Interview with John Roger Stemen, June 26, 2001

John R. Stemen  
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Interview Participants

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Description
John Roger Stemen was interviewed on June 26, 2001 by Michael J. Birkner about his experiences before he became a professor of History at Gettysburg College. He discusses his childhood in Indiana and focuses on his undergraduate education at Yale University and his service in the photolithography unit in Korea. After the war he attended Indiana University and Johns Hopkins University, where he obtained his doctorate.

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ROGER STEMEN Oral History

Michael Birkner: This is June the 26th, 2001. I’m Michael Birkner, and I’m sitting here in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at 202 North President Avenue, Apartment B, at the home of Roger Stemen, longtime faculty member of Gettysburg College. Roger and I are going to have a conversation today about his life, and we’ll go as far as we can get in the time we have on a tape. Roger, tell me a little bit about your parents and where you grew up and when.

Roger Stemen: Well, I was born and grew up in northern Indiana, a place called Goshen; it’s between South Bend and Fort Wayne. My father is of Pennsylvania German Mennonite background, and my mother came from a family, mostly New England Yankee, a little Scottish. She was Presbyterian.

Birkner: What were your parents’ names?

Stemen: My father was John Milton Stemen and my mother was Adelaide Louise Higgins.

Birkner: And your father did what for a living?

Stemen: Well, at the time I was born, he was in the restaurant business. He was born in Ohio; he was born in the country near Lima, Ohio and moved to Goshen, Indiana when he was about in high school, went into the restaurant business. A couple of his brothers were in the business with him. My mother came from Kokomo, Indiana, which is between Goshen and Indianapolis. She came to Goshen in the 1920s as a schoolteacher, and met my father there, I guess while dining in his restaurant. They were married in 1927. I had one sister who had cerebral palsy. I was born in 1931.
Birkner: Was your sister older?

Stemen: She was three years older; she was born in 1928.

Birkner: In those days, how normal a life could a child with cerebral palsy have?

Stemen: Well, she was severely afflicted. She couldn’t have lived a normal life in any circumstances.

Birkner: Roger, how would you describe Goshen in 1930? Is it a very rural place, is it a small town, what is it?

Stemen: Oh, about a medium-size town, a combination rural center and small industrial town. Had a population around 12,000 then; now it has a population about 20-some-thousand after some annexations later on. When I was growing up it was about in the 12,000 range.

Birkner: I’m assuming that it was surrounded by farms.

Stemen: That’s right. Surrounded by farm country.

Birkner: And so it was sort of a hub for farmers to come in and shop.

Stemen: Yeah, on a Saturday night, shopping was a big deal with people then.

Birkner: When you grew up, did you live in a residential neighborhood that was in either walking or biking distance of the main commercial area?

Stemen: Yeah, it was about a mile and a half from downtown, about a half mile from the school where I went. I guess I’m describing it as suburban; it was on the edge of town.

Birkner: As you were growing up in the 1930s, did your father continue to run his restaurant?

Stemen: Well, he did until 1936, and then, with the Depression, business did not flow, so he got out of the business. A couple of his brothers stayed in, but he went to Chicago,
studied accounting, and eventually ended up working for a New Deal agency in Indiana in the unemployment compensation division.

**Birkner:** Now, when he went off to Chicago, did he just kiss you good-bye and tell your mother “I’ve got to go for a year,” or was it a matter of him coming back on weekends, or how did it work?

**Stemen:** Well, he came back on weekends, and then in the summer of 1937, my mother and I joined him in Chicago for the summer, which for me was very exciting. That was the summer I turned six years old, and so for entertainment, we’d take a ride on the El. My father would have a weekly pass and I guess probably, since I was underage, I probably got to ride free, so we rode around. The summer we were in Chicago, my mother worked as a waitress on Howard Street to help pay for the apartment we lived in. The apartment was on Bryn Mawr Street on the north side of Chicago, near the beaches. We were near the Foster Avenue Beach, so we spent a lot of time swimming, visiting the museums, the Field Museum, and going out to Jackson Park, which was one end of the El line, so for me, this was an exciting summer. I guess for my parents, it was in the heart of the Depression years and probably something of a struggle for them, but I remember it as a pretty good time.

**Birkner:** Well, if your mother was a waitress, what happened to you at the age of six when she was waitressing?

**Stemen:** The landlady at the apartment where we lived had a teenage daughter who was enlisted to look after me days when my mother was working at the restaurant.

**Birkner:** At this time, had your elder sister passed away?
Stemen: No, she died in 1944; I think my grandmother looked after her for that summer, and then, I think about the next year, she went to live in a state institution in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a state home where she spent about the last six years of her life.

Birkner: Did you have any younger siblings?

Stemen: Nope. So that left me as an only child.

Birkner: Now, you moved back and went back to elementary school in Goshen in the fall of '37?

Stemen: Yeah. I had started kindergarten in the previous year, and then I started first grade in 1937.

Birkner: Would it be fair to call Goshen kind of a classic Midwestern small or medium size community, I mean with all the accoutrements we think of, when we think of that?

Stemen: Oh, yeah, very much. It was a college town, Mennonite college there.

Birkner: And it's called?

Stemen: It's called Goshen College. It was a Mennonite center.

Birkner: Was a local kid like yourself allowed to just sort of hang out around the college grounds, or did you not do that?

Stemen: We did some, yeah. We used their football field and on Saturday mornings they let us shoot baskets in the gym, so we hung out some on the college campus. Why, I lived about a block from the campus, so it was convenient. In my younger days, I went to summer bible school over at the Goshen College campus.

Birkner: Did you go to a Presbyterian Church on a regular basis?

Stemen: We went to the Presbyterian Church. Then my mother, who was a church organist, got a job in the Lutheran Church, so we decided since she was playing the organ
there, that we would join that church. So from about the age of 10, we belonged to the Lutheran Church.

**Birkner:** What were your main preoccupations as a boy?

**Stemen:** Well, the neighborhood I lived in was on the edge of town. There were some woods, there was a canal, or we called it the race, we played in. So I had one of these I guess classic Midwest boyhoods. I could pretty much run loose, ride our bikes around town. Of course we were preoccupied by sports; football was my favorite sport in those days.

**Birkner:** Did you follow major-league baseball, and if you did, did you have a favorite team?

**Stemen:** I followed it somewhat; of course, the Chicago teams, the Cubs and the White Sox. The Cubs tended to be the favorites of small town people, although I sort of liked the White Sox, but I think it was only a few years that I really followed major-league baseball much, from about the age of 10 through say 17 or 18.

**Birkner:** Of course, part of that time was the war itself, and the game was watered down quite a bit, as the stars went off to war, so you really had second-stringers playing from ’42 to ’45.

**Stemen:** Yeah, it seems to me I can remember one world series with the St. Louis Browns, if I’m remembering correctly.

**Birkner:** I think that was their only world series they were ever in. So you liked the standard things that kids would do. Did you have the sense that your family was more or less prosperous, or just right down the middle, in terms of its economic status and well-being from your parents?
Stemen: Oh, probably about in the middle.

Birkner: And I’m assuming, given that this is what it was, that you were not used to having luxuries; your luxuries were getting to go to the movies and having popcorn at the movies, or something like that.

Stemen: Yeah, we went to the Saturday matinees, a double feature and there’d be a Western and a detective movie and a cartoon or two. We’d get popcorn. Of course it only cost a dime to get in the movies in those days, but then, a dime was a little harder to come by than it is now. A nickel for a Popsicle, a dime for a comic book.

Birkner: Do you remember having particular favorites in terms of genres of movies or movie stars?

Stemen: Well, I’d say probably from the age of six to eight it would be the western, Charles Starrett, Buck Jones, Johnny Mack Brown. Then after that, I liked adventure movies. Of course, when the war came on, war movies, with the great classics of the late 30s which were, of course, The Wizard of Oz, Snow White, Gone With the Wind.

Birkner: Did you see The Wizard of Oz and Snow White in the movie theatres?

Stemen: Oh, yeah. And I went to Gone With the Wind with my parents, but as I recall, I probably slept through about the last half of it.

Birkner: I can see why, too.

Stemen: I saw it later, as an adult, and I couldn’t remember seeing a lot of the last part of that movie, ever, so I was probably asleep. I was about nine years old, probably.

Birkner: I’m not sure we got the exact date of your birth, but we probably should get it now. I know it was 1931.

Stemen: July 27, 1931.
Birkner: So you were exactly 10 years old when World War II broke out. Can you recall the circumstances that Sunday morning when the news came that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?

Stemen: Of course the Midwest was an hour behind Eastern Standard Time, but I don’t remember hearing it until, it seems to me, in the afternoon, when I went with my parents to visit a friend of my father’s over in Elkhart, Indiana, and the news was coming over the car radio, it seems to me, as we drove over there. Then I remember, later in the afternoon, the newspaper got out an extra, maybe it was about dark by the time the paperboys were coming through the neighborhood, hollering, “Extra!”

Birkner: Did you notice your parents talking about it, or anybody saying anything?

Stemen: Oh, well, my father, of course, was discussing it with this good friend of ours, a man that he had worked with in his office; yeah, I remember that well.

Birkner: Did it mean anything to you in particular? I mean, did you notice, for example, that the older boys in town started talking about war, or disappearing and going off and getting enlisted or drafted? What did it do to Goshen, for example?

Stemen: Well, of course, a lot of guys went into service. My father was of that generation; he was a little bit too young for the First World War, and he was just a little bit too old for the second, although he had a draft number. I remember he had registered for the draft.

Birkner: Was he still working in 1941 for the New Deal agency?

Stemen: Yeah, he was working for unemployment compensation [] for a while, he was out at the Studebaker plant; I guess they were converting from peacetime to wartime production.
Birkner: That was in South Bend?

Stemen: Yeah, South Bend; that was about 25 miles away. So that agency still was active during the war years.

Birkner: As a boy, did you participate in the salvage drives, or the war stamp frenzy, or civil defense, or any of that stuff?

Stemen: Yeah, somewhat. I can remember even, I think there was a warden in our neighborhood, and occasionally you’d have blackouts, you’d have drills, and that sort of thing, but . . . Probably every town in the United States that had had a factory also had a rumor that the Germans would bomb us first because of our factory, and some very vital part that the Germans knew about, so my guess is, you heard this story wherever you lived.

Birkner: Kept you vigilant, right, during the war years? Did you find that your routine in any way noticeably changed as a result of the war being on?

Stemen: Yeah, I guess, [ ] for my father, because he worked for a state agency, had a C-ration card. The A-card, I think, was the most restrictive, and then the B-card, and he had a red C-card because he traveled a lot for the state, and at times during his career, he went all over the state. This was tough during the war because there was a 35-mile-an-hour speed limit, and say if he went to Evansville, which was at the other end of the state, 300 miles away, coming home for the weekend was a long drag, and I suspect not everybody observed the 35-mile speed limit all the time.

Birkner: The [purpose] of this was this to save gas, was that the idea?

Stemen: Yeah, to save gasoline.
Birkner: Well, imagine doing that today; it wouldn’t happen. Now, in your school, did your teachers use the war as a teaching tool, or did it largely get ignored as far as your day-to-day life in school was concerned?

Stemen: Well, I was in 5th grade at the time of Pearl Harbor, and the day after Pearl Harbor, our teacher had a radio and broadcast the president’s talk, which I guess probably would have been at noon Eastern time and only 11, otherwise we’d have been home for lunch. But I remember hearing that at school. Yeah, we heard quite a bit about the war. So I was in the last couple of years of grade school and then junior high during the war years.

Birkner: Were you particularly conscious of name generals like Eisenhower or Patton or MacArthur or others, or was that not something you paid attention to?

Stemen: Oh, I even had a little plaster of paris bust of General MacArthur, which would probably be a treasure now, but I think at some point during my childhood it got knocked over and smashed.

Birkner: Did you read the papers as a 6th or 7th grader??

Stemen: Oh, yeah, we got both the Goshen News-Democrat, which was the local paper, and the Chicago Tribune, the politics of which were extremely right wing, but during those days that didn’t bother me as much as it might have later.

Birkner: Sure. Well, I read the New York Daily News when I was growing up, but I didn’t think much about its right wing politics; I was reading the sports page mostly.

Stemen: Comics.

Birkner: Yeah.
Stemen: Well, I read the front page during the war years especially. Everyday there’d be a battle map showing where the . . .

Birkner: Right. Did your parents pick the Tribune because it was the paper to take or because your father supported the point of view of Colonel McCormick?

Stemen: No, I don’t think he supported Colonel McCormick. It was just the paper to take.

Birkner: It had the best coverage of everything.

Stemen: Yeah.

Birkner: I believe at that time the Tribune might have been the largest circulation newspaper in the United States.

Stemen: I don’t know; they weren’t modest about things. They called themselves “the World’s Greatest Newspaper,” and they had a radio station, WGN, with those initials.

Birkner: Yeah, that’s right; I think they did have, because they had basically the whole Midwest as their territory, and there were an awful lot of Americans who [ ].

Stemen: It was pretty much the paper of choice in the small town area up by Chicago, maybe in Chicago more people – well, we read the Chicago – I can’t even remember the name of the paper, but the more liberal . . .

Birkner: Sun-Times, maybe.

Stemen: No, that was Marshall Field. There was another one, I think it was the Chicago News, maybe, that carried some more liberal columnists, like Sidney Harris.

Birkner: I remember Sidney Harris. When you were nine years old, there was a presidential election: Wendell Willkie for the Republicans and Franklin Roosevelt the incumbent for the Democrats. Were you conscious of that election?
Stemen: Oh, yeah, very much.

Birkner: I assume Goshen must have been a Willkie center.

Stemen: Yeah, Willkie was from Indiana; he came from Ellwood, which was another town maybe about like Goshen, farther down the state. My grandmother, who was a staunch Republican, went to Ellwood to see Willkie when he came through.

Birkner: That famous scene where he makes his return.

Stemen: She was there for that. Now my father, I think, maybe supported Franklin Roosevelt since he worked for a New Deal agency and had kind of fit in the New Deal in a couple of different ways. So I remember being for Roosevelt in 1940.

Birkner: So you voted for Roosevelt on election night.

Stemen: Yeah, but a lot of people in Goshen didn’t.

Birkner: Did you actually listen to the radio on election night?

Stemen: Probably did, yeah.

Birkner: In ’44, there was another presidential election, this one with Thomas Dewey against Roosevelt. Did you have any particular memory of that election?

Stemen: Oh, yeah, I think I was for Dewey then because I had a good friend, his parents were very staunch Republicans and he was too, and I can remember the convention of 1944 when Dewey was nominated.

Birkner: And did you ever think that Dewey had a chance to beat Roosevelt in ’44?

Well, you were only 13 years old, so I would never expect you to have a sophisticated analysis, but did you go into it thinking . . .

Stemen: Yeah, we thought Dewey had a good chance. Of course, in 1948, we thought that Dewey had it all sewed up.
Birkner: That’s right. Now, when you were in school, did you have a particular area where you were interested, or were you just good at everything, or what was school like for you?

Stemen: Oh, I think I enjoyed most of the subjects. Everything but penmanship. Those were the days when you had penmanship drill once a day; you had these desks that had inkwells and you had a penholder, and you would stick a little point in the penholder and dip it in the inkwell, and then you’d do exercises: draw circles and I forget the name of the method of handwriting, but it included a lot of kind of fancy flourishes, and I never could quite master it. I was never very good coloring inside the lines and that sort of thing.

Birkner: But I look at your handwriting, and it’s a lot better than mine. You have a very clear and open kind of writing, so they taught you something.

Stemen: No, I gave up that method that I learned in school, and I devised a method of my own a little bit closer to printing. I dropped the flourishes and the curlicues and that sort of stuff.

Birkner: I see. Now, did you as a boy, once you reached say 14 or 15, get encouraged to take part-time jobs to make some spending money, or was your family well-fixed enough for an allowance? How did that work?

Stemen: I usually tried to avoid working if I could; I mowed some lawns and I had a paper route briefly in the summer of 1945, but then I dropped that because I went out for football, and I couldn’t do both.
Birkner: I assume you are not a lot shorter than you were when 16 years old, so what made you think you could play high school football? It just didn’t matter what size you were?

Stemen: Well, when I was a senior, I weighed in at about 180.

Birkner: You did!

Stemen: And I played on the line, and I was a guard.

Birkner: So you were stocky and strong? You could play the game.

Stemen: And I was fast, I was really the fastest lineman. Sometimes in wind sprints I’d beat a couple of the backs, so for a while I even thought I might be able to do college on a football scholarship, but at 5’7” and 180, I wasn’t quite big enough.

Birkner: Yeah.

Stemen: So that didn’t materialize.

Birkner: How big a deal was football night or afternoon – I don’t know whether you played night or afternoon in your town – did it get a good crowd?

Stemen: Yeah, we played at night. We played in a league – we were a little bit overmatched. Goshen was one of the smallest high schools in the league. We played teams from South Bend, Fort Wayne, Elkhart, Mishawaka, Michigan City, and so on. Well, we did all right, I think.

Birkner: Your state has a kind of tradition of these small towns competing against bigger schools, I mean, it’s the basis for this great movie Hoosiers, in which. . .

Stemen: No, that’s basketball.

Birkner: That was basketball, but the small town basketball squad defeats the big-city team in the finals and wins the championship.
Stemen: Yeah, that happened once in a great while, but the small schools liked to play in the tournament against the big ones because every so often, a small one would knock off one of the big teams.

Birkner: It was a great David versus Goliath story for the newspapers and great for the town’s self-image if they could beat one of these bigger places.

Stemen: Now I think football has been reorganized since I was in high school. My old high school, Goshen, has won at least a couple of state championships since I was there, but we never did when I was in high school either, in football or basketball.

Birkner: Did you play any other sports besides football?

Stemen: Well, intramural basketball, I played, not varsity.

Birkner: Would you describe your childhood as a fairly typical well-adjusted childhood, or were there any storm clouds in your particular life?

Stemen: No, I think I had a pretty well-adjusted childhood. Of course, when you’re a kid, you get the idea that your father isn’t too sharp at a certain age; maybe a lot of us went through that. Maybe you change your mind when you get a little older, but of course you’re anxious to get out of the small town and hit the big time and go some place more urban.

Birkner: Well, of course you do that, because you go up to New Haven at age 17 or 18. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about the process about which a kid from Goshen would apply to college – and wound up at Yale. My assumption is that when you were graduating from high school in the late 40s, the majority of students did not go off to college, and those who did tended to go to more local institutions, so describe how your situation doesn’t fit that mold.
Stemen: Well, I'd say in my high school class a fairly high percentage went to college, maybe not as went today, but oh, a lot of them went to liberal arts colleges or state schools, Ball State, Indiana, a few went to places like Chicago or Northwestern.

Birkner: So you must have had a fairly middle-class environment, because in 1968, when I went off to college, in my hometown less than 50 percent of the kids went off to college, and that was 20 years after you went off.

Stemen: Well, Goshen was a fairly prosperous town, I'd say. A lot of kids went to college, and my ambition might have been to go to Chicago or Northwestern at that point. For a while I thought maybe I could get a football scholarship to Purdue, but (laughing) I gave up on that. Well, the way I got hooked up with Yale, there was a guy in the class ahead of me who went to Yale. It turned out he only spent one semester there, but he thought of several of us in the next class who might be interested, and Yale was sort of beating the bushes in the Midwest and here and there at the time to advertise their regional scholarships; you know, they wanted to diversify geographically. Well, there may be more to it than we realized at the time, but, anyway, a member of the Yale faculty came to my high school and gave a little talk, and so I thought, "Well, why not?" So I applied and got admitted and got a scholarship, so I decided that's where I would go.

Birkner: How much of your education did you and your family have to pay for?

Stemen: Oh, the scholarship covered tuition and at least part of room and board, and I had something called a bursary job. A lot of guys worked in the dining halls, but I could type, so I worked in the Yale library for four years in the reference office, which was a little cushier job than dishing out food in a college dining hall. I lucked out on that.
Birkner: You sure did; you got a good deal. Before you go off to Yale, had you ever been away from home for any extended period of time on your own?

Stemen: No, no, not really, outside of going to church camp summers. I guess most of the trips I took were with parents, so I hadn’t been any place very far away. Chicago was the big city; that’s where we went to visit museums or go to the theatre. We had some relatives around Chicago too, so we would combine trips to the city with visits to our relatives. I’d been in New York once, when I was 16, the first time I got to New York.

Birkner: Under what circumstances?

Stemen: Well, my mother took training for something called “Welcome Wagon” which maybe you’ve never heard of . . .

Birkner: I’ve heard of it, sure.

Stemen: Anyway, this was a big deal in those days; it was really a commercial venture in which the Welcome Wagon lady would visit new residents or I think women who had just had a baby or couples who were just getting married and things, and products from the local merchants, maybe a bottle of milk or something from the various stores, so she went to New York to take Welcome Wagon training. And so for part of the time she was there, I came out while she was taking classes during the day, and I sort of roamed around the city, took photographs, took tours; I remember getting down to the Bowery and Chinatown.

Birkner: You weren’t intimidated by it.

Stemen: No, not in those days.

Birkner: I’m just thinking of the sheer size and speed and everything of the city compared to what it must have been like in small-town Indiana.
Stemen: I think the city came to be seen as more of a menace after that; we were used to going to Chicago, and New York was maybe a little bit bigger version of Chicago. I think maybe for kids in the, I’d say by the 60s and 70s, New York might have seemed more intimidating. I don’t know if the crime was worse later, but there was more publicity about it.

Birkner: Let me ask you this: you were an only child, and you obviously were close to your parents. Did your parents have any concerns about you going off to New Haven from Indiana? Would they have preferred that you stayed in Indiana to go to school and go to Bloomington or something like that?

Stemen: I don’t know; they didn’t say so anyway.

Birkner: They didn’t discourage you from the Yale application.

Stemen: I don’t know what they might have talked about when I wasn’t there, but, no, they were very encouraging about that.

Birkner: In those days, would parents accompany the entering freshman to their school, or did you go off by train on your own?

Stemen: Oh, they drove me out to New Haven. Sort of made a trip out of it. We went up to Canada, Niagara Falls, the Adirondacks, White Mountain, and so on.

Birkner: Was this September of 1948 or ’49?

Stemen: Forty-nine I started to college.

Birkner: So you entered Yale in the fall of ’49 at a time when I’m sure there were still lots of veterans going to school, or at least some.
Stemen: Not very many. I think my class was considered the first of the post-war classes. That is, there were hardly any veterans in my class. I think in the older classes they were still there; there would have been some, but very few in my class.

Birkner: Now I happen to know you graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Yale, which means you were an academic success. I’m just curious whether when you got to Yale you felt intimidated by all these bright people or preppies or whatever, or did you just feel like it was the right place for you and you fit in okay?

Stemen: I think I was a little cocky, actually. I tried to get by for a while without doing much studying and found out I couldn’t do that. I was probably overconfident when I got there.

Birkner: You mentioned at one point to me that you had several roommates, one of whom actually may have killed himself while he was at Yale . . .

Stemen: No, not while he was at college . . .

Birkner: Later on. How many roommates did you actually have in your first year at Yale? How many suitemates or whatever you’d call it?

Stemen: Well, there were four of us in a three-room suite.

Birkner: And were those people compatible with you at the time?

Stemen: Oh, more or less. I think everybody goes through the roommate deal. I’d say over four years of roommates at Yale there was considerable bickering and that sort of thing, but nobody moved out in the middle of the year or anything like that.

Birkner: Which college were you in?

Stemen: Timothy Dwight. Freshman year you start out on the Old Campus; I was in one of the older dorms, by the name of Durfee. Its nickname used to be Dirty Durfee.
Birkner: You don’t do the college then until your sophomore year in those days?

Stemen: Not in those days.

Birkner: Okay, so you did Timothy Dwight sophomore, junior and senior years? Who was your master?

Stemen: Charles Sawyer.

Birkner: I’ve heard of that name.

Stemen: You may be thinking of Charles Seymour, who was the president of the college.

Birkner: Oh, I am, yes.

Stemen: He was succeeded by Whitney Griswold in my sophomore year. Charles Sawyer was, I think, in the art department. He was master of Timothy Dwight, succeeded by Thomas Bergin then, but that was after I graduated.

Birkner: What did you make of having maid service?

Stemen: We never had maid service.

Birkner: You did not.

Stemen: Mm-mm.

Birkner: Did you have someone empty your garbage though?

Stemen: Yeah, someone came around to empty the trash, but we either made our own beds or in fact, we even had to supply our own sheets and towels. About all the college supplied was the mattress and a bunk bed. We had to buy our own furniture if we wanted any easy chairs or couches, any stuff like that. We had to take our own laundry to the local laundry. I had one roommate freshman year, I think, who slept on a bare mattress most of the year. He didn’t want to bother with a sheet.

Birkner: Did you have a fireplace in your suite?
Stemen: Yeah, we had a fireplace.

Birkner: Useable?

Stemen: Useable; I can’t remember that we used it much. Once in a while, I guess.

Birkner: What was, as far as you were concerned, once you got to New Haven, the best thing about being at Yale?

Stemen: I’d say just the, you know, actual life, the excitement of the place, the courses, the . . . I would say the debates: politics, religion.

Birkner: It was a pretty interesting time; the Cold War was really heating up, the Korean War commenced while you were at college.

Stemen: Yeah. McCarthyism was a big issue.

Birkner: McCarthyism was a big issue. Were there campus personalities or campus controversies that you particularly remember during your Yale years?

Stemen: Well, the firing of MacArthur was exciting. People took sides on that. Well, Yale had – I guess still does have something called the Political Union which featured debate on issues. I belonged to the Labor Party, which was the most leftist of the parties in the Political Union.

Birkner: You were with the Labor Party.

Stemen: Let’s see; when I was there, I think there were four parties. There was the Conservative Party that had people like Bill Buckley and Ray Price, who was later Nixon’s speechwriter and Ed Meese, who was later Attorney General of the United States. They were in the Conservative Party. Then there was something called the Bull Moose Party, which was split from the Conservatives, I guess, and then there was the
Liberal Party, and then the Labor Party, which was the most leftist of the Political Union parties.

**Birkner:** And you were with the Labor. Now, are you telling me that Meese and Buckley were there at the same time you were?

**Stemen:** Buckley was a senior when I was freshman; Meese was in my class.

**Birkner:** Did you rub shoulders with any people in these circles who ultimately became public figures? You just mentioned Meese and Buckley, but any that you particularly remember?

**Stemen:** I didn’t really rub shoulders with Buckley, but he was well known on campus, whereas Meese I knew pretty well.

**Birkner:** And did you have respect for Meese as a person of significance?

**Stemen:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was a leading college debater in those days, a very congenial guy. Very tall and slim in those days.

**Birkner:** You liked the intellectual environment; you said you worked in the library to help pay for your board. Did you do extracurriculars?

**Stemen:** Not a whole lot. I belonged to the Lutheran Student Association in those days besides the Political Union. I didn’t do a whole lot in other extracurricular activities. I probably should have, but with the bursary job, that took up some time, and being naturally lazy, I goofed off a lot of the time.

**Birkner:** Did you have an interest in the opposite sex at that time? The Yale boys probably dated Albertus Magnus girls or went elsewhere to the Seven Sister schools for dates; I mean was that part of the world for you?
Stemen: Not a whole lot. I was interested in the opposite sex, but there weren’t many opportunities if you didn’t have the bucks to travel. I got to Smith and Mount Holyoke a few times and then a few dates with Albertus Magnus women, but I didn’t do very much dating in college.

Birkner: Could you remember now who your best friend was from college?

Stemen: Yeah, a guy that I roomed with over four years, who later died at the age of 37.

Birkner: This was the fellow who killed himself?

Stemen: Yeah.

Birkner: Do you want to say for the record what his name was?

Stemen: Yeah, his name was James Stephen Reiss; he went by Steve.

Birkner: Is that Reese?

Stemen: Reiss. He went by Jim to his family and his old friends, but when he went to college, he decided he’d go by Steve, partly because there was another guy in our suite freshman year who was named Jim too, so . . . But I think there might have been more to it than just that he was doing that to be identifiable.

Birkner: By one of those odd coincidences in life, there’s a pretty good historian of baseball named Steven Reiss. I suspect not [related].

Stemen: Did he spell it the same way?

Birkner: Yeah, he does.

Stemen: Probably not the same family. This guy came from a family of Russians. I think their original name was something like Ridgoretzky, changed that to Reiss. His family were in politics; they were Mensheviks and they got out of Russia before the Russian Revolution.
Birkner: Now Roger, you said you were naturally a bit lazy; you liked to enjoy the life. When you weren't reading and studying – and obviously we're missing something here – because you were successful academically, you did get into Phi Beta Kappa. What did you do for fun when you weren't studying?

Stemen: Goofing off, long conversations, hanging out around the room. I couldn't afford to drink very much beer; in those days the law was rather lax. They didn't enforce the drinking age much around New Haven, so you could go to bars and drink beer, but I couldn't afford to do this very often. Then we played pool, played squash.

Birkner: What were you majoring in?

Stemen: I was an English major all the way through.

Birkner: Did you have a particularly favored professor or several professors you liked a lot?

Stemen: Richard Sewall, who taught a course on tragedy; Louis Martz who taught a seminar on poetry that I took junior year – who was a Pennsylvanian by origin.

Birkner: Did you take classes with any of the famed historians at Yale?

Stemen: I think Ralph Gabriel was probably one of the most famous that I took a course with. For a while, I thought maybe I'd go into American Studies. He taught the very popular course on American Studies that had an enrollment of several hundred.

Birkner: And you were in that class. I'm trying to think back now whether Samuel Flagg Bemis was at Yale at that time.

Stemen: He was there at the time, but I didn't take his course.

Birkner: Was he a campus personality or not particularly?
Stemen: Somewhat. I had a friend who got kicked out of his class for smoking. I guess when class started, all cigarettes had to be out, and I guess this guy was still blowing smoke and Bemis kicked him out.

Birkner: Just to know that stuff doesn’t cease, in a way. Tim Shannon, our young early Americanist, was telling me that when he was at Brown, James T. Patterson used to teach a very popular course on 20th Century America, but he would get infuriated when students would read the newspaper while he was lecturing, and he would march up to the top steps of a particular large auditorium, and he’d grab the newspaper out of the student’s hands, and say, “Don’t you have any respect for your teachers?” and “Get out of here if you’re not going to do this!”

Stemen: I remember a guy getting kicked out of class – this was Basil Duke Henning, who taught English history. I remember him kicking a guy out for reading the paper. And I remember Ralph Turner, who taught a course in world history, kicking a guy out during an argument. He said something – I can’t remember exactly what, but Turner didn’t like it, so he told him, “Now, you leave the room.”

Birkner: Did you do a senior seminar or a senior thesis in English?

Stemen: I did seminars. We had a seminar junior year and one senior year. I think my junior seminar was with Louis Martz on – it was called “Problems in Poetry.” And my senior seminar was Maximillian Price on 18th century English literature: Swift and Pope and that period.

Birkner: Do you recall what you specifically were most interested in for that senior seminar? Did you like these writers?

Stemen: I liked Pope and Swift, especially Pope.
Birkner: Did the teachers take any special interest in the students? What was your sense of that?

Stemen: You didn’t see them much outside

[Tape 1 Side 1 ends]

[Tape 1 Side 2 begins]

Stemen: (in process) ... fellows of the College, Timothy Dwight, they would regularly eat lunch. Dave Potter, for instance, would be at one of the long tables, or Bob Kiphuth, the swimming coach. There was a man named John Phillips, who was an expert in colonial silver and pewter, who was a fellow there.

Birkner: It sounds to me like your Yale years were fairly comfortable, that you enjoyed it, that you were not particularly troubled by anything or particularly deeply engaged in anything except learning and soaking up the atmosphere.

Stemen: I think the biggest drawback to Yale in those years was that it was a men’s school and there were not women around. It was a bit of a downer. Of course, that’s changed greatly since then.

Birkner: For the record, your daughter went to Yale. Did you go home for the summers?

Stemen: Yeah, I went home Christmas, and sometimes but not always for spring vacation and then for the summer.

Birkner: Did you work in the summers, or did you take it easy?

Stemen: I worked. I had jobs with the city utilities. One summer I spent my time at the sewage plant, and another summer I worked for the electric and water works doing what I would call donkey work at the sewage plant; it was mostly cutting the grass and trimming
the hedges, although once in awhile, when things got clogged up, you’d have to put on a pair of rubber boots and get the hose out, but it was mostly painting. Did a lot of painting around the place.

**Birkner:** During your summer breaks, did you have particular kinds of reading that you liked to do? Did you read novels? Did you read political histories?

**Stemen:** I was pretty much of a novel reader in those days.

**Birkner:** Who was popular in those days as far as a young person was concerned? Did you read Thomas Wolfe, for example?

**Stemen:** Yes, Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, Fitzgerald; I used to read a guy you probably never heard of. This is not a novelist now, but a guy who wrote sort of general commentary, by the name of Phillip Wylie.

**Birkner:** Oh, sure, *A Generation of Vipers*, right?

**Stemen:** Yeah, and he was the one who came up with the term “momism” I think.

**Birkner:** Well, he’s the one who accuses mom of creating this generation of vipers, I believe, right? That was a bestseller he wrote in 1942, and he subsequently wrote many other books.

**Stemen:** Yeah, looking back on it, it was probably kind of low-grade stuff, but it was interesting. And I used to read a humorist called H. Allen Smith, books like *Lost in the Horse Latitudes* and *Treadmill to Oblivion*.

**Birkner:** Did you read Thurber or E.B. White?

**Stemen:** Not in those days. Thurber maybe a little bit.

**Birkner:** When did you come into the habit of reading *The New Yorker*, for example? When did you pick that up?
Stemen: I used to read that sometimes in college. There used to be a newsman who stood outside the post office, and he’d holler, “New Time, new Life, new New Yorker!”

Birkner: And you could go out and pay 10 or 15 or 20 cents and buy one.

Stemen: Yeah, though even at that price, I didn’t buy it very often, but there were usually copies lying around here and there, and then of course since I worked in the college library I’d go in the periodical room there. Well, we subscribed to – I remember my senior year, we subscribed to the New York Herald Tribune on weekdays and The New York Times on Sundays, so we did read the newspapers. Of course, I probably didn’t have time to read as much of The New York Times as I do now.

Birkner: What was New Haven like in the late 40s and early 50s? How would you describe it as a city?

Stemen: Well, it was an industrial city, a large city. We used to hike around the city quite a bit; on weekends, we’d hike out to East Rock, maybe, or we’d hike down to – there was an area that had some really great restaurants, the Worcester Square area. There was a restaurant called Sallie’s Pizza and Spaghetti, and then there was a Pepi’s. Pepi had a place back of his restaurant called The Spot, where you could get some pizza and raw clams.

Birkner: There’s still to this day a place near the campus where students and faculty members would go and read and sit; Jonathan Spence allegedly writes some of his work in this restaurant. It’s a very modest scale kind of place with no fanciness about it at all; do you know what I’m talking about?

Stemen: I think that’s the place; now it’s mainly a pizza restaurant. I think it’s called Naples or something like that, but when I was there, it was George and Harry’s. George
and Harry’s was one of these New England restaurants where you’d order stuff at the
counter and then take it back to your seat. We hung out there some. There was more
than one. There was a George and Harry’s on Wall Street, and then there was one called
G and H’s. The one on Wall Street was pretty close to where I lived; occasionally we’d
go there. But I didn’t go to restaurants an awful lot in New Haven. It was just too
expensive since we had our meals in the college.

**Birkner:** Did the men of Yale College occasionally seek out female companionship in
the New Haven community, or were they much more oriented to the weekends going on
the road to Smith and Wellesley or whatever?

**Stemen:** Well, it was a big deal to go to Smith or Holyoke I guess were the two, or
Vassar, maybe those three. There was Sarah Lawrence. I didn’t know very many guys
who dated New Haven girls.

**Birkner:** Now, does Yale have fraternities?

**Stemen:** Yeah.

**Birkner:** And were you part of that scene?

**Stemen:** No. When I was there, they still had frat houses, but they were not residential.
The frat houses served food and drink. For a period, the frat houses were gone; the
University had bought them out. One of them I think is still the alumni house. I think
they’ve made a comeback since then, and there are also some sororities now. When I
was there, I’d say the percentage of students who joined frats was less than half.

**Birkner:** And you did not join.

**Stemen:** And I did not.
Birkner: You didn’t feel ostracized as a result because they were not the dominant social force on campus?

Stemen: From what I would gather, they are obviously at Dartmouth or Cornell; there are a lot of frat houses.

Birkner: Now, when you reached your senior year at Yale, did you assume you were going to go into the armed forces at the end of college, or what was your expectation for your next step in life?

Stemen: Well, I wasn’t sure. I applied for graduate school; I was interested in going into American Studies at that point, and I applied to the University of Minnesota, but finances were an obstacle then, and I decided that since I was probably going to get drafted anyway, I might as well take my two years and then get the GI Bill. So the summer after senior year, I volunteered for the Army, volunteered for a two-year stint.

Birkner: Did you volunteer in your senior year, did you say?

Stemen: The summer after my senior year.

Birkner: So you’d graduated and gone back home.

Stemen: I went back home and volunteered at my hometown draft board.

Birkner: I assume that was not an uncommon thing for a college graduate to do. I mean, today a college graduate’s not going to go and volunteer, because there’s no draft hanging over their heads for starters. But when you walked into your draft board and said, “I’ve just graduated college; I’m interested in volunteering.” They didn’t look at you funny, right? They thought this is a normal thing.

Stemen: Well, they were glad for that because of course they put you on the quota then and they could fill their quota. I volunteered to go in August of ’53.
Birkner: By volunteering, did you get to choose what in particular you wanted to do? Did you get any advantages by volunteering?

Stemen: The only thing you got to choose was when you went in. What it did, in effect, was move up your draft. If I'd waited around to get drafted, it might have been six months later. I might say a little bit about draft deferments in those days. The Korean War started in 1950, this would have been right after my freshman year in college, and the government had a policy of deferring college students. In fact, at one point, there was even an exam that was given, and if you got a score over 70, you got deferred. Well, I took advantage of these things, but looking back on it, I think it was a big mistake for this country.

Birkner: Yeah, you're talking about national policy, not your personal life.

Stemen: Yeah.

Birkner: Well, I feel the same way. I mean, when I look at the Vietnam War, why should the fact that I was in college have deferred me, while someone who didn't go to college had to be subject to the draft?

Stemen: It promoted a kind of a two-class system in the country. Just as a matter of fairness, I don't think anybody's life is worth any more than anybody else's.

Birkner: Do you have any understanding or an idea as to why this two-tiered system was put into effect? Why did college students have this advantage?

Stemen: I'm not sure what the politics of that might be. Maybe because the people who were making the policy and decisions were people who had gone to college and whose children were going to college.
Birkner: That certainly is possible. What branch of the service were you volunteering for?

Stemen: The army.

Birkner: And did you expect to be a grunt, I mean, what was going to happen to you?

Stemen: Well, I just went in as an enlisted man. I was a yardbird, as the term goes.

Birkner: Where did you first go for training?

Stemen: Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Birkner: And standard set of six to eight weeks of getting acclimated to army life?

Stemen: Yeah, eight weeks basic training. Fort Leonard Wood was an engineer camp. The choices then were to go in to some branch of the Army Engineers, either combat engineers... I applied and got into photolithography school, and after the eight weeks basic, I was at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. It was a 15-week course.

Birkner: Would you say your army experience was pretty much what you anticipated or that it was yucky or better than you anticipated?

Stemen: Well, in some ways maybe better. It was a lot of fun to do army life.

Birkner: And it wasn’t during a hot war, so that was an advantage too, right?

Stemen: Yeah, the war ended about a week before I went in the army, so shooting ended. It ended on my birthday, July the 27th in ’53, and I went in the army on August the 6th.

Birkner: That’s good timing.

Stemen: That was very good timing.

Birkner: Did you find this mixture of people – races, classes, ethnicities – was a salutary thing?

Stemen: Yeah.
Birkner: How did you get into the photolithography school? Did you have to take a test, or was it just a simple request?

Stemen: I suppose [they] looked in our records, looked at the tests we had taken, I don’t know how they decided who got in. Maybe we were the only ones who applied for it, I’m not sure.

Birkner: What did it mean to go to photolithography school? What were you studying and learning?

Stemen: Well, photolithography had to do with how to make the kind of plates that are used in offset printing to print maps. The process involved taking an actual photograph of the line drawing on a negative and then burning the negative onto a zinc plate – we used zinc plates for the printing process – [so] though it was a photographic process. To do a four-color map, you had to do four plates and make sure the negatives were all the same size and the different colors on the map would register together.

Birkner: You worked with [ ] hot lead?

Stemen: No, in offset printing, there’s no lead involved.

Birkner: Offset is actually a new process that begins to replace the hot lead printing in the newspaper business in the 1960s and 70s and sort of was [coterminus] until they kept going further and further toward a more modernized operation, and hot lead went out of fashion. You were in Virginia doing that, and would you continue to work with photolithography beyond Virginia?

Stemen: Yeah, they asked us at the end of school where we wanted to go, so I said I wanted to go overseas. At that time I was thinking, “Well, maybe I’ll go to Europe,” but I went to Korea instead.
Birkner: In other words, you didn’t know where you were going to go when you volunteered to go overseas.

Stemen: No, they just said do you want to stay in the states or go overseas, and I decided “Go overseas.”

Birkner: Do they take you by boat or by plane?

Stemen: Well, we went by troopship in those days.

Birkner: What was your attitude about going to Korea when they assigned you to that?

Stemen: Well, at first I was a little disappointed because I would have preferred a European assignment, since I had taken German and French in college and was interested in Europe. In fact, I might even have got interested in German studies had I been sent over there.

Birkner: But instead, you found yourself going to Korea. What was your assignment in Korea?

Stemen: Well, I was assigned to a photolithography unit; well, it was a printing outfit, engineer topographic detachment, which was equipped to print maps and print anything else that needed to be printed. It was a mobile unit, so the stuff was all mounted in trucks and vans.

Birkner: Do you feel like you were useful in what you did?

Stemen: Yeah, I enjoyed what I did. I wound up as a cameraman working with a process camera. Now, a process camera takes negatives, at least the one I worked with, the negatives two feet by three, and the camera’s mounted in a semi-van, so that the back of the camera actually is in the darkroom. Put the negative on the back of the camera from the darkroom and then the lens of the camera is aimed toward an easel where you put the
drawing. We used arc lights to illuminate the drawing. But by that time, the war was over and there wasn’t any demand for map printing, so we did a lot of other stuff, some of it probably illegal.

Birkner: Such as?

Stemen: Oh, guys would bring in pictures that they wanted made into calendars; for instance, a guy would bring a picture of his wife and we’d make a calendar out of his picture. Then we’d print menus for the officer’s club. Well, we did a few projects, unit histories, and so on. Of course some unmentionable stuff people brought in from time to time.

Birkner: I can imagine. What was your first impression of Korea when you arrived?

Stemen: I guess the squalor, the damage from the war. A lot of the cities were pretty well shot up in the war, a lot of damaged buildings, people were very poor.

Birkner: What cities did you see?

Stemen: The first place I was stationed was up north of Chunchon; it was up in the hills. But then our unit pulled back to the Seoul area; most of the time I was there, I was around the Seoul area.

Birkner: Was Seoul pretty beat up?


Birkner: The armies had basically crossed back and forth through Seoul, right?

Stemen: Yeah, it had been a real battleground.

Birkner: Did you ever get up to the DMZ?

Stemen: Yeah, one time I went up with a guy in a truck.

Birkner: Was it a pretty foreboding place or what?
Stemen: There wasn’t much to see there. You could look across to the hills on the other side, but you couldn’t see anything of the guys on the other side.

Birkner: To what extent was there concern that fighting would break out again and to what extent were you fairly comfortable that this was indeed a ceasefire?

Stemen: I don’t remember us thinking very much about that. I guess maybe once or twice there was something of a scare, but I don’t remember that we ever thought about it much. At one point, the battle of Dien Bien Phu was going on. There was a rumor that we were going to get sent to Vietnam, but probably every unit had a rumor like that.

Birkner: Well, of course, you know those rumors were not ridiculous, in the sense that at the highest levels, as you know, the administration was discussing what it could do to help the French, and in the end, without the British support to help the French retain their empire, there wasn’t an American will to go in and do that. But it could have – you know – if Richard Nixon had had his way, there could have been some more aggressive action taken. What was your timeframe in Korea? How long were you there?

Stemen: Oh, a little over a year. I got there in April of ’54 and left in May of ’55.

Birkner: Did you find the service tolerable? While you were there, you weren’t saying, “God, I wish I were somewhere else,” were you?

Stemen: Well, I guess given your druthers, maybe you’d rather not be in the army, but on the other hand, it wasn’t bad. [Somebody] who went through combat would probably have a very different view of that, but . . .

Birkner: Did you have good camaraderie?
Stemen: Yeah. For a while, I was running an NCO club, which was dispensing alcoholic beverages in great quantity. That’s one of the things about army life, there was [at least it created] a great deal of drinking.

Birkner: How did you deal with that yourself?

Stemen: Well, I just would be imbibing myself probably more than I should have. This was part of the life [ ]

Birkner: Did you, while you were there, also continue to read, and was that accessible to you? If you wanted to read a current novel or read something from a wider range of literature, could you get it?

Stemen: Yeah, actually, the army was one place where books were very popular when we were up in the hills, especially when a new box of books would come, guys would actually run to grab a book. They had something of a library there, mostly in those days Pocket books or Signet books we’d get from the States. I’m not sure who sent them to us. So there was a lot of reading, even a lot of guys that you might not expect to be readers would read for something to do. Novels, mysteries, westerns and that sort of thing.

Birkner: Did you witness any particular unexpected things in the army, whether it was someone getting hurt in an accident or a fight or anything that kind of stands out in your mind as a notable episode from those months in Korea?

Stemen: No, not really.

Birkner: How about your interaction with Koreans? Did you have any?

Stemen: We had a lot of Korean employees in the company, the cooks and the houseboys and the laundry people. Of course there were Korean women who attended parties at our
NCO club, quite a few of them. Well, there was a considerable black market. The way the black market operated, the ... Well, first [ ] I’d say that GIs in Korea didn’t have US currency; we dealt with something called military scrip, which was a currency just used by the army. It wasn’t supposed to be used by Korean civilians, but Koreans got a hold of it. It was the women who would get the money from the GIs and then that would be used in turn to buy things for the black market from the PX, or the GIs would sell stuff, cigarettes, so there was a thriving black market.

**Birkner:** Could you comment on how the American GIs treated the Koreans who worked for you or socialized with you or they ran into in the streets; I assume there was a range of treatment.

**Stemen:** Yeah, quite a range. I think there were some friendships, close friendships between GIs and Koreans. On the other hand, some GIs were rather arrogant toward Koreans, dependent on the personality of the [person].

**Birkner:** Were there certain epithets that were used to describe Koreans by some of the cruder GIs?

**Stemen:** Well, yeah, the word “gook” which actually comes from the Korean language.

**Birkner:** So “gook” actually has its origins in Korea rather than Vietnam.

**Stemen:** Yeah.

**Birkner:** I see. Now, in the army, did you have the opportunity to make any lasting friendships, or were these mostly acquaintances?

**Stemen:** Well, there are a couple of guys I’ve kept in touch with. And then in the army, especially one guy I went through basic training in photolithography school, I still exchange Christmas cards with him. I’m not in touch with anybody I knew in Korea. I
guess going to basic and engineering school is a little bit like college, you make some
lifetime friends.

**Birkner:** Do you feel that the army changed you or affected your persona or path in life?

**Stemen:** Yeah, it affected the field I went into. When I got to Korea and Japan, I got
interested in East Asian studies, or where I got interested was through conversations I had
with some Chinese employees. I was in a unit after the [ ] engineer detachment I was in
was deactivated and then went into an outfit called “First Leaflet and Loudspeaker.” It
was a propaganda unit, the purpose of which was to print leaflets and make loudspeaker
broadcasts to the other side. Of course this stuff wasn’t going on much anymore. The
shooting was over, but we had some Chinese employees who were interpreters,
interpreted Chinese prisoners of war, find out how effective our propaganda was. One of
them was a former Chinese general. He’d been a general under Chiang Kai-shek. He
didn’t like to discuss politics around his officer quarters with other Chinese, so he
enjoyed talking politics with the GIs because he knew nobody was going to inform on
him. So I got interested in Chinese politics talking to him. He had known Stilwell and
thought Stilwell was right. So I got interested in the Stilwell Mission and American-
Chinese relations in general. So that’s the field I went into after I got out of the army.

**Birkner:** For the record, General Stilwell’s first name was Joseph?

**Stemen:** Mm-hm.

**Birkner:** So some little light bulb went up gradually, over time, while you were in the
armed forces, that you might want to pursue East Asian studies beyond the army. Is that
right?

**Stemen:** Mm-hm.
Birkner: You never had an idea that you were going to stay in the army more than a two-year hitch?

Stemen: Two years, yeah. No I never, I didn’t have any idea about that.

Birkner: If you volunteered, you just had to do the two years, you didn’t have to do three years?

Stemen: There were two kinds of enlistments in the army. One was in the Army of the United States, so you had a serial number that began with US, that was what draftees got into. The other was regular army; your serial number started with RA, but you could volunteer for the Army of the United States, and the term there was two years.

Birkner: And that’s what you chose.

Stemen: If you enlisted in the regular army, that was a three-year stint.

Birkner: So you knew that by the fall of 1955 you would be out of the army.

Stemen: Actually, as it turned out, the army was being reduced in numbers by the end of the fiscal year of 1955. The Eisenhower administration wanted to cut back on the size of the army, so again, here’s where luck comes in. Those of us who got in the army in the summer of 1953 were given the opportunity for early release, so I actually got out of the army about the end of May rather than early August, which was soon enough that I could start graduate work in the summer of ’55, rather than waiting until fall.

Birkner: Let’s talk about that process a little bit. You’re going to get mustered out of the armed forces, you’re going to be eligible for the GI bill. How widely do you cast your net in terms of programs and universities?
Stemen: Well, it was a little hard to apply for graduate school from Korea. I applied to Indiana University, that was my state university and I never did take the Graduate Record Exam.

Birkner: Did you apply to others as well, or just Indiana?

Stemen: No, just Indiana.

Birkner: And did you apply to it primarily because it was your state university or because they had strength in the field you were interested in?

Stemen: I had no idea what they had in the field I was interested in. I applied there because it was a place to start graduate work. As it turned out, they did have work in the field I was interested in, so I stayed on there.

Birkner: Now, you say you didn’t take the GREs, but they were willing on the basis of your college experience . . .

Stemen: They probably gave some breaks to veterans they wouldn’t have to somebody else. Although I don’t think the graduate school is as hard to get into then as it became later.

Birkner: Did you use a GI bill to pay for graduate school, or did you have a scholarship?

Stemen: I had the GI bill and then I had graduate assistantships. And I had a fellowship my last year of graduate school. But I actually wound up a little money ahead in graduate school between graduate assistantships and the GI bill.

Birkner: How far is Bloomington from Goshen?

Stemen: About 200 miles.

Birkner: So what’s the sequence here? You got mustered out of the armed forces in May of ’55, you went home, and then fairly shortly thereafter [ ].
Stemen: Yeah, I went down to Bloomington in June.

Birkner: Were your parents alive and well when you got back?

Stemen: Mm-hm.

Birkner: And they were kind of pleased that you were going to stay at Indiana this time?

Stemen: Yeah, I guess so.

Birkner: As an only child, did your parents treat you in a normal way or did they have some special kind of protectiveness about you?

Stemen: Well, it’s hard to say, hard to compare with other people.

Birkner: Well, you could tell whether your mother fluttered around you all the time . . .

Stemen: Well, yeah, there was a little of that, I think, which is probably normal in American families.

Birkner: Maybe that momism thing is something (laughing) [ ] So you were off to Bloomington to graduate school. Did you anticipate that you were going to work for a PhD and become a college professor, or did you have really an open field?

Stemen: Oh, I was fairly open to what I was going to do, I considered going in to the Foreign Service. I went as far as taking both the written and oral Foreign Service exams and then decided at the last minute to stay in graduate school and finish up.

Birkner: We’re coming close to the end here now, I just wanted to sort of get a word or two about Indiana, and then we’ll knock off for today. When you entered the graduate school at Indiana University, did they have a cohort that entered at the same time that you were part of, or did you just sort of find your way?

Stemen: Oh, you just sort of find your way. I think people kind of come and go in graduate school. Some of them were pursuing it part-time and some were fulltime and
some were right on the PhD track and others came and went, so there wasn’t any distinct feeling that “I’m with this group of people” the way there is in college when you go in with your entering class.

**Birkner:** Let me ask you this question, based on what I know about you, which is that you seem to represent as a professional in history a common phenomenon from your era that is not so common today, which is someone who’s bifurcated between studies in East Asia and someone who does American diplomatic history. I don’t think you see as much of that in graduate school and the profession today.

**Stemen:** You don’t, although American-East Asian relations has become a fairly developed field since then. It wasn’t then, so I thought of myself as primarily in East Asian studies but with a really strong interest in American-East Asian relations.

**Birkner:** Did you come to Indiana with any language skill besides the German and French you had acquired in college? Did you pick up any Korean?

**Stemen:** No, I started taking Chinese in graduate school.

**Birkner:** And did you find that you were okay with that, I mean that you could handle that?

**Stemen:** Yeah, there were only two of us in the Chinese class when I started. The other guy wound up in the Foreign Service and had a long career with the Foreign Service. The two of us would meet in the professor’s office and he would serve jasmine tea, and he was a pretty strict taskmaster. You couldn’t hide very well when there are only two of you there.
**Birkner:** So you learned your Chinese. Now did you take classes in Chinese history or culture wherein you had to use the Chinese, or was that not integrated as much in those studies?

**Stemen:** Well, we used it somewhat, but for the most part, instruction in readings were in English. I guess when I took Chinese historiography, then we got into Chinese materials.

**Birkner:** Did Indiana University have a step with a master’s degree toward the PhD or were you more like Hopkins where you got in and went straight to the PhD?

**Stemen:** Well, I picked up an MA sort of on the way. There were two ways to get an MA. One was to take so many hours and take an exam, and the other way was to do an MA thesis, but I skipped the thesis and got the MA on the way and went on for a PhD.

**Birkner:** Did you anticipate working in East Asian relations then? Is that what your goal was when you were in graduate school for the PhD?

**Stemen:** I guess I anticipated then going out and teaching East Asian history, Chinese history.

**Birkner:** Well, what I guess I’m getting at is in terms of focusing on a dissertation topic. You weren’t going to do Chinese history, *per se*, right?

**Stemen:** No, the dissertation topic was actually in U.S.-Japanese relations.

**Birkner:** And what was the topic itself?

**Stemen:** It was on the immigration issue, diplomacy surrounding that.

**Birkner:** In what chronology?

**Stemen:** Oh, from about 1907, the Gentleman’s Agreement up to the Immigration Act of 1924 and then beyond; the cutoff was 1941.

**Birkner:** What was it you were trying to prove in that dissertation?
Stemen: Well, I was trying to prove that American diplomacy and American immigration legislation was obviously driven by racism. American policy, I concluded in the end, was mistaken. Not that the United States should have necessarily accepted a great many more immigrants, but that Japan should have been given equal status with European countries. The Immigration Act of 1924 allotted quotas to countries on the basis of how many people of that national origin were living in the United States as of 1900 to 1910 – my memory is a little dim on the date now – which of course had the effect of giving the biggest quotas to northern European countries. But Japanese, Chinese, and other Asians got no quota at all because they were not either Caucasian or free black. According to the original immigration statutes that they were ineligible for nationalization, so on a racial basis they were denied any quota at all. Actually, the quota they would have gotten if they’d been given quotas would have been minimal anyway, but to the Japanese, this was an insult.

Birkner: Did you have to leave Bloomington to collect the material for your dissertation, or could you do it right there?

Stemen: Most of it in Washington in the National Archives.

Birkner: How did you pay for that?

Stemen: Oh, I guess I had grants and of course, I had the GI Bill ongoing.

Birkner: So you were able to get out to Washington to do that.

Stemen: I did my research in Washington at the Archives and a little bit at the Library of Congress. In those days, it was easy to park in Washington and it was easy to find lodging there. There were a lot of rooming houses up on Capitol Hill near the Library of Congress.
Birkner: Yeah; they’re largely gone now.

Stemen: Yeah, probably. I haven’t been back to that neighborhood.

Birkner: It’s become a very gentrified neighborhood, from what I understand. It’s very expensive.

Stemen: It was very cheap then, to rent a room by the week.

Birkner: I know; that’s gone. Who was your dissertation adviser?

Stemen: S.Y. Teng was my chief adviser and Robert Ferrell was second reader.

Birkner: So Robert Ferrell was already at Indiana in the late 50s.

Stemen: Yeah, he was there when I got there in ’55.

Birkner: And he was the second reader on your dissertation. So you had accomplished this in what timeframe? When did you get your dissertation done?

Stemen: In ’60.

Birkner: So you arrived in Indiana in the fall of ’55, you took your classes, you did some T.A.ing and you worked on your dissertation, and you were done by the fall of ’60.

Stemen: Yeah, I left Indiana in ’58 and finished the dissertation during my first couple of years of teaching and did the dissertation defense in the summer of ’60.

Birkner: Just before we cut this off, did you develop any lifelong friends while you were at Indiana University? Were any of the graduate students people you kept up with?

Stemen: I kept up with a couple of them. Let’s see, I exchanged Christmas cards with Jim Powell, who teaches up at Syracuse; I guess he’s retired by now. And I occasionally ran into Ed O’Day at AHA meetings, but I haven’t kept up really very closely with any of them.

Birkner: But you had a good experience at Indiana; you were glad you went there.
Stemen: Yeah. The instruction I thought was very good, the people I had in the history department and comparative literature department, oh, Harold Grimm, Robert Byrnes, S.Y. Teng, Robert Ferrell, Leo Solt in the history department. I remember Henry Remak in the comparative literature department; he was an excellent teacher. I thought the instruction there was very good.

Birkner: And it was a pleasant community to live in.

Stemen: A more bucolic place than Yale. Bloomington is a smaller town, and the campus is out on the edge of town. It's a spread-out campus with a lot of woods and bubbling brooks and that.

Birkner: I've never seen it, but I've heard it's very beautiful. Well, that's a good place, I think, for us to stop right now, because what we could do is pick up the next time as you accept a teaching job, and we'll pursue that, and of course your meeting Nancy and your experiences at Delaware, and then on to Gettysburg College. Since this is for the archives of Gettysburg College, I'm sure a future historian will want to know about your Gettysburg years, so we'll get there. Thank you, Roger, for today.

[End of Tape 1 Side 2]