



Joseph Heller, 1948

JOSEPH H. HELLER
(b. circa 1923)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHELLEY ERWIN

May 5, 2010

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Subject area

Feynman, Richard P. (Richard Phillips), 1918-1988; Greenbaum, Arline; physics

Abstract

Joseph H. Heller recounts his childhood recollections of Richard P. Feynman, whom he refers to as Richy, during the 1920s and up to 1935 in Far Rockaway, New York, and then the resumption of contact between the two in Los Angeles in the 1950s. Heller's older brother, Elmer, was a close friend of Feynman's; Feynman frequently spent time with the Heller brothers in their home. The reminiscences include Feynman's first wife, Arline Greenbaum, and the beginnings of her relationship to Richard Feynman. Heller recounts teaching Arline to row and Richard to play trap drums. He traces parallels in the paths of his brother and Feynman, both of whom he notes worked during World War II at Palmer Physical Laboratory in Princeton on the Manhattan Project and then subsequently taught at Cornell. He touches on the later brief relationship of Elmer Heller to Feynman in Los Angeles in the 1950s; relations of both brothers with Feynman tail off after Feynman's marriage to Gweneth Howarth [1960]. Discussion of some details surrounding illness and death of Arline Greenbaum [died 1945]. Heller recalls others from Far Rockaway High School social group: Harold Gast, David Leff, Buzzy Mann, Robert Stappler. Interview concludes with further anecdotes about childhood and high school years; Feynman's childhood names of Richy versus Ritty; and reference to a set of letters and documents given by Heller to the Caltech Archives from the papers of his deceased brother relating to Feynman.

Administrative information

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH HELLER

BY SHELLEY ERWIN

LAGUNA WOODS, CALIFORNIA

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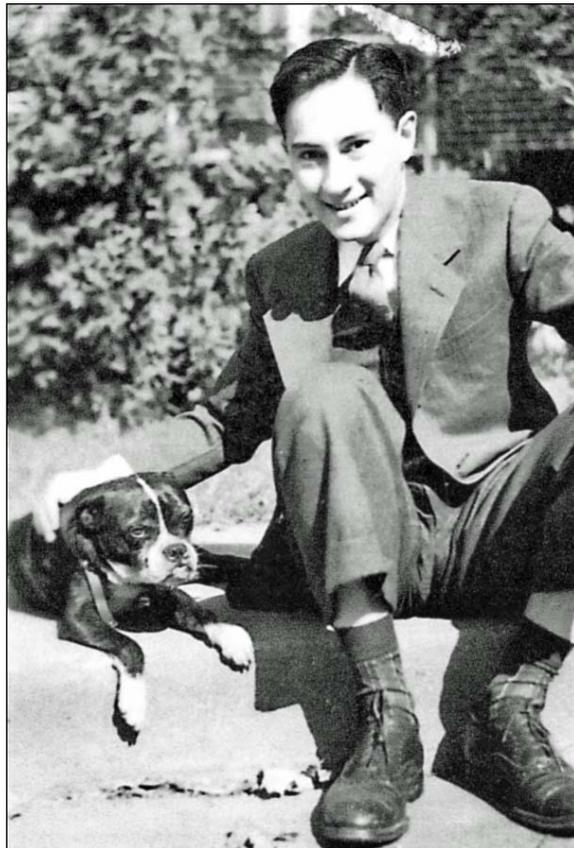
PREFATORY NOTE

This interview was recorded in connection with the gift from Joseph Heller to the Caltech Archives of a small collection of letters and documents concerning Richard P. Feynman. The materials were assembled by Joseph Heller's older brother, Elmer, and passed to Joseph upon Elmer's death. They are now part of the Caltech Archives' collections under the title Elmer and Joseph Heller Collection on Richard P. Feynman. The interview with Joseph Heller provides information on the childhood and subsequent relationships of both Heller brothers with Feynman, as well as on the donated materials and some of the people and events documented there.

Shelley Erwin
June 8, 2011

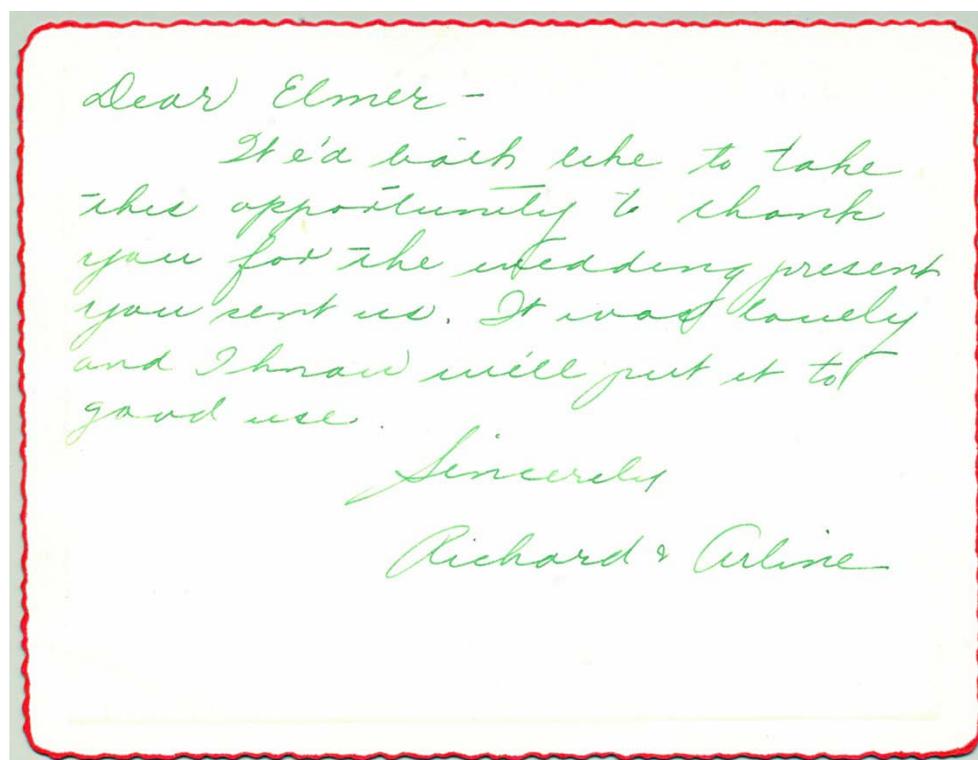


Joseph, Mom, and Elmer Heller, July 1948



Elmer Heller, October 1943

Christmas card, 1942



CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Mr. Joseph Heller
Laguna Woods, California

by Shelley Erwin
May 5, 2010

ERWIN: I'm talking with Mr. Joseph Heller of Laguna Woods, in Orange County, who was a childhood friend of Richard Feynman, and he's going to record here some of his memories of Feynman today. So Mr. Heller, why don't we jump right in, and you tell me your first memory of Richard Feynman.

HELLER: My first memories of Richard Feynman go way back to [when he was called] Richy—that's the way I knew him. He had two sides to him. [There was] his mathematical side. He was a very close friend of my brother Elmer, and they were scientific brains talking in high school and so on. The other side of him was the little boy, and then he was my friend. When he wanted to play Kick the Can, he was my friend. And when he wanted to talk about scientific items or mathematical items, he was my brother's friend. And that was the way we enjoyed our friendship—a very close one.

ERWIN: Did you live near the Feynmans?

HELLER: Yes, we lived near the Feynmans. It was only about a five-, ten-minute walk from each other. The railroad tracks split the town in half. He lived down one side. We lived down the other side. But they were equal. [Laughter] It wasn't as if one side was "on the other side of the tracks." It was not such a thing as that.

ERWIN: So we're talking about Far Rockaway, New York?

HELLER: Yeah. We're talking in Far Rockaway, Far Rockaway High School.

ERWIN: Now, does your friendship date back to elementary school?

HELLER: It does for Elmer; not for me, because there was a year's difference between Elmer and Richy. Richy was a year younger than my brother. And there was about a two-and-a-half year difference between myself and Richard. So that's the difference of age. [The age difference between Joseph Heller and Richard Feynman appears to have been greater. Recounting his World War II service later, Heller implies he was eighteen in 1941.—Ed.]

ERWIN: Did you have any other siblings in your family?

HELLER: No.

ERWIN: Just you and your brother Elmer?

HELLER: Yes, and Richy had a sister [Joan Feynman]. There was a very close friendship between Richard's mother and my mother. Because of the closeness between the boys, there grew a very close relationship between my mother and Mrs. Feynman. Richard's father had passed away rather at an early age for him. I think he had just about entered MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] when he passed away somewhere in that year. I don't recall exactly the year, but it was very similar to it. [Melville Feynman died on October 8, 1946, when Feynman had been at Cornell about a year.—Ed.]

ERWIN: Now the father was named Melville, if I'm correct, and the mother Lucille?

HELLER: Yep.

ERWIN: And could you tell me your parents' names just for the record here?

HELLER: My mother's name was Eva, and my father's name was David.

So going back, Richard—[it was] in later years when people know that he played drums—he got very interested in drums. All right, that interest started with me way back then. I was—in those years they called us trap drummers. That name, trap drummer, has phased out over the years, but I played with all the dance bands and what have you. And he got very fascinated, and I taught him some of the trap drumming. And that's where he picked up the idea

of tom-toms and so on and really delved into it and became quite an expert on drum with tom-toms or drums.

ERWIN: Is a tom-tom the same as a bongo?

HELLER: Yeah, bongos are tom-tom drums or, as we would call them, tom-toms.

ERWIN: You play them with your hands, right?

HELLER: No. The ones that I taught him were played with drumsticks.

ERWIN: With sticks? So, he played with sticks too; because I've seen pictures of him, but playing with his hands.

HELLER: Yeah. The native drumming for tangos and rumbas and all [those instruments], they're still used in orchestras to this day. So he became quite a drummer.

ERWIN: So he must have spent time at your house?

HELLER: Yes, quite a bit. It was a debate where he was going to eat dinner that night—whether it was at his home or our home. He spent more time at our home because they lived in an apartment house. We lived in a private home. There was what we called—we didn't refer to it as a den; there was no such word as a den in our era and time. It was a three-bedroom house. Three bedrooms were upstairs: front, middle, and back bedrooms; so it was always referred to as the back bedroom. That was set up as a study with a desk. And so that was our room, and that's where all of us got together.

ERWIN: Okay, and so he might even be spending the night over there?

HELLER: He did spend some nights, yeah, weekend nights. After Richard's move from MIT and so on after that—I had very little contact with him because, number one, by that time the war drums were beating, and I went into the service. And when I came back from the service I

learned from my brother about the Manhattan Project, where he and Richy were working, in Princeton University at Palmer Physical Laboratory.

ERWIN: Okay, let's fill in something here. Your brother went to college where?

HELLER: He went to Purdue.

ERWIN: But by this time he was finished with college, and he—your brother—had come back to Princeton.

HELLER: No, he had come back to New York. He was working for Gyro Company in Brooklyn [the Sperry Gyroscope Co. of Brooklyn]. And Richy picked him up and wanted him to join him at Palmer Laboratory in New Jersey, at Princeton. And then I learned later, when I went home on furlough, that he—my brother—was on the Manhattan Project. And that's all I knew because I was in the service. And I asked him what the Manhattan Project was. "Mmm, mmm, mmm. It's a project. What do you want from me? It's a project. You know—a project. What? A project." Of course, he couldn't divulge what it was, and [I learned] absolutely nothing at all. And then he sent me a letter when I was overseas. So from then, they [my brother and Feynman] went their separate ways. My brother was very disturbed. As a matter of fact, most of the men in the project—from what I learned from my brother—including Richard, were very disturbed with what the bomb did. My brother went to Israel at the time. Then after about six or eight years...

ERWIN: So that would be after the close of World War II, when Israel got its statehood—that was 1948?

HELLER: About 1948, yeah. He went to Israel, and Richy just floundered until he was wooed by General Electric; and he turned that down, and then he wound up at Caltech.

ERWIN: He went to Cornell in the interim. You remember that part.

HELLER: Yeah, my brother was teaching at Cornell also.

ERWIN: Oh, really?

HELLER: Yeah, he taught at Cornell. And I think Richard was teaching. When you mentioned Cornell, right away it flashed back to me. They both taught there for a while.

ERWIN: Yes, and then '51 was the year that Feynman was recruited to Caltech.

HELLER: Yeah, okay, my brother was in Israel at that time. I think he got there about '50 or '51 or somewhere like that, and he stayed there for about eight years and then came back.

I had already, in '51 or so, when Feynman came to Caltech—I am a cabinet maker by trade and a carpenter, a master craftsman—I had my shop on Pico Boulevard. And a very, very dear friend of mine from the service [later identified as Herman Stern—Ed.]—I saved his life, and that's the way our friendship grew up—he walked into the shop, and he said, “I had the most wonderful experience last night.” Oh, he was raving about this guy who lectured, and so on. And I said, “Well, you keep raving about this guy lecturing. Who the hell is this guy? Tell me already, who is he?” He said, “A fellow by the name of Dr. Richard Feynman, and he's out at Caltech.” “Mmm!” I said, “Richard Feynman.” I said, “Richard P. Feynman?” And he said, “Yes, Richard P. Feynman.” So he looked at me and said, “Why do you keep saying Richard P. Feynman with such emphasis?” I said, “Richard P. Feynman. Wait a minute.”

So I called information for the telephone number of Caltech; and he looks at me as if I'm crazy. And I got the number, and I called it, and the operator answered. And I said, “Is it possible to connect me with Dr. Richard Feynman, please?” And he's sitting there—[Heller imitates his visitor's rapid breathing sounds]—gasping for air, and his secretary got on the phone, and I explained to her. I said, “Look, I'm a very, very old childhood friend of his, and I would like to surprise him a little bit, if it's possible. If not, I'm Joseph Heller, and you can tell him that.” And she said, “No, I'll put him on the line and let him figure it out—if he wants to hang up or talk to you.” And I said, “Fine; that would be wonderful.” He gets on the line and says, “This is Dr. Feynman.” And I say, “Dr. Feynman. This is *the* Dr. Feynman, *the* Richard P. Feynman, who I knew in Far Rockaway?” So right away he yells at me: “Who the hell are you?” And I say, “I'm Joseph Heller, that's who I am.” He says, “Joseph Heller?” And I say, “Yeah.” And he says, “Where are you?” And I say, “Here in Los Angeles. Why? How specific do you want me to—?” “I want your address, the street, and where you are, and I'll be there in thirty

minutes.” I say, “Richy, are you coming here in thirty minutes?” He says, “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” So I turn to this friend, Hy [Herman] Stern. I turn and I say, “Hang around for thirty minutes, and you can really meet *the* Dr. Richard Feynman.” And he says, “You just got through talking to him?” I say, “Yeah. He says he’ll be here in thirty minutes. I’ll give him a little more, coming from Pasadena here. I’ll give him a little more time than that.”

ERWIN: So you said you were on Pico?

HELLER: Pico and Swall Drive; it’s a long drive. It’s Pico and Robertson Boulevard—that’s close enough. Sure enough, in about forty-five minutes, Richard walks through the door. And, arms out, we hug each other.

ERWIN: So at that point you hadn’t seen each other for how long—before the war? [Heller nods.] Okay, so it’s quite a gap of time.

HELLER: Yeah. Quite a gap of years had gone by. Arline [Arline Greenbaum, Feynman’s first wife] had passed away while I was in the service, and all the other journeys that went with that. And this guy just about fainted. He turned white, green, and purple, and every other color. He was just flabbergasted. I mean, here a person of Richard’s standing walks in the door. And that’s where we started to build our relationship. It was a wonderful, wonderful relationship. He spent lots and lots of time at our home for dinner, and back and forth. It just developed into a wonderful friendship, until he married Gweneth [Gweneth Howarth], and then it was like a machete just came and just chopped it off, and that was the end of it.

ERWIN: Oh, what a shame.

HELLER: Yeah, it was. There’s mention of it in one of my brother’s letters where my brother and his wife had Richard and Gweneth over to the house for dinner, and she evidently made sure it wasn’t going to go any further than that.

ERWIN: I see. Well now, your brother had come back from Israel, and where did he go then?

HELLER: He lived in Culver City.

ERWIN: And he worked for what company?

HELLER: He worked for North American Rockwell. And his first thing, when he went back with them, he went in as a thermodynamics engineer for the Minuteman.

ERWIN: That's a missile?

HELLER: Yeah, and at the conclusion of that project, then he went over to Rockwell Company and started working on the Space Shuttle program and so on.

ERWIN: But he had more or less the same experience, as you said, with trying to revive the friendship with Richard.

HELLER: Yeah, much later because, like I say, there was a gap of about eight years where he was in Israel, before he came back. So his relationship with Richy at that time was a very short span. It was almost at the time that he married Gweneth, something in there. So I'd say it's somewhere between six and eight years from the time that he [Feynman] came to Caltech that he married Gweneth. [Richard Feynman married Gweneth Howarth on September 24, 1960.—Ed.]

Going back into our childhood again, prior to that, right up to the time he married Arline: I knew Arline very well; I taught Arline how to row a boat; she got very interested in rowing; I used to take her rowing; we used to steal rowboats and go rowing together.

ERWIN: Let's go back then to some of those memories. So where was Arline from?

HELLER: Arline lived in Cedarhurst; that was the next town up. It's known as the Five Towns, and this was one of the five towns.

ERWIN: And those are the five towns along that strip of land, the peninsula?

HELLER: And I think Richard met her at her sweet sixteen birthday party, or something in there; there was a birthday party where they met.

ERWIN: So they didn't go to high school together? They went to different schools.

HELLER: Yeah, they went to different schools.

ERWIN: But it was a sort of neighboring town meet-up?

HELLER: Friendship—a very close friendship grew out of it.

ERWIN: So he was sixteen too? They were the same age?

HELLER: Roughly, yeah, give or take, the same age—very sad, very sad.

ERWIN: So when Arline wanted to learn to row, she came to you because you had the boat?

HELLER: Well, I knew how to steal rowboats. You see, there were fishing stations that rented rowboats, and when people got tired of rowing them, they'd just row ashore and leave the boat and walk home, because Far Rockaway is only about a ten-minute walk from the water. So people wouldn't take them back to the station, they were just done. So we used to take the boats and go rowing. So I told her how to get them, where they were. We'd always find boats. It was very easy to find them, and I said, "Oh, we can take 'em out and go rowing." And when we got tired, we'd put them on the beach again, and they'd come around and collect them every night and bring them back in. And she became quite a rowing athlete.

ERWIN: Really! Well now, her family name was Greenbaum?

HELLER: Greenbaum, yeah.

ERWIN: So when you first knew her, as far as you knew she was healthy, because there's this tragedy looming with her health?

HELLER: Yeah, the health situation came about when I was in the service. I didn't know too much about it. I did later learn the whole story about it, but it was a tragedy. It was a misdiagnosis. Possibly she could have been saved, I don't know.

ERWIN: What did—

HELLER: She was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, but it wasn't Hodgkin's disease; it was cancer. I think it was breast cancer.

ERWIN: Oh, she had cancer?

HELLER: Yeah, that's what I understood.

ERWIN: I had understood she had tuberculosis.

HELLER: I heard too, that she had TB. I don't know—it never—the story was so convoluted, but it was a misdiagnosis.

ERWIN: I see. So she didn't receive adequate or proper treatment at an early stage, whatever—

HELLER: I don't think so. I can't really say. I wasn't there. I'm only talking about hearsay at the time. I know one thing about it—these are facts because Richard told me about it—that he would not go to Los Alamos for the final testing [of the atomic bomb] because Arline was, shall I say, on her last legs, and he didn't want to leave her. So what they did is they equipped a Pullman car, I understand, and just turned it into a hospital car; and he agreed to that, and so that's the way she went with him.

ERWIN: And she went with him. So she died there, in New Mexico?

HELLER: I understand that, yeah.

ERWIN: So, the biographer, James Gleick, spends a bit of time talking about how upset Feynman's parents, Lucille and Melville, were about his proposed marriage to her, and I suppose

one can understand why. Do you know anything about that or, again, were you not on the scene at that time?

HELLER: No, I wasn't on the scene at that time.

ERWIN: I suppose for health reasons, for fear that—

HELLER: That I don't know anything about—any opposing of the marriage or anything like that—because they were married. [Richard Feynman and Arline Greenbaum were married on June 29, 1942, in Staten Island, New York. Arline died on June 16, 1945, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.—Ed.] Let's see, I went into the service in '41; I went in in June. I enlisted in June. They gave me ninety days to get my house in order. So I reported for active duty in September of '41.

ERWIN: So even before Pearl Harbor.

HELLER: Yeah. I have two discharges. At that time there was a military conscription of one year for all eighteen-year-olds. I think it went from eighteen-year-old to thirty-five-year-old. I had to report for one-year military conscription. So I reported for one year, but they forgot to tell me about the rest of it.

ERWIN: Oh, I see.

HELLER: So I spent six years there. Of course I was just eighteen! And I couldn't get a job; nobody would hire me. They said, "Go get your year of military over there and we'll hire you, because they're gonna grab you right away for a draft." So I decided to go and get it over with. So by the time I reported in September, you know what happened in December.

ERWIN: Yes. So you actually were in the military for six full years from that time?

HELLER: Yeah. I got out in '46—from '41 to '46.

ERWIN: So you weren't home at all then, or on leave at all in that period?

HELLER: Yeah, I came home periodically; I had furloughs in between.

ERWIN: So did your brother do military service?

HELLER: No, he was exempt all the way through. He was at the Manhattan Project.

ERWIN: Your brother was too? [Heller says yes.] I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. Your brother was also with Feynman.

HELLER: He was with Richy at the Manhattan Project in Princeton at Palmer Laboratory.

ERWIN: Did he go to Los Alamos?

HELLER: No, he did not go to Los Alamos. He had no interest in going there.

ERWIN: Right. So he had some assignment in the project that kept him in Princeton.

HELLER: Yeah, I think I mentioned it earlier.

ERWIN: You did. I'm sorry, I slightly misunderstood.

So Feynman's—Richard's—circle of friends when he was a kid—of course your brother and you were both in there—were there some other people you would like to mention at this point that kept in touch with you or felt like you were a group?

HELLER: No, all the guys that I knew just went separate ways. There were about four fellows there; there was Richy, my brother is two, Harold Gast is three, Bob Stappler was four. There was one other fellow; I don't remember his name. I think that in the archives that I gave you you'll find him somewheres. [Heller remembers and tells about Buzzy Mann later.]

ERWIN: I think we saw one more name in here [referring to collection of letters prepared by Heller].

HELLER: I know Harold Gast came to Hollywood and was very successful in the motion picture industry. Of course my brother remained in the defense industry. Richy went to Caltech. Bob Stappler unfortunately committed suicide.

ERWIN: Hmm, what a shame. You mentioned David Leff. That was another member of your group.

HELLER: Yeah.

ERWIN: So these guys were math and science oriented; they were—

HELLER: You know, it's a funny thing. There was a conglomeration almost. David Leff was a journalist and a professor. Bob Stappler was a brilliant, brilliant mathematician from a very, very poor family. His father died, and he had to work. He never went to college; he had to go to work. That was the only way. And he went into the service and became, I think, a captain or a major or something. He was discharged and came back and just never got off the ground. He worked for Kresge's, and somehow he just took his life. Harold Gast moved to Hollywood and became very successful in the motion picture industry. And people scattered to the four corners, and they never did come back together. Although my brother stayed in touch with Dave Leff; that was the only connection that remained.

ERWIN: So how were your times together in this high-school period spent? Did you do athletics? I'm just trying to get a feeling for what the social life was.

HELLER: The social life was just around the house.

ERWIN: Just around the house, talking, and fooling around and—

HELLER: Yeah, whatever was happening, that's all.

ERWIN: So kind of an easygoing childhood?

HELLER: Yeah. Like I say, but depending on what Richy's mood was. If he wanted to be a kid, we played together. Mostly, it was a very eclectic group. It just flowed with the days, that's all. No structure to it.

ERWIN: No structure! Well it sounds like a great childhood, really.

HELLER: Yeah, it was.

ERWIN: Not too stressful. So when Richard met Arline—because she seems to be so important in his life—did you realize that he was in love with his great love?

HELLER: Oh yeah, we knew it. I mean that was very blatant. It was like Mary and her little lamb: Where Mary went, Richard went, and where Richard went, Arline went.

ERWIN: Okay, so they were an item. They were very much mutually connected.

HELLER: Oh yes, yes, no matter whatever happened, that was it.

ERWIN: So after she died, then, for him it was never the same with any other relationship?

HELLER: No, not that I know. For many years when he was out here in Caltech, he was dating one, dating another, but he spent more time at the house with us than anything else. His argument was that he had two suits. And we would say, "But, why did you get two identical suits?" And he would say, "What do I need anything more than that?" He said, "One I wear and one is in the cleaners. How many suits do you need?"

ERWIN: Oh, I see, so he would just swap them out. Well, in those days, everybody wore a suit to Caltech. When you went to work, even in the labs, in the photos, you see everyone wearing a suit and tie. Of course, nowadays, nobody wears a suit and tie.

HELLER: One night he came over to the house, and he says, "I want to go—I want to see how the rich live." He says, "I'm rich. I have a lot of money."

ERWIN: Oh, he did?

HELLER: [Laughter] Well, yeah, he never spent any money. Whatever money he had he put in a bank. And he says, “Find the swankiest restaurant you possibly can find. Cost is no object. And we’re going to go—we have to see how the rich live, because I’m rich, so I’ve got to learn how to live like a rich man.”

ERWIN: So what did you choose?

HELLER: We went to Perino’s. Perino’s is long gone, but that was one of *the* restaurants in the city of Los Angeles at the time. And we went there, and we had dinner. He gorged himself, and he says, “This is rich?” “Yes.” “All I know is,” he says, “they gave me a very fancy bill; the food wasn’t any different,” he said, “than if I would have gone to one of the local restaurants. Oh yeah,” he says, “lots of waiters. They bowed and scraped and did everything for ya,” he says. “They picked up the fork. You didn’t have to even feed yourself; they’d feed ya.”

[Laughter] He was very unimpressed.

ERWIN: Well, that sounds very much like other stories about him, that he didn’t like fuss and any kind of phoniness.

HELLER: He was a very simple man. He says, “So this is the way the rich live? Then I’m rich. I live like this anyhow. But I don’t have anybody bowing and scraping.” He said, “I take my own suit to the cleaner, and they probably send it with their butler to the cleaner. I don’t have a butler.”

ERWIN: Well, did you want to mention anything else, anything that occurs to you that you’d like to talk about?

HELLER: No, I think that pretty much covered everything out of my memoirs. Probably at two o’clock tomorrow morning I’ll think of something and say, “Oh, I should have told them about that, but”—

ERWIN: Well, you can always get in touch with us.

HELLER: Yeah, I think I've covered pretty much everything. Have you any other questions that you would want to ask me?

ERWIN: I'm going to pause for just a moment.

[Pause in recording]

ERWIN: So I have a question. Sometimes it seems that Richard Feynman was called Ritty—R-i-t-t-y—by some of his friends, but not by everyone. So is that just the way things were—any reason behind that?

HELLER: Yeah, I think it's just the way that each person had their own personal connection to him. One guy felt he was very close to him by referring to him as Ritty. I always knew him as just plain Richy. I didn't know any other name to call him by; I called him Richy.

ERWIN: What did his mother call him?

HELLER: Richard.

ERWIN: She called him Richard.

HELLER: Yeah. In the notes and the memoirs I gave you, he's referred to—in one letter here, you'll find where he signed "Ritty."

ERWIN: I saw several that are signed "Ritty." [Heller points out a few such letters.] The first one is signed "Ritty" as well.

HELLER: Oh, he himself referred to himself as Ritty. Because this one—"My dear Helmholtz"—which is the pet name that he had for my brother. I don't know where he came up with that name, Helmholtz, for him, but that's the way it was. And this is back in 1936, March

the 7th; and he signed it “Ritty.” So he himself used Ritty. He was very close by calling him “darling Helmholtz.”

ERWIN: He seems to have been a warm guy.

HELLER: Very, very warm, very warm fellow. And here [looking at another letter] he signs himself “Feynman.”

ERWIN: Yeah, I like that one. It looks like it says, “Love, Feynman.”

HELLER: I’m just glancing through these things. I don’t know who signed this one here. It looks like his handwriting.

ERWIN: Well, maybe it’s on the back.

HELLER: And here he got very, very formal. He signs it, “Fraternally, R. Feynman.”

ERWIN: Probably posing as a—[fraternity brother.]

HELLER: And here he says, “Don’t mind me, I’m in love. Fraternally, R. Feynman.”

ERWIN: Well these letters are going to be a wonderful addition to the Caltech Archives, and I’m looking forward to reading them at leisure.

HELLER: You’ll enjoy reading them. There’s lots to read here. And this letter here is from Dave Leff to my brother. Here in this short paragraph he mentions something about Richard’s marriage: “Your account of Ritty and Arline has certainly affected me.”

ERWIN: Now this is Dave Leff writing to your brother.

HELLER: Yeah, this is Dave Leff. When he learned of the thing [referring to Arline and Richard’s marriage], he says, “Please remember me expressly to Ritty and Buzzy.” Oh, that was the other fellow: Buzzy [Mann]. Buzzy was a renegade. Although he went to college, he was—

the best way I can describe him—was the old medicine man with the bottle of slick stuff that would cure everything.

ERWIN: Oh, snake oil?

HELLER: Yeah. Buzzy got the crazy idea—this is a rather funny story—Buzzy got the idea to go down to the beach. They'd sneak down to the Tack-A-Pou-Sha Hotel there and collect driftwood. So my brother and Richy and Buzzy went down there. And they picked up all the driftwood; and they were gonna sell it as remnants of the original cross that Christ carried on the march. So when I say that he was the medicine man, he came up with crazy ideas. And he was very successful in all these crazy things. He made more money than you'd know what to do with. Whatever happened to Buzzy, I don't know. He just disappeared off the face of the earth.

ERWIN: His last name?

HELLER: I'm trying to think of Buzzy's last name, but I can't think of it. His father was a very prominent doctor in the community. Mann. Buzzy Mann.

ERWIN: M-a-n-n?

HELLER: Yeah. [Returning to Leff's letter] And he says, "Please [remember me] expressly to Ritty and Buzzy. I think of you often." When I just came across that and I saw Buzzy, Buzzy Mann was quite a medicine man in the old Rockaway days. Oh, he tried hard, that kid did.

ERWIN: Well, it's a cute story about the driftwood.

HELLER: And he got an idea. He ran around, and he had a box camera—the old box camera, Kodak—and took pictures of all the kids. They went home, and in the bathroom—with my brother and Richard—they developed the pictures and printed them, and then they went back and sold them to the mothers.

ERWIN: Oh, to the mothers?!

HELLER: Yeah! I think they sold them for a dime or a quarter.

ERWIN: Who couldn't say no!

HELLER: No, of course not. That was another one of Buzzy's adventures to make money.

ERWIN: You know, I see this funny symbol at the end of some of these [letters]. It looks like an "s" or a Greek letter.

HELLER: I don't what it is. I can't make it out because I see it on a number of letters here. I saw it here and I was kind of puzzled as to what it is. I just saw it here in another place. Well, that's another symbol.

ERWIN: There it is, yeah.

HELLER: There it is again. It's something that Richy came up with, I believe. It had some connection—I don't know—I couldn't find it in any of the letters.

ERWIN: Well, that's interesting if you think he came up with it. It seems to be a little symbol that they used in their letters. Could be Greek letters. Well, maybe someone else will know.*

HELLER: Yeah, it seems to be something—I don't know.

ERWIN: These diagrams are interesting in these letters too, because Feynman became so famous later for the Feynman Diagrams. That was one of the big pieces of his work—to create these diagrams that showed relationships between particles and forces.

* The Greek letters Sigma Epsilon Xi, written $\Sigma\Xi\Xi$, appear in the body and in the signature of the first extant letter written by Feynman to Elmer Heller during his freshman year at MIT, dated November 28, 1935. They continue to appear regularly in Feynman's letters to Heller from MIT, both as a spoof on the Greek fraternity name convention and as a spelling of S-E-X. The background to the Greek-letter word play is of course in mathematics and in the practical difficulty of finding a typewriter that would provide the desired Greek keys.

Feynman was a member of the Phi Beta Delta fraternity at MIT, according to his biographer James Gleick (*Genius*, 1992). –Ed.

HELLER: He was quite a character with a sense of humor that just wouldn't quit.

ERWIN: Yeah, I think you get that about him. A sense of humor, and a sense of warmth, and personality—nothing dry about him at all.

HELLER: No. It's wonderful that my brother saved all this stuff. I was shocked when I saw that he'd saved it. I don't have any more here. That's it. But even to come up with this one here, which was quite a thing to save—well this here, in particular—

ERWIN: Yes, that's a thank-you letter from Arline. There are some great things here even though they sort of trickle out—[More overlapping chatting and scanning of the files leads to the mention of a graduation program.]

HELLER: This here in particular—the graduation—was really something. When I came across that, I was shocked.

ERWIN: Yeah, the [1935] graduation program from [Far Rockaway High School]. Your brother wasn't in the same class.

HELLER: [Looking at graduation program] Here's that Robert Stappler that I spoke about. And this here was my brother's girlfriend, Jessica Soffer [Fleischmann]. I remember her. She was a pretty girl, but I don't know what ever happened to her. She was a bright girl—

ERWIN: And your brother, you said, was not in this class, he was one—

HELLER: No, he was not in this class, but—

ERWIN: Oh, here's David Leff.

HELLER: David Leff. He got history honors.

ERWIN: Interesting.

HELLER: This is Leona Feldman, I remember her—instant flashback when I saw her name. She was a dork; oh, was she a dork!

ERWIN: Well, there are always some, aren't there?

HELLER: I read across a lot of these names, and I see 'em—

ERWIN: Well, Feynman won quite a lot of prizes at his high-school graduation.

HELLER: This was a very famous name: Lillian Perlmutter. I'm trying to think of where that Perlmutter name came from. He was a publisher, if I'm not mistaken. This was a niece or something to him.

ERWIN: Well, this has been very interesting, and we're very pleased to have the material.

HELLER: It's all yours. Take care of it.

ERWIN: Yes, sir. Thank you very much.

HELLER: There's a lot of history in there, when I look at it. Maybe someday I'll take a trip out there and look at the Archives and find it.

ERWIN: Oh, you'd be welcome, any time.

[Recording device turned off.]