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Interview with Robert O'Brien, January 9, 2006

Robert O'Brien

Michael J. Birkner
Gettysburg College

Interview Participants

Interviewee: Robert O'Brien, Class of 1951, Gettysburg College
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Description
Robert O'Brien was interviewed on January 9, 2006 by Michael J. Birkner about his military service during World War II and his years as a student at Gettysburg College. He discusses his childhood and time at Muhlenberg College, before he enlisted in the US Navy Air Corps and served at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. After the war he came to Gettysburg on a basketball scholarship. He discusses his experience as a physics major, fraternity brother, and college athlete.

Length of Interview: 94 minutes

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ORAL HISTORY WITH ROBERT O’BRIEN, Gettysburg College Class of 1951.

This is January 9, 2006. I’m Michael Birkner and I’m sitting at the home of Robert O’Brien of 125 E. Broadway in Gettysburg, PA. We’re going to spend the next ninety minutes talking about Bob’s life, experiences in the Second World War and beyond, including his years as a student at Gettysburg College. Bob, I want to start by asking you about your growing up years. Tell me when you were born, where you were born and a little about your parents.

O’Brien: Well, I was born in Brooklyn on March 12, 1927 and lived in an apartment in Brooklyn with my mother and father and four sisters until I was about eight years old. And then we moved over to Bergen County to Ridgefield Park and lived in a house on Lincoln Avenue.

Birkner: What were your parents’ names?

O’Brien: My father’s name was Robert O’Brien, the same as me, so I was a junior but I don’t use the junior anymore and my mother’s name was Margaret Powers.

Birkner: I assume your father was the bread-winner and your mother was a homemaker, is that right?

O’Brien: Right.

Birkner: What did your father do for a living?
O’Brien: He was a mailman in New York City. His route was downtown down around the Fulton Fish Market area.

Birkner: And the good news about that was that he had a secure job at a time when many people didn’t when the stock market crashed and the depression hit.

O’Brien: That’s right.

Birkner: Because people who worked for the federal government were protected even if they weren’t getting much money, they did have jobs.

O’Brien: Yes, he worked for the post office as a postal delivery man his whole life.

Birkner: Do you have any early memories of Brooklyn or are your first memories New Jersey memories?

O’Brien: I have some memories of Brooklyn. A half a block down from where we lived, we lived in the middle of the block, were cobblestone streets that had trolleys that ran tracks through the cobblestones. And above the trolley tracks were elevated trains. So you had trolleys and elevated trains going down the main thoroughfare in Brooklyn. And we lived, as I recollect, maybe a half a dozen blocks away from a large park in Brooklyn called Prospect Park. The section is called “Park Slope.”
Birkner: I know the park and it's a beauty. Today that would be considered a very desirable location I would imagine.

O'Brien: It was just standard apartments. It wasn't big, and we had seven in the family. I had four sisters and myself and so it was pretty crowded. We had one bathroom and probably three bedrooms.

Birkner: It was a typical house.

O'Brien: I would say money was a little hard to come by but we were not deprived.

Birkner: Did you go to Catholic school or public school?

O'Brien: I started off at a Catholic school called St. Augustine which was three or blocks from where I lived. And when I was in third grade I moved over to New Jersey and went to another Catholic school called St. Francis in Ridgefield Park.

Birkner: When you made the move to Ridgefield Park when you were a boy of about eight, did you have a strong feeling that this was a good thing or a bad thing or you just figured that you would do whatever your parents said?

O'Brien: I did what my parents said. I didn't have a feeling one way of another. . . . In Brooklyn they had half year promotions and I was in the cycle that started in January and ran until September. When I moved to New
Jersey, they had full year promotions. The issue was I’d either go back a half year or go forward a half year and my marks were good so they moved me forward. And I have to say I really struggled in fourth grade. Fifth grade was a little bit of struggle and then sixth I was OK. But in hindsight I concluded that the school in New Jersey was probably ahead of the one in Brooklyn anyway. And then when I was put ahead the challenge was considerable. . . . It took a couple of years to catch up but eventually I did.

Birkner: For the sake of people who might be reading the transcript years from now, please describe first the towns that bounded Ridgefield Park and second give a little description of Ridgefield Park in the 1930s as you remember it.

O’Brien: Well, it was a town of middle income people. People who worked for the post office, like my dad did, and the police department, or worked in manufacturing facilities. It was bounded by towns that are similar in nature like Bergenfield and maybe Hackensack but it also had some towns that were rather affluent like Teaneck, which was affluent and parts of Englewood, which was also fairly affluent for a town. And Bogota was a town which was pretty much like Ridgefield Park. So that was the general sort of real estate ambiance in the area. And at that time there
were no shopping malls like you have today so that
Hackensack was the main shopping area for that whole series
of towns in Bergen County.

**Birkner:** Absolutely and to a lesser extent probably
Englewood, but Hackensack for sure. Now you obviously had a
greater sense of elbow room in Ridgefield Park, then you did
in Brooklyn?

**O’Brien:** Yeah, we had a two-story house. And we had more
room but it was still seven people. It was not a large
house but it was certainly significantly larger than the
apartment that we had in Brooklyn.

**Birkner:** Was space the main reason your parents moved back
to the suburbs?

**O’Brien:** I don’t know the reason they moved out but this
goes back a ways. My grandmother gave the house to my
father because my grandmother and especially my grandfather
at one time was what used to be called, if I understood it
correctly, the weigher of New York in which case he was
responsible for all imports into New York City and had that
responsibility which is a story in itself. You want me to
talk about that?

**Birkner:** Yes, but before you do let’s just for the
transcriber’s sake know that what you said when you referred
to the weigher of New York.
O'Brien: That's correct. But the weigher was in those days in New York City was always a big power. And up until the time my grandfather actually won the job, it was a politically appointed job. And if I have it correctly which I think I do, it was at a time when the federal government wanted to install civil service. And so the head of Tammany Hall appointed an individual to take the place of the retiring weigher of New York. And I think Grover Cleveland was the president at the time, and he determined that's going to be part of civil service. And so the Civil Service Board of Examiners gave a test. And something like fifty people that took the test and my grandfather [earned] the highest mark. And so he was selected to be the weigher of New York. And so he got the job and he was in charge of the imports for a long time. And in that capacity he had a nice home in Brooklyn but also bought some property in New Jersey in the Ridgefield Park area just as it was starting to develop. And part of that property was the house that my grandmother gave to my dad because my grandfather had died prior to that.

Birkner: The house was being rented out to others before that?

O'Brien: Yes.
Birkner: I see. So you were in this house in Ridgefield Park. As a boy what were your main interests?

O'Brien: Well, sports mostly.

Birkner: Baseball, basketball, football?

O'Brien: Right. You had a standard where you play with a gang of guys who play in season. So in the Summer you play baseball, Fall you play football, Winter you play basketball. When I was in high school in Ridgefield Park I played three sports in high school, football, basketball and baseball too.

Birkner: I assume that you played towns like Bogota and Little Ferry. What other towns did you play against?

O'Brien: Well, the league we were in was called The NNJIL, the Northern New Jersey Interscholastic League. And the teams that were in it were, I think there were eight teams in it and it was Cliffside Park, Hackensack, Tenafly, Leonia, Teaneck, Ridgefield Park, Rutherford and there was another one but I can’t remember it right now.

Birkner: Not Bergenfield or Dumont?

O'Brien: No.

Birkner: There was a BCSL that these towns played in.

O'Brien: Yeah, whatever it was.

Birkner: It strikes me then that you guys were playing pretty big towns.
O'Brien: Yeah, we were what in those days what was called the group two school. . . . We always competed successfully. . . .

Birkner: Now, did you play well enough to play varsity in these three sports?

O'Brien: Yes.

Birkner: And of the three where was you greatest strength?

O'Brien: Basketball.

Birkner: And as a high school player were you on a successful team?

O'Brien: Yeah. We were the number one team in the state of New Jersey.

Birkner: That's successful! In your league you were number one in New Jersey?

O'Brien: We were number one in the league, we were number one in the county, we were number one in the state.

Birkner: That's very good.

O'Brien: And we were a group two school. And we were rated higher than a group four school.

Birkner: You're showing me a clipping right now from the Bergen Evening Record; it says Ridgefield Park and Bogota were state Champions. Bogota won in group two.

O'Brien: And we won in group three.
Birkner: And your picture is featured in here. Oh, my goodness gracious. He’s laughing. Put that in the transcript!

O’Brien: In there he [sports columnist Al Del Grec] says we were clearly number one.

Birkner: I read his columns when I was a young man because I grew up in Bergen County. only a little later. So this is called athletic success. Tell me a little bit your coach in basketball.

O’Brien: The coach’s name was Frank Bell. We won the state championship game by twenty-five or thirty points. It was sort of embarrassing. . . . We tried to keep the score down but . . . we had, I think, two of the top ten guys in the state on the All-State team, one on the first team, one on the second team—Artie Fitzgerald who’s indicated in the headlines, and Jimmy Doran.

Birkner: You had talent is what you’re saying.

O’Brien: Yeah, we did. If you look at the right side [of the picture], they got it mixed up. It’s says Fitzgerald.

Birkner: What’s interesting here and worth noting is that the clipping that we have just been looking at is dated March 27, 1944. It’s very interesting to see this kind of what I would call normalcy in high school life. the basketball championships going on against the backdrop of a
great war which is of course sucking out the town of particularly the males into the war effort. Were you a junior or a senior when this picture was taken?

O'Brien: I was a senior.

Birkner: So this was going to be the end of the line for you in high school.

O'Brien: Yes, you see when I was a young age senior because I had skipped that half of grade. So I ended up going to college on a scholarship and I played as a freshman in college because I didn’t turn eighteen until March of my first year in college.

Birkner: And while they would accept a volunteer at seventeen they wouldn’t draft you until eighteen?

O’Brien: That’s right.

Birkner: OK. Talk for a minute before we get into your thinking about college. You were just in high school when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Tell me whether your family paid any attention to public affairs. Did you read newspapers or discuss war events either with your family or with any of your friends? How much attention were you paying in the late 1930s to the ominous developments around the world?

O’Brien: I would say not a great deal. I was in high school. I was a teenager and outside of sports the only important thing was girls.
Birkner: I understand.

O’Brien: And so and my mom and dad never talked about world events because with five children, everybody was trying to do their homework and get on with life. So the national and international details that some people might be discussing, we never got into that.

Birkner: Did your family, your mother or father ever express positive or negative opinions about President Roosevelt?

O’Brien: Not that I recollect but off hand I would have to say while we were Irish and Catholic and in those days that makes you a Democrat. And so all the Irish Catholics would vote Democrat.

Birkner: Without thinking about it.

O’Brien: Yeah, and I’m a registered Republican and my sister said, “If mom ever knew that she would roll over in her grave.”

Birkner: There you go. Now let me switch gears to the side of the radio. Did you have favorite radio programs in your house or personally during the 1930s?

O’Brien: There was a standard group of radio programs I think most people listened to including us which were Jack Benny, Fred Allen and the kids maybe right before dinner would listen to something like The Shadow.
Birkner: I was just going to mention that.

O’Brien: And Little Orphan Annie maybe, the Shadow and the Lone Ranger. They were standard fare. And then later on in the evening there was a drama theatre called The Lux Theatre that everybody would listen to unless you had to go to bed, of course.

Birkner: It probably was good for your imagination.

O’Brien: Yeah, yeah. The Jack Benny, Fred Allen shows were really enjoyable, I think because TV hadn’t come of age yet. And that was the standard family type of recreation in the evening.

Birkner: Was the Lone Ranger on radio at that time?

O’Brien: Yes, the kids would listen to the Lone Ranger.

Birkner: “High ho, Silver!” Right?

O’Brien: It was something like a cloud of dust and a hearty “high ho Silver.”

Birkner: That’s right. I think Ozzie and Harriet started out as a radio show before it became a television show.

O’Brien: I don’t know that, but it might have been. Incidentally, they were originally from Ridgefield Park.

Birkner: And he went to Rutgers if I’m not mistaken.

O’Brien: Yes [inaudible].

Birkner: That’s my understanding too. That’s an interesting New Jersey connection. Did you listen to
President Roosevelt’s speech after Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

O’Brien: I don’t remember that.

Birkner: What is your recollection of receiving the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

O’Brien: Well, it came across the radio. I mean I don’t recollect the instant that it happened but as soon as it happened it was communicated rapidly across radio and neighborhoods.

Birkner: You knew the world was going to change.

O’Brien: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Birkner: Now, of course you were only fourteen so it doesn’t have the same immediacy if you were nineteen at that time probably.

O’Brien: Absolutely.

Birkner: So what I’m saying is, sports is the world for a fourteen year old guy. Now, what about during the war itself, to what extent do you feel looking back on it that your high school education or high school experience was affected by the war—or was it?

O’Brien: I don’t think it was affected. The only element of my education that was affected by the war is that they had a special course for seniors who were interested in military service. And so it had mathematics, a lot of it
was Air Force oriented so you might have a little bit of algebra and navigation, some scientific principles related to thrust and things of that type that related to airplanes and things associated with it.

**Birkner:** But you were not in that program?

**O'Brien:** Well, it wasn’t a program, it was just a course.

**Birkner:** Well, were you in that course?

**O'Brien:** Yeah, I took the course as a senior and then I did get in the Navy Air Corps after that. I signed up when I turned eighteen which was in 1944, no, 1945 because I had gone to Muhlenberg on an athletic scholarship, played basketball during the basketball season because I was only seventeen. And when the season was over or toward the end of the season I enlisted in the program for carrier pilots called V5 and passed the test and if you were a new enlistee they didn’t call you up the next day. They called us about a month later. And by that time the basketball season was over and we went into the Navy Air Corps.

**Birkner:** In your senior year, which was 1943, ’44 you had started to think a little bit about college and you were too young to go into the army as a draftee or any of the armed forces. What steered you toward Muhlenberg College?

**O’Brien:** They offered me a full scholarship.
Birkner: How do you think they knew about you that you would be attractive to them?

O'Brien: Well, we won the state [basketball] championship and that gives you lot of visibility. And there was a coach at Muhlenberg named “Doggie” Julian.

Birkner: I’ve heard that name somehow.

O'Brien: Well, Doggie Julian coached Muhlenberg at that time and a year after I was at Muhlenberg he left and went to Holy Cross and won the national championship at Holy Cross with three great players, Bob Cousy, Kaftan, and Mullaney. And then he was so successful there he was hired to coach the Boston Celtics. And he coached the Celtics for three or four years, not very successfully. So then the cigar smoking guy took over, [Red] Auerbach. Auerbach, yeah and then Doggie left the Celtics and coached at Dartmouth until his retirement.

Birkner: That’s where I’ve heard of him—-from Dartmouth.

O'Brien: Yeah, he coached at Dartmouth, I don’t know, ten or fifteen years. Because when Dartmouth would play Princeton and other various places in New Jersey I would go down and see the game and then talked to him.

Birkner: He had coached you.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Birkner: So he actually recruited you at Muhlenberg?
O'Brien: Right.

Birkner: Do you recall whether Muhlenberg was the only college you applied to or did you apply to several?

O'Brien: That was the only one. My parents never once asked me if I wanted to go to college. They didn’t think that way. In retrospect, I always believed it was my mother’s expectation that when I got out of high school I’m going to work and help her live an easier life. An Irish mother. I’m the only son, with four sisters. But in my mind I said, “I’m going to go to college.” I might have gone to Bergen Junior College [now Fairleigh Dickinson University]; the community colleges didn’t exist. Fortunately, because of my success in basketball I got a full scholarship at Muhlenberg and played there for one year.

Birkner: I realize that this is a very small piece of your long life but why don’t you just for the record tell me whatever you remember that stands out about that year at Muhlenberg, whether it’s basketball or other things. What do you remember about that year at Muhlenberg?

O'Brien: I would say basketball was the big thing. Fortunately, we had some talent. I was seventeen and there were a couple of other seventeen year olds that were fairly good. They also ha at, Muhlenberg what was called V5 and
V12 programs. V5 was Navy Air Officer Corps Training. V12 was Navy Officer Line Ship Training. And in those groups we had three very good basketball players. So we had about six guys that I think would be considered fairly good college team for that period of time because a lot of the good athletes that were older were all in service. All the good athletes that were over eighteen were either in service or in training in programs like the V5, V12 programs. And so Muhlenberg went 25 wins and 3 losses [that year]. We beat most everybody and we played in Madison Square Garden during the season against St. Francis and we beat them. And I think that was one of the spring boards to get us invited to the NIT [tournament] because that was a big tournament in those days. You know they had DePaul and Kentucky and Indiana and then Muhlenberg. You know, “Who’s Muhlenberg, where are they from?” So we played St. John’s and lost by one point.

Birkner: Well, that’s a great memory. As an athlete in those days I’m sure you were sort of a big man on campus even as a seventeen year old, right?

O’Brien: Well at the campus there wasn’t a lot of guys there because really outside of the V5 and V12 and they only had one or two semesters and then they’re gone. The only other ones that were there were pre-ministerial students
because Muhlenberg was like Gettysburg. There were a number of students that were called pre-min that were going to the seminary to be ministers. So there wasn’t a big population of students other than the military training groups and some seventeen year olds.

Birkner: Am I to understand that you spent a full year at Muhlenberg and at the end of that year you went into the military?

O’Brien: Yes, but I didn’t quite have a full year because I went into the military in April and the semester wasn’t over yet.

Birkner: How did they take you without you having finished your semester?

O’Brien: Because that’s when they called me to go in. They didn’t say “Well, you need another month and a half or whatever it is to finish the semester.” When we enlisted I thought we would go sooner, because we enlisted in March and I thought we would go by the end of March at the latest we would be gone. But we didn’t go until April, early April.

Birkner: So you enlisted when you turned eighteen. And they called you a couple of months later.

O’Brien: Well yes, maybe a month or less.

Birkner: Where did you head next?
O'Brien: I went to what was called NATTC, Naval Air Technical Training Center in Memphis, Tennessee. The Navy had a special boot camp for Navy Air Corps guys. And so they would send you over there because they were going to put you in school but they can’t put you in school until the semesters are over. And so they had these training programs for the potential flyers and then when the semester would be over like in September then they would put you in school in the V5 program. But I was in, so in the boot camp they would teach you the naval discipline and also there was some electronics. They had mock-ups of planes and variable communication systems, things of that nature. But they required technical skills to get navigation and engineering related to your planes and whatever. And then what happened was I didn’t even get to college because the German war ended. Before we headed for school the Navy came back and said for guys like me, because we had just gotten in service and we were in the midst of preliminary training, if you want to be a flyer, you have to sign up for five years. Initially we were signed up for the duration of hostilities, plus six months, since everybody had signed up for that term of service. And I and all my friends said, “We don’t want to sign up for five years.” So then they transferred you out to other bases. They sent me to the
Naval Air Station in Jacksonville and put me in the PT Department, physical training you know. So I played basketball for the base team at the Naval Air Station until I got out.

Birkner: I want to be sure I understood you correctly, Bob, Basically you had a choice to make between signing up for five years and going into being a pilot or going wherever they wanted to send you under the understanding that would be duration plus six months.

O'Brien: Yes, right.

Birkner: So you would have been preparing to be part of the invasion of Japan?

O'Brien: Depending on where they put you. Yeah, but the Air Corps training was probably a year or more and by that time the Japanese war was over. But the reason for the five years was the recognition that once the German war was over the Japanese war would be over shortly thereafter because they were moving closer and closer to Japan.

Birkner: Were they actually training you for anything when you were in Jacksonville?

O'Brien: No. In the morning I had what was called the gear locker room that had sports equipment in it. So if you had time off and you wanted to play baseball with a group of guys, you would come over and give me your ID cards and I’d
give you a baseball bat, gloves, and whatever and then you’d
go and play and when you come back you’d get your ID card
back. Or basketballs or football or whatever. So it was a
you know they called it a ID locker. Give me your ID and
I’d give you sports equipment. That was in the morning and
then in the afternoon we practiced basketball or play if we
were playing another team. We might play Pensacola, or
Memphis or Houston or whatever.

Birkner: Sounds like a pretty good war.

O’Brien: Yeah. Well, there were guys in the Naval Air
Station in Jacksonville that were there during the whole war
because they were training, a physical training kind of
thing. In fact as a side issue, one of my sisters, Dorothy,
joined the Navy Air Corps and became a machinist mate and
worked on Navy planes. And she was in Jacksonville when I
moved down there.

Birkner: That’s nice.

O’Brien: Yes, she was there. And then she met her
boyfriend, a sailor, who was always an athlete and I played
with him on the team. And they eventually got married.

Birkner: Well, I was going to ask you about your
experiences in Jacksonville. And one of the things I wanted
to ask you about was whether you ever noticed the
segregation of the South in regards to race?
O'Brien: No, normally no. . . . When we were in boot camp in Memphis at NATTC, there were some southerners who in my judgment had like a chip on their shoulder because of the Civil War issue. And I wouldn’t say there was strong animosity but there was a feeling by some of them against the North. But most of them, you know, we were all together and we were a bunch of seventeen and eighteen year olds. We were worried about the war and not the long lasting effect of the Civil War.

Birkner: I want to be more specific then in my question. Did you notice segregation, separate water fountains, the fact that blacks were not training with you?

O'Brien: No.

Birkner: You didn’t notice any of that?

O'Brien: I didn’t notice that because when I was in Memphis in the boot camp and we didn’t get off the base very much at all because you were confined. And then when I was in Florida I didn’t really notice that. And I think it was not quite so prevalent in Florida as it might be in Alabama or Mississippi or Louisiana.

Birkner: I think it probably was but it might have been more hidden.

O'Brien: If it was there I didn’t notice it and plus the fact, even there, I hadn’t been in service very long, I
didn’t get a lot of time off, so I was on the base most of the time except when we were playing basketball.

Birkner: That might affect the next question I was going to ask you because I was curious. Most young healthy soldiers when they have some free time are interested in the local female population and I’m just wondering, did you have an eye on a particular girl or been out to dances?

O’Brien: Oh yeah. I had a high school girl friend when I was in high school junior and senior year. And in my senior year as we called it in those days we “went steady,” which means we just dated each other and nobody else. But then when I went to college it broke up and she went her way and I went mine. So when you were in service in those days most of the relationship with a woman was at the USO dances. So on week-ends, no matter where you were at any city, any place, it was always USO dances on week-ends. And a few of the local gals would dance and associate with the local military guys.

Birkner: I bet it was fun.

O’Brien: Yeah, it was, it was fun.

Birkner: Were you in a normal situation, a normal day in Jacksonville on base when President Truman announced that the Japanese had surrendered?

O’Brien: I don’t remember that.
Birkner: But you obviously paid attention to that because it meant you were going to get out of the service, right?

O’Brien: Except I was probably one of the last men that got out of the service because I was one of the last guys in and so what happened when I was discharged it was like the end of August or the beginning of September of 1946 when most of the guys were out and they were all flooding into colleges. And so I didn’t go to college that year because I was just getting out.

Birkner: So were you in Jacksonville through the period from April of ’45 when the war ended until they released you from your service obligation?

O’Brien: Around there, yeah. I don’t remember the exact month but it was the end of August, 1946. When I got transferred, I don’t remember from Memphis to Jacksonville, but yes, I just was in the Naval Air Station until everybody else got out because we had a point system depending on how long you were in service during the war and how much overseas duty you had. And I didn’t have any overseas duty and I didn’t serve very long, a little over a year and so I was one of the last ones to be discharged.

Birkner: I see. It must have been slow, life must have been pretty slow in late 1946.

O’Brien: It was, yeah, it was.
Birkner: Now, you were clearly thinking at some point in ‘46, they are going to let me out of here eventually. Were you starting to think about going back to Muhlenberg or were you thinking about going into the work force? What was going through your mind?

O’Brien: I was thinking about going back to Muhlenberg. Except what happened when I got out of service, of course I had taken a year off because everybody else was in colleges and my expectation was I would go to Muhlenberg. Back to Muhlenberg except the coaches changed. And Doggie went up to Holy Cross. Muhlenberg brought in a hot-shot football coach, Ben Schwartzwaller, who focused on football and allocated fewer scholarships to basketball and as much as he can for football. Because he was the controlling factor in the scholarships and so there was a lot of turmoil. My friends, some of them that were there, that had gone back to Muhlenberg, were thinking about going elsewhere. And so I was looking around at a number of schools. But it wasn’t as easy then, to be very honest, because I only had a little bit of the GI bill. I didn’t have four years in service because I was only in the service a year and so therefore while I was looking for a full scholarship for that part of my education which was not financed by the GI bill. And so I played a lot of basketball that would be called semi-pro.
Toward the end of that season a coach from Teaneck High School, Charlie Knapp, who was not even my high school coach, came up to me and said "Have you decided where you want to go?" And I said "No." I really had wanted to go to Lafayette because I wanted to take electrical engineering there, an engineering course. And they gave basketball scholarships. And like Lehigh, which is a good engineering program, they gave football and wrestling scholarships. They didn’t care about basketball. You might be interested in this. I had discussions with the basketball coach at Lafayette. His name was Anderson and he eventually became the athletic director. And we couldn’t come to terms as far as what he could give me from a scholarship standpoint to complement my limited GI bill. And so we couldn’t come to terms on the scholarship end of it. And then the thing that surprised me on the other dimension to it that we had a disagreement on was what I was going to take in terms of courses. He asked me, "Had I decided what I was going to major in?" I said, "Yeah, I was going to take electrical engineering." And he said, "My scholarship athletes don’t take electric engineering." He said, "How about phys ed?" I said, "I don’t want to be a coach. I want to take electrical engineering." I said. "What’s wrong with electrical engineering?" "Oh there’s laboratories in the
afternoon, it’s a hard course and I got to worry about eligibility.” So that sealed the deal; that was the end of that.

**Birkner:** Can I ask you just to back a second. You mentioned that Coach Knapp in Bergen County got to thinking about where you might want to go to college when you resumed your academic course. But remind me, who was Coach Knapp, what was he the coach of?

**O’Brien:** He was coach of Teaneck High School.

**Birkner:** And he knew about you from playing in this league?

**O’Brien:** This guy came up to me there. They used to have an armory called Bergenfield Armory.

**Birkner:** You mean Teaneck Armory.

**O’Brien:** Well, I don’t know, but there was one in Bergenfield.

**Birkner:** Well it was on Bergenfield’s border with Teaneck, on the Teaneck side.

**O’Brien:** Well, maybe, OK. And they had a professional team that we use to play on Sundays. They were ex-college guys who had graduated. And on a preliminary game they would have these semi-pro teams that I mentioned to you. And you played until you lost. So we were like the third team to go in and play. And we won every game for the rest of the season. And at the end of the last game Charlie
Knapp came up to me and said, “Where are you going to go to college?” And I explained my situation. And then he said “Did you ever think of Gettysburg?”

Birkner: He said this Gettysburg thing before you had the discussions with Lafayette or after you had the discussions with Lafayette?

O’Brien: I think it was after.

Birkner: So you’re still up in the air with the Lafayette not having reached a final decision. And Knapp said “Have you thought of Gettysburg?”

O’Brien: Yes.

Birkner: Why would he have recommended Gettysburg?

O’Brien: Because he used to send athletes here. And he knew there were a group of guys that were already at Gettysburg, some football players from Teaneck that he had sent.

Birkner: Was Joseph Cervino one of them?

O’Brien: No. But Joseph Cervino went to Teaneck and became the coach and then became the athletic director. He wasn’t from Teaneck.

Birkner: I knew he had a Teaneck connection.

O’Brien: He still lives up in Bergen County.

Birkner: In fact, I met him about a year ago [at an Orange and Blue function].
O’Brien: Anyway, about Charlie Knapp. I said, “So yeah I’m open to talk to anybody.” And I said, “I don’t know anything about Gettysburg, but yeah, I could go up there.” So he said, “I’ll make arrangements with Hen Bream. You go talk to him and see.” So I came up and talked to Hen Bream and he gave me everything I needed.

Birkner: Because Hen did have basketball scholarships?

O’Brien: Yeah, he had basketball and football.

Birkner: In those days of course the scholarship money came directly into Hen. It didn’t go through the president of the college.

O’Brien: How did you know that?

Birkner: I’ve been through Bream’s papers. And I know how it operated and I know how he got the money.

O’Brien: You may know this better than I if you researched it. As I recollected they had a group called the faithful fifty. And these guys would contribute money for Hen’s programs. And I think the college allowed Hen a certain amount of tuition scholarships but that he had to pay room and board for the athletes and he got the money from the faithful fifty so he had an account there, as I understood it, that he would pay the college.

Birkner: I think that’s pretty much right. I guess I would just slightly amend it to observe that the faithful fifty
was a group of loyal alums from the Philadelphia area. But Hen also had a group of people like Charles Stine, a chemist who worked for DuPont who lived in Delaware, who would give regularly. He had people like a local automobile dealer here in Gettysburg named Glenn Bream.

O'Brien: Yockie Bream.

Birkner: Yeah, Yockie Bream, right. And then the people, he had a fellow up in Harrisburg who was an insurance agent. And he had another guy who was a sports writer in Philadelphia, Bill Duncan. Duncan obviously was part of the faithful fifty. And there was a clothing store owner in New Jersey who also gave money to this program. But the point is that Hen had this money.

[end of first side] Tell me about your first reactions to the conversations with Hen Bream and your reactions to being on the Gettysburg campus and talking about coming back to college at Gettysburg instead of Muhlenberg.

O'Brien: Well, as I have mentioned Charlie Knapp made all the arrangements. And I came up and had a conversation with Hen. Hen watched me play basketball. He discussed my background in high school and college at Muhlenberg. And I would have to conclude that Charlie Knapp gave me a very strong recommendation because Hen gave me everything I needed including an additional scholarship because I don’t
know the exact numbers but I may have a couple of years tuition and then I needed two more years. I will explain why in a minute. And I wanted a room and board scholarship because I didn’t have any money. And the government financed the first couple of years. gave the money directly to the student. I don’t know, $80.00 a month for room and board, whatever it was. I wanted to be able to keep that for my spending money so Hen gave me room and board essentially. He got me when I was a sophomore to become a dormitory counselor--free room and fifty dollars a semester, whatever it was. And so he really accommodated me very well.

*Birkner:* There’s one other piece to this though. You just mentioned that the Lafayette coach wanted you to major in phys ed as opposed as to what you wanted to. But Gettysburg didn’t have an engineering program at this point, so how were you going to go back to academics?

*O’Brien:* Well, first of all I should mention that because they didn’t have electrical engineering, they didn’t have an engineering program, Hen asked me what I was going to major in and I said “I’d major in chemistry or physics.” So I started off as a chem. major and then switched to physics. So I got a degree in physics. Then, I said to Hen “Is there anything that you need from me to be OK, or do you have any
questions?” He said, “Well, I have one requirement if it’s OK with you is that you played basketball at Muhlenberg so if you transfer your credits you lose a year of eligibility. So I’m going to ask you to start all over again.” So with today’s rules that’s called red shirted. The red shirted was the first year, because freshmen in the first year in those days couldn’t play varsity anyway. So they had a freshman team and I couldn’t play freshman because I had played at Muhlenberg. So my first year at Gettysburg was like a refresher which I was happy about anyway because I was out of school for two years anyway.

Birkner: Just to be clear here, weren’t you in effect starting as a first year student at Gettysburg?

O’Brien: Yes.

Birkner: So then the three-quarters of the year at Muhlenberg academically didn’t exist?

O’Brien: Yes, that’s correct.

Birkner: But you having been out of it for two years you were just as happy to start over?

O’Brien: Yes, that’s correct.

Birkner: Given that you couldn’t play intercollegiate basketball that first year, were you still practicing with the team?

O’Brien: I practiced with the team, but I couldn’t play.
Birkner: OK. Now, I assume at this point your parents are OK with you going off to Gettysburg?

O'Brien: Oh, yeah.

Birkner: What was your first experience at Gettysburg like? Did you feel that you had come to the right place?

O'Brien: Yes. It was a lovely campus then just like it is now. It wasn’t as big, obviously not as many students. There were probably 1000 to 1200 students then versus maybe 2400 now. And then the population was probably 80% male and maybe 20% female. But it was a well-known, well respected small school. It had a good reputation if I wanted a college degree and they gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse. So Hen was very good to me.

Birkner: Was Hen the only person that had to pass muster on bringing you to Gettysburg or did you have to meet with anyone else? For example, Henry Hanson.

O'Brien: Hen was it. Hen had a great deal of power in those days. People listened to him when athletes would get in trouble. And Hen would talk it over, as to what was necessary, and get them out of trouble within reason. He had a lot of influence. And then the administration, you know, generally pretty well complied, again within reason.

Birkner: Because he had done a lot of good for the institution.
O'Brien: Yes, he had. He was very well respected by everyone.

Birkner: Now, did you know anybody on the student side when you matriculated at Gettysburg?

O'Brien: No.

Birkner: So you didn’t know anybody?

O’Brien: No, I didn’t know anybody.

Birkner: And when you came here you had a roommate your first year?

O’Brien: I’m trying to figure who it was.

Birkner: Well, did you live in Pennsylvania Hall?

O’Brien: No. They used to have barracks. I lived in the barracks the first year.

Birkner: The barracks being where the college union building is now.

O’Brien: Yes, that’s right. They had to build all those when all that big surge of GIs came in ’46. And it was probably either maybe Hank Belber or Walter Pleckner who played basketball and eventually went to our school.

Birkner: I was wondering if you would be matched up with an athlete?

O’Brien: Yes.

Birkner: Because Belber was a basketball player, right?

O’Brien: Yes, yes he was.
Birkner: Now, let’s talk a little bit about the academic side because you weren’t playing football so I assume you had to pay some attention that first semester back to your academics. What do you remember about your teachers and your courses and your first year in 1947?

O’Brien: Well, I remember the fact that it was a big benefit to me and my judgments to have been in the service. So when I started education as a twenty year old rather than an eighteen year old, I recognized the significance of academic performance. So did a lot of veterans. And when I graduated, I don’t mean to be self serving, I was in four honor societies. I was president of the Physics Honor Society. I was a member of what was called in those days The Gettysburg Honor Society. I had senior class honors and I represented the student athletes at graduation and planted a tree or something with the corresponding girl student athlete.

Birkner: What you’re saying is you had a somewhat greater degree of maturity than an eighteen year-old coming on the campus.

O’Brien: Absolutely. I would never have been like that at eighteen. Like when I was at Muhlenberg, I got through the courses all right but I coasted. But when I got here I studied hard. My friends, who were jocks, were mostly phys
ed majors. Most of the phys ed courses were taught by coaches. I had to lock my door at night to study, so I wouldn’t let them in.

Birkner: One of the things I noticed in Hen Bream’s papers were that the athletic contingent was weak academically. Not only those doing the phys ed major but others, too. Their average GPAs was around a 2.0. There were of course exceptions, more serious student athletes. But Bream was not recruiting athletes, not scholar athletes. He was recruiting athletes who would get through college, by and large and supporting them. Can you remember any teacher or teachers in your first year or two at Gettysburg who one way or another made an impression on you?

O’Brien: Well, yeah [George] Bollie Miller who was the chair person of the Physics Department. And of course Dr. [John] Zinn. Because what had happened. I started off as a chemistry major. And then after my freshman year I guess in my sophomore year I decided I wanted to switch to Physics. And in order to do that you had to have the parting department chair sign off and the receiving department chairman sign on. So Bollie Miller signed on, but Zinn wouldn’t sign off because he hated to lose majors, chemistry majors, so he wouldn’t sign, you know. For awhile.
O’Brien: He said ‘You’re doing fine, come on.’ I said “Dr. Zinn I want to be a physics major.”

Birkner: That’s funny.

O’Brien: But he eventually capitulated. Because he was a big supporter of athletics, Zinn. In fact he was an athlete someone told me, a track guy. Yeah, Zinn. He would always be at the games. He was a big follower of sports. So he eventually signed on. And of course guys like Dr. [Richard] Arms. He was a big name. He was eccentric but a very bright guy and head of the Math Department. And I took a lot of mathematics.

Birkner: Could he teach math well?

O’Brien: I never had him as a professor, but yet I would talk to him periodically. The only course that I ever had that he taught in my senior year when I had music. I always took more hours than I had to because I wanted to take advantage of my education. And so I decided I would take a course in music appreciation which he taught. So that was mostly opera.

Birkner: What language did you study when you were at Gettysburg?

O’Brien: French.

Birkner: And did you have Albert Bachman for that or someone else?
O’Brien: No, I had Allen Percival.

Birkner: I don’t know that name.

O’Brien: I don’t think he stayed here too long but he was here when I was here. He was a younger guy. [Percival taught at the college for three years, 1948-1951.]

Birkner: So you liked your physics program and why was that?

O’Brien: Well, Charlie Knapp changed my life. With his offer to arrange a meeting with Hen Bream changed my all life. I married a local girl and graduated from Gettysburg College you know.

Birkner: How did you meet the local girl?

O’Brien: When I came to Gettysburg College which of course is a Lutheran College, where there were not a lot of Catholics, but there were some, you know. And I always was treated fine. I never had any animosity or anything because I’m Catholic. Because there was some in those days. Some concerns between Vatican and Catholicism.

Birkner: Sure.

O’Brien: But I never saw it or felt it in my personal exposure to people. But the local priest asked the college for the names of Catholic students and invited them up for a social. And that’s how I met Patricia at the social. We had sort of a quasi introduction in a business meeting and
there was some punch or something and when I went to find her after the meeting she was gone. And I said, "Where did that girl go?" I spotted her, you know how things are. And I had dated other girls before this but she caught my eye.

**Birkner:** How did you track her down?

**O'Brien:** Well, I found out who she was. She didn’t introduce herself. And we found out that she lived on East Stevens Street. She was the oldest in a family of ten. there was one girl and nine brothers.

**Birkner:** Wow.

**O'Brien:** And so I tracked her down. Recently we had our fiftieth wedding anniversary. We had a get-together at the hotel about five years ago. And it was interesting, my kids, five daughters who all spoke and some of them spoke about how dad and mom got together. You know they got that information from their mother which was probably different than my view. Kathy, who is pretty gregarious, said, "When Mom first met these college guys because in those days the town girls and the college guys didn’t mix because the college guys would date them and sometimes marry them and then leave and then get divorced." Many of the girls including my wife was very straight laced, hands off kind of thing. So Kathy’s comment at the fiftieth anniversary was "When Mom met these college guys, she wasn’t impressed."

39
Birkner: But she was willing to go out for a spin.

O’Brien: She said, “You know dad; he can be pretty persuasive. When dad puts on the full court press watch out.” So that’s what I did. And we got married in my last year in college. There were a lot of GIs at that age that had gotten married.

Birkner: It wasn’t uncommon to get married that young in those days. Less common today. What kinds of activities were the most common in terms of going out with a girl that you liked?

O’Brien: Well, first of all I didn’t have a car. I was not a big beer drinker in those days. You know I was in service. So we’d go to the movies most of the time. We went to the movies and go up to Faber’s which was an ice cream parlor right next to the hotel. And then on Sundays we would walk on the battlefield. And that was pretty simple. And then they would have college events that we would go to together, dances, things of that nature. But it was simple, social get-togethers and gatherings.

Birkner: Were you a fraternity man?

O’Brien: SAE.

Birkner: There were probably more SAE activities you were invited to right, dinners and things of that nature right?

O’Brien: Yes, there were.
Birkner: But SAE brings up different recollections in the late '40s and early '50 than the late '60s. SAE was kind of a classy house at one point.

O'Brien: It was. . . . In those days they had housemothers. And the pledges had responsibility to keep the house clean. And as the motto of fraternities one was a true gentleman and then they had this list of behavior patterns and conduct that this is what we aspire and strive for. And some guys always messed around, of course, but I would say by in large everybody, people followed the rules in those days. Now, whatever rules are, nobody listens to them anyway.

Birkner: I'm assuming that some of the sillier stuff that goes with pledging was not going to be imposed on you or other former GIs.

O'Brien: No. . . . There was still a recognition that you didn't have to do that, that GIs were older than that. Forget it. But the freshmen pretty much followed that.

Birkner: Did you ever live in that house on Lincoln Street?

O'Brien: No. I was married so my last year I lived in an apartment in town. Prior to that my sophomore year and junior year I was a dormitory counselor, had my own room, second floor, corner room right as you went in. I had this corner room myself, read, locked the door, studied, learned
calculus, thermodynamics, physical chemistry, etc. and [in effect] told people, “don’t bother me.”

Birkner: . . . How was it living in an increasingly decrepit building?

O’Brien: Well, it wasn’t too bad.

Birkner: It wasn’t too bad?

O’Brien: No. No, it wasn’t too bad physically. And there were always some guys who were a pain in the butt. There was one guy who eventually became a minister who would start practicing his trumpet at 8:30. And we had study hours. Study hours were like seven to ten, all quiet. So all of a sudden I hear this trumpet. I went down and he said, “No, I have to play.” I got a little testy.

Birkner: You were the dorm advisor?

O’Brien: Yeah, some guys don’t listen, they just want to do what they want to do and they get a little hard nosed.

Birkner: Tell me about your memories of Henry W.A. Hanson. Do you remember his personality?

O’Brien: My exposure to him [was limited]. . . . In my judgment he was sort of aloof [from the students], perhaps focused on the administrative aspects at the college, maybe even the faculty aspects, I don’t know that. But he was a big [inaudible] guy and very bright. He was always very proper. He knew how to handle himself. So, for his time, he
was, I think, the kind of person that the board of trustees of the college liked to run the college. I don’t know how long he was president. A long time.

**Birkner:** Do you remember his orations in the chapel?

**O’Brien:** Yeah, some, yeah. Everybody had to go to the chapel. Everybody tried to beat the system. Everybody was trying to check each other in, but by and large [we went].

**Birkner:** How did it work trying to check each other in?

**O’Brien:** I didn’t play that game. That’s not the way you kept track. You had to sign something or do something, I don’t remember. It wasn’t such a burden anyway, what’s the difference?

**Birkner:** Do you have any memory of the kinds of programming, the kind of programming that they had at the chapel? I assume it wasn’t all religious in nature.

**O’Brien:** I don’t remember. I think it was mostly. There was hymn singing and music and things of that nature. I don’t think it was long and involved and deep spiritually. You go in there and the guys might be reading their French book or something. You’re there physically, which was the obligation. You can’t force people to be there spiritually if they don’t want to be there, you know.

**Birkner:** They kept finding that out year after year.

**O’Brien:** Yeah.
Birkner: Now, let’s talk a little bit about your basketball years and how that was. The first year to go back to what we’ve said already, you were in effect red shirted, you’re practicing with the team but you’re not playing. Is that right?

O’Brien: That’s correct.

Birkner: And you’re OK with that?

O’Brien: Yeah.

Birkner: And the second year did you have an expectation that you would actually get regular court time?

O’Brien: I would hope to. . . . I started every game in my sophomore year.

Birkner: And what did you make of the talent you were playing with?

O’Brien: It was very good. We had, we were five or six pretty good guys. And I would say the reserves weren’t quite as strong as we would have hoped you know. [Points to his scrapbook.] This is scrapbook [for that] year. The college performance prior to that year was not so great but we started off very strongly that year and if I remember correctly from the newspaper clippings and everything we were rated like the seventh best team in the state, including all the schools. And I think part of the reason was we were beating everybody because people weren’t
expecting that because that was not the case previously. In the starting five there were only two guys from the previous year starting. There were three new guys who became sophomores that started--myself, Hank Belber and Walter Pleckner and so that worked out pretty well. We had a fairly good year but we played a lot of big teams. The teams that we lost to, the principal reason was in my judgment that we didn’t have enough size. We had five or six pretty talented guys I thought that could do what had to be done. But when we played LaSalle, it was a powerhouse in those days and they had an All-American 6’10” named Larry Faust. We matched up with the other guys OK. You’d be in the game for the second or third quarter then the opposing coach, a mild mannered guy, would say, “quit making yourselves look like horses asses--Get out there and play!” And all of a sudden you’d bang into a big guy like that and you’d end up on the floor looking up. But we won a few big games. We beat Penn State, that was a big win for us. We played Virginia and lost by three points or something. Played Georgetown. Because you know the big guys toward the end of the game take over physically and we couldn’t match up with that. That was an emotional game we lost.

Birkner: Tell me a little bit about what it was like for you to go back to Muhlenberg to play at Muhlenberg. You
must have even been playing against a couple of guys you knew as a freshman?

O'Brien: Well, I did.

Birkner: What was that like?

O'Brien: Well, it was great because we beat them and they had very strong teams, even after I was there. They had recruited a couple of kids that decided to go there from New Jersey who were very strong athletes. So we beat them in their court in Allentown in my sophomore and junior year. And that was a shock to them. They never thought that would happen.

Birkner: Did any of the people there make any particular remarks directed at you? You had been, in effect, a Muhlenberg boy who turned toward Gettysburg.

O'Brien: No. We were all friends. Even on the court it’s different. There wasn’t any personal animosity. Of course with some of these guys I played next to a year. I went there in December, I played with them in various places. So we all got along.

Birkner: Tell me a little bit about Hen Bream’s approach to coaching, including sportsmanship and things like that.

O’Brien: Well, as happens with every sport and every game, once you’re prepared to play another team there’s an evaluation of where their strength is and where their
weaknesses are and who are their scorers in basketball. What is their system and how do we defense it? And that’s standard preparation and who would decide who is the best of our guys to play defense against maybe their best scorer. And a lot of times I had that responsibility—not all of the time but a lot. So we handled it as best we could. And Hen you know was always, “it’s a sport and we should follow the sportsmanship rules.” So he could get emotional as most coaches can maybe during the duration of the game but the principal conduct of behavior was good sportsmanship.

Birkner: He followed that.


I guess those are the words I was looking for.

Birkner: And was he?

O’Brien: Yeah, pretty much.

Birkner: What about the business of motivation, particularly in a tight game in the middle of the game and at halftime or when the quarter breaks, was he a butt slapper or did he use particular language. How did he get you motivated?

O’Brien: Well, he just used standard coaching techniques, but he never used foul language which I thought was very good conduct and very good role modeling. And once
in a while if we really looked bad, maybe something like the
game after we beat Penn State, which was a big victory for
us. And we were playing Hopkins or somebody mediocre—in
those days that was a piece of cake. And we really looked
lousy the first half, you know. He comes over at the end of
the first half and was really hot and emotional because of
the Penn State win maybe, and now we looked like the New
York Giants looked Sunday, you know. And he said, “If
that’s basketball I’m a shad.” And he kicks the bucket with
all of our oranges. Everything is flying all over.
Normally he wasn’t like that but that was one incident where
he was very unhappy.

Birkner: What was the expression, “If that’s a basketball
I’m a what?”

O’Brien: Shad.

Birkner: As in a fish?

O’Brien: Yeah. “I’m a shad. I’m a shad.”

Birkner: Did he smoke while he was on the sidelines?

O’Brien: No.

Birkner: Because he did smoke cigars on the sidelines in
football games back in the 1930s.

O’Brien: Is that right? I don’t remember that. I never
remember seeing him smoke. But it may have been in football
and I just didn’t notice it. But like in basketball I don’t
remember seeing him with a cigarette or a cigar for that matter. He was a great guy and he was sort of a father image to a lot of the athletes.

Birkner: And he had, of course, recruited them and from the beginning, they were his boys.

O’Brien: Yes, that’s right.

Birkner: So he was going to look after then if their father died or they ran into financial difficulty or academic troubles. He was going to be looking after them.

O’Brien: Yes. As I said it was [inaudible] then. This doesn’t relate to me but it’s a story. Probably the best guy on a basketball team today named [Walter F.] “Buckey” Harris [Class of ‘50] who was a junior and he was selected as one of the top ten guys in the state. He was all state, Buckey. And he was a dedicated student, he wasn’t the best student, but he could manage it. In those days you had to have a literature in the original language. And he couldn’t get through that. So Hen convinced the administration that if Buckey took Latin literature in English and he passed it that would fulfill the requirement. And he did take it and he passed it. And he graduated. But that was close.

Birkner: He went on to a career as a coach at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, as I recall.
And he always was very appreciative of what Hen Bream had done for him.

**O'Brien:** Yes. And he was a very successful coach. He built that basketball program at the level that they played. They were national champions one year. So, even though he was not the brightest guy academically he did work hard and he had a very successful career as a coach. So the college did the right thing in helping him get through to get his degree. . . . I was always a little bit involved with him. But he got through. But anyway, the fact that Hen was able to get somebody to comply with that accommodation with Buckey was an indication how hard Hen worked for his kids and also how much influence he had even with the faculty and with some of the deans.

**Birkner:** What about the case of Walter Pleckner? You mentioned that he was thrown out.

**O'Brien:** Walter Pleckner was an outstanding basketball player from South Philadelphia. He was All-City. He came from a poor family in South Philly. And when he came to college he got probably a mind-set that said, "I'm a big jock like I was in high school. And they're going to help me get through so that I don't have to study." So he was getting into trouble academically, on and off. And Hen would help him out. And then he would get [out of line].
You know he hit a lot of beer gardens on and off. He had a room next to me in the barracks. And one time these two well-dressed guys knock on my door. I open it up and they said, “Where’s Walter Pleckner’s room? We understand he’s in these barracks.” I said, “His room is next door.” “Well, he’s not there, do you know where he is?” Well, I said, “Who are you?” “We’re from the FBI.” And they flash their FBI credentials. I said to myself, “Holy Cow, what is Walter doing now.” So I don’t remember, I think I knew where he was but I didn’t want to tell them so I said, “Well, if you go to the administration building they will have his schedule. I’m not sure where he is.” But I knew where he was so I went over to him. The people called him “Scary” because he was blond and always had a crew cut. He looked like a scarecrow. You know the jocks, they have a name for everybody.

Birkner: He was called Scary?

O’Brien: Scary, because of the scarecrow, short for scarecrow. So I said, “Scary, I don’t know what you did but there’s two FBI guys here at the college looking for you.” And the story goes that he was at one of the town bars drinking beer and if I remember correctly, these two guys from Maryland who are drinking with him and they get into a situation where they’re talking about that Pennsylvania
gave a bounty for fox furs because foxes attack chickens. And these guys had twelve fox fur skins and they were from Maryland and they can’t cash them in because they don’t have bounties there. But they do in Pennsylvania. And they need a guy to go to the local county game warden, I forget, or the sheriff. Pleckner does most anything for a dollar. And they said, “You do this for us and we’ll split it fifty/fifty.” And it was something like $50.00 per skin,, and “we’ll split it.” So Pleckner knows nothing about hunting but wants easy money. So he says “OK.” He then turns it into the game warden, who asked a couple of questions. Scary can’t answer them. So then the game warden calls the FBI, I guess, it’s interstate commerce or something.

Birkner: Is that what got him ejected from the college?

O’Brien: No, but that was one of the things that was building up, so Hen got upset. And one day he came into basketball practice. He went down the court for a fast break and the ball goes one way and he goes the other. I thought, “What the hell is this guy doing?” And when I got close I could smell, he was drinking, you know. And so then Hen picked that up and then finally he got caught cheating on a test. And Hen said, “You’re out.”
Birkner: Well, it was interesting. You credit his departure to Hen saying, "You're out," as opposed to his professor saying 'You're out.'

O'Brien: Well, the professor caught him cheating. And the college administration knew about this fox fur thing. And Hen knew he was drinking a couple of times.

Birkner: And Hen had a limit?

O'Brien: Yeah.

Birkner: So Pleckner was gone.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Birkner: Did you ever hear about him again after he left the college?

O'Brien: Yeah, he left. In those days if you were a "tramp athlete," which he was, if you couldn't get into any place else, you'd go to the University of Miami. That was the deal. So he goes there and they accept him. He plays basketball and I don't know what happened. They threw him out of there. And once you're thrown out of there, you're done. So he went back to Philly and became as you might expect a used car salesman. Apparently then he gained a lot of weight and then died prematurely because of his dissipated habits. Birkner: An interesting story. . . .

O'Brien: And like Buckey he was from South Philly. The same way, but Buckey did everything right. Never cheated
that I know of. [Buckey] worked hard to get through college
and then he had a very successful professional career. [Tape
clicks off; end of interview session.]