense we used to do at this college. It’s this vocation preparation attitude that’s beginning to infect the college. We’re not educating, increasingly as we talked about in the seminar where you had to socialize the student body rather than educate them. We’re doing so by using these clichés and buzz words that I just mentioned to you. The sociologists and anthropologists have taken control and the educational
bureaucrats too; beginning with the state. It’s a little hard for the state to control what goes on at private colleges but they’re doing a good job of it. They’ve got their fifth columns in place and they are beginning to cease control, especially in the way we are required to train teachers; secondary and elementary education or if you don’t do what we tell you we won’t give you the money from the federal or state governments. So the liberal education is becoming really perverted and this I think is extremely alarming. I’m not alone in this, a lot of us see this going on but a few people are willing to do or say anything about it so they are going along with it. This is bleak, this is dark. [Laughs]

**Miller:** Well, thank you so much for the interview.