

RICHARD J. HARRIS

INTERVIEWED BY CHARLOTTE E. ERWIN

May 19, 2012

**ARCHIVES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California**



Subject area

Seminar Day, alumni, students, pranks

Abstract

On Seminar Day—Caltech’s annual reunion event—May 19, 2012, for the first time the Caltech Archives and Library offered alumni/ae the opportunity to record mini-interviews with Archives’ staff. Nine people participated, including one alumni spouse and one daughter. These alums held bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees across several divisions, with engineering marginally in the lead. One former student who transferred out of Caltech came back to relate how well his Caltech years had served him in his later studies and career in psychology. Ranging from 10 to 15 minutes in length, the interviews typically relate stories or episodes from student years. Favorite topics include pranks and traditions, some of which have died out. Alumni also reflect on professors and classes which were memorable and on the unique intellectual stimulus that a Caltech education provides. Readers will find that the transcripts of the short interviews reflect the personal and colloquial tone at which the event aimed.

Administrative information

Access

The interview is unrestricted.

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD J. HARRIS

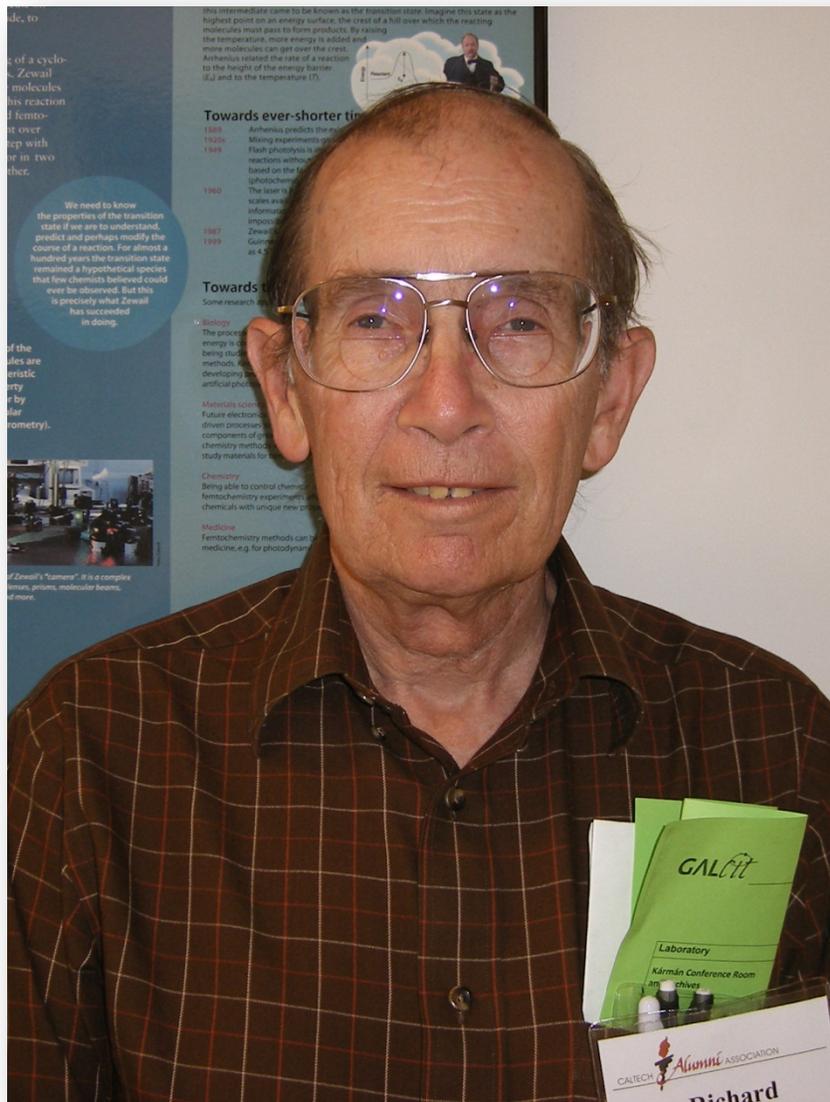
BY CHARLOTTE E. ERWIN

MAY 19, 2012

CALTECH ALUMNI SEMINAR DAY

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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RICHARD J. HARRIS

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Richard J. Harris
Class of 1962 [no degree]

by Charlotte E. Erwin
Pasadena, California

May 19, 2012

Begin Tape

ERWIN: Okay, we're recording. So please identify yourself and your class.

HARRIS: Sure. I'm Richard Harris. I was called Rich at Caltech, and now Dick. I was expected '62. I transferred after my junior year into psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I thought I might give a little perspective as to dropouts and how Caltech has been a very big influence despite my not having completed my degree here—in a couple of ways. One, just the academic background, especially seeing the connection between math and the way systems behave, stood me in very good stead in psychology, where I eventually got a PhD and taught for thirty years. Secondly, it's a very under-populated behavior setting, which has two different effects. First, it means that you can do an awful lot of things that you never would have entry to in a larger university. So, for instance, I had totally avoided athletics of any kind in high school; but here, if you could breathe, you could go out for a team. So I did track, cross-country for a couple of semesters. That wound up sticking with me for years. I'm still running marathons occasionally and—

ERWIN: Wow! That's impressive.

HARRIS: I'm up to 289 so far. It's been a lifelong—

ERWIN: Oh, wow! Two hundred and eight-nine marathons?

HARRIS: Right. But it's taken forty years to get to that point.

ERWIN: Well, I understand. Still, that's very impressive.

HARRIS: I also got into drama. Did a couple of plays—minor parts here at Caltech. That I haven't followed up on as much, but it's, was, still fun. The flip side of that is that it can get distracting and take up some time that would be better spent in study groups, etc. So it may have had something to do with my switching out, but I very much enjoyed it. Just a couple of other things I might mention. My impression is that we no longer have crew teams and blazers. I don't know—

ERWIN: Here at Caltech?

HARRIS: Here at Caltech.

ERWIN: I don't know that we do have that. I have never seen that.

HARRIS: Right. Crew team is where you line up ten men, ten undergraduates, each with a mug of beer and you try to down all ten in succession in as little time as possible.

ERWIN: I see.

HARRIS: That's called "crew."

ERWIN: Crew! Okay. And you do wear a blazer when you do that?

HARRIS: In Dabney you did. I think that's part of the house song. [He clears his throat.] Pardon me just a minute [he sings]: "Our crew team drinks in house coats, it is so damn refined—" [Stops singing.] Because a lot of other people—a lot of the other houses would just wear T-shirts because they knew they were going to get wet anyway.

ERWIN: Okay.

HARRIS: But—

ERWIN: House *code*? House code? What was the word you said? Our crew team drinks in—?

HARRIS: House *coats*.

ERWIN: Coats!

HARRIS: Right. So your formal house coat, with the logo.

ERWIN: That's your formal house coat. Sounds almost like what a lady would call a bathrobe or a—house coat.

HARRIS: Right, but this was your sport jacket that—

ERWIN: Your sport jacket that—did it have a—

HARRIS: A Dabney logo.

ERWIN: A Dabney logo.

HARRIS: Right. Dark green.

ERWIN: I'm sure we can find some pictures of those somewhere.

HARRIS: Right, right. The other aspect of that was “flamers.” I think I said blazers first. [This is] where you tried to down a shot glass of whiskey or brandy that's been set on fire in creative ways—you know, over the back of the head, etc. But I think it's disappeared.

ERWIN: That's sounds a little risky.

HARRIS: Ah, yeah.

ERWIN: But then it wouldn't have been fun, maybe.

HARRIS: But we had someone standing by with a towel in case—to take that off. And, of course, to backtrack a little bit in terms of identity: our class was the founding class for Lloyd House. And it also turns out that that first year, Lloyd House was the core of the group that pulled off the '61 Rose Bowl hoax.

ERWIN: Oh, really?

HARRIS: Right.

ERWIN: It's nice to know that. I don't know; is that even mentioned in the legends book?

HARRIS: I'm not sure.

ERWIN: So that's a good piece of information.

HARRIS: Yeah. Lyn Hardy [Lyndon Maurice Hardy] had been a high school reporter, a high school newspaper reporter, and posed as same again to find out exactly how the cards were stored, etc., to set up the process of borrowing them for a while and replacing them.

ERWIN: Were you actually involved in that?

HARRIS: Very little. I was part of an unsuccessful attempt to dye the new cards that we put together to make them look more like the old ones. That was not successful, but fortunately the Washington Huskies' leader of the cards stunt section did not notice the difference.

ERWIN: Yeah. [Laughter]

HARRIS: But anyway, the main point is that even for those of us who did not finish our degrees at Caltech, it's had a very big influence; and I very much appreciate the time that I had here.

ERWIN: Well, that's a very nice thing to say; and I'm glad you stopped by to leave that thought.

HARRIS: Okay, well, thank you!

ERWIN: Yeah, well, thank *you*.

[Tape ends]