



THOMAS J. LITLE

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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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS J. (TIM) LITLE

BY CHARLOTTE E. ERWIN

MAY 19, 2012

CALTECH ALUMNI SEMINAR DAY

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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Thomas J. Litle

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Thomas J. Litle
BS 1962

by Charlotte E. Erwin
Pasadena, California

May 19, 2012

Begin Tape

ERWIN: Okay, we're ready.

LITLE: My name is Tim Litle. I was in the class of 1962, graduated as an electronic engineer.

ERWIN: And you're going to tell us a story today about your life as a student.

LITLE: Well, mostly the stories that I remember are things that we did either as stunts or crazy things that we did in the student housing. And I've got all of the *Legends of Caltech* and there was one particular stunt, and a couple of other things, that weren't in there, and I was surprised. Maybe you have this information from somewhere else, but it was a rather elaborate thing that we did at Ricketts House. I guess I'd entitle it "The Funeral of the Ricketts Watercolor-Green Upright Piano in 1958."

ERWIN: Okay. [Laughter] Okay, so tell us about that.

LITLE: So, I was a freshman and from the east and trying to get used to Caltech and really didn't know what to expect.

ERWIN: Where did you come from actually?

LITLE: Well, I grew up in Michigan, but I came from Connecticut at that point. So, I'd never been to California before. I was getting used to a whole bunch of people that I didn't know and an environment I didn't know much about. We had a pretty good, spirited house at Ricketts, and

was welcomed as a freshman. I was sort of observing house life. In the Ricketts Lounge was an upright watercolor-green piano. I wasn't a piano player, but people were and they played it quite a bit.

ERWIN: Now what do you mean by watercolor?

LITLE: Well, it was painted—the water. It wasn't, you know—

ERWIN: Oh, water color—the color of water?

LITLE: Well, it was watercolor painted. Instead of a regular piano paint, it was painted with watercolors. It was in pretty tough shape. It was un-tunable and the piano players in Ricketts were getting a little tired of it, so somehow they decided that it was time to get a new piano. So somebody went and did the negotiation for a new piano, and the big disappointment was the sort of a favorite watercolor green piano would only get five bucks for a trade-in. They figured that that wouldn't do the piano justice because it'd been such a friend of all the piano players. At about the same time, a guy in the house had a car that was in pretty sad shape and it also was distinguished by the fact that it had no paperwork attached to it, so he couldn't sell it or take it to a dump. He had to probably abandon it and he was ready to do that. With the disappointment of the five-dollar trade-in value, people had to give the piano a better send off than that. In that kind of environment, the imaginations started working. They came up with a way to say goodbye to the piano. What happened was that this event involved all of Ricketts House. It was really well choreographed. It was something that everybody involved, I'm sure, remembers. The piano was taken to the corner of Las Palmas [Avenue] and Hollywood Boulevard one Saturday evening before Christmas. And Saturday was picked because that's when kids would cruise up and down Hollywood Boulevard. I don't know if they still do it, but it was—

ERWIN: Probably.

LITLE: It was, you know, just huge amounts of traffic. Kids would go up Hollywood Boulevard in one direction, and they'd go back in the other direction, and they'd do that all night. And the cars would—I think there was a car full of eight girls and a car full of twelve boys and it was

really quite a scene. So that's why the chaos of Hollywood Boulevard was a proper setting. The piano was put at the corner of Las Palmas and Hollywood, where there was a—going on the Las Palmas side—there was an out-of-town newspaper stand. A lot of people were around. On the Hollywood Boulevard side was the Egyptian Theater.

ERWIN: Oh yes. Could I just ask this question: How was it transported? Maybe that's not an important part.

LITTLE: No, well, it does tie into it. It was transported there—I mean, the whole thing was well organized. There were teams that did all the various things that'll come out. But it was put on a trailer and pulled down there. So they set up the piano. And they also set up—one of the piano players from the house was dressed up as an old cripple, and he started playing the piano. Then there was another guy who was dressed up as sort of a freaky, religious fanatic. And he had a little tin cup and he was collecting money. He was passing out an explanation of what they were doing. And it was these pink sheets of paper, printed with an explanation, which was excerpts from the Koran and the Bible and all kinds of stuff, jumbled up with God and Zeus. I mean, it read perfectly, but it made no sense whatsoever. And the sponsorship was “Jehovah's Virgin Witnesses.” So these guys were passing this out on the street. They didn't get too much attention except from the guy that owned the bar that was on the corner. He wanted to shoo them away because it was distracting customers. But then, where all the choreographing came in, right at that time—or right at the time that the Egyptian Theater was letting out and people were pouring out on the street—about fifteen of the biggest guys in our house, all dressed up in motorcycle jackets, came walking along Hollywood Boulevard, and sort of being pushy and arrogant. They could have been the Hell's Angels as far as anybody was concerned. They got to where the piano guys were playing and they pretended to beat up the piano player and beat up this religious guy. And then they took the piano and they threw it right smack in the middle of the intersection so all the traffic was held up for miles. But, also, at that [same] time, when the piano landed in the middle of the intersection, the guy with the car—he had come down Hollywood Boulevard—he hit the piano, further breaking it up, stepped on the gas, revved up the engine, blew the engine. So here was this dead car and this piano and all these people wandering around, trying to figure out what happened. Needless to say, the people in the motorcycle

jackets and the evangelist guys disappeared. So it was a lot of, “What just happened?” The police showed up fairly quickly, which was expected. So the police were trying to figure out what to do and they would ask people. And people didn’t have any idea what was going on. They [would say], “Well, jeez, these tough guys came and beat these poor people up, and we don’t really know what exactly happened.” Well, the rest of Ricketts House that wasn’t directly involved—we were all there with dates watching them.

ERWIN: Okay, so that was your part, that you played? Okay.

LITLE: Yes. So the police would ask one of us what happened, and it was, you know, “A hundred and fifty guys came down the street and murdered these people, and there’s blood all over the place.” And of course the police had no idea what was going on. I heard one guy—one policeman—with my own ears say, “Jeez, we’ve never been trained for anything like this! What should we do?” [Laughter] “Maybe we should shoot the guns in the air and maybe the crowds will disperse.” Well, you know, it probably was maybe half an hour, but it seemed like a long time. Several innocent bystanders, maybe six or eight young guys in white jackets that said “The Lancasters” on the back of the jackets and so, you know, they were just—I don’t know what they were.

ERWIN: A real gang?

LITLE: They could have been. But they didn’t seem like they were that tough or anything. But the police didn’t know what to do. So somehow they brought a paddy wagon up and they shooed all these guys into the paddy wagon quickly. These perfectly innocent guys were going off to jail. Well, Caltech had a history of really not wanting to cause any physical harm or really get people in trouble by accident, so somebody went up and told the police that they should let those guys go because they were innocent. And if they did, and they made a deal, the piano would disappear and the car would disappear. By that time, the police wanted anything to happen to get out of this mess. Because there were hundreds and hundreds of people.

ERWIN: Really? Really, so—

LITTLE: Yeah, and of course the traffic had been stopped for a long time, and the kids that liked to cruise up and down were yelling and screaming. It could have gotten out of hand. But so, what happened was the police agreed with that deal. The piano—the transport that we—mysteriously appeared. They picked up the piano, and I don't know how they got the car out of there. I don't remember that part. Our whole mission had failed. We still had the piano.

ERWIN: And the car?

LITTLE: Oh, the car. I don't really remember what happened to that. But we still had the piano, so they had to improvise. They took the piano and—didn't have as much planning—but they took the piano and put it in the Occidental [College] swimming pool and all the watercolor paint came off and there was a big ring around the Occidental pool. So that was what happened to our piano.

ERWIN: Well, that's a great story! What a lot of drama and what a lot of effort.

LITTLE: Well, I don't know why it didn't get into *The Legends*. Because that was in that same league of stuff that was done.

ERWIN: It's definitely very elaborate. So was there any press coverage of that? Did you mention that?

LITTLE: I don't remember anything. Actually, I saw Roger Noll just yesterday and he was one of the gang members. He's here.

ERWIN: Oh, he was. Yes, right. He was a professor here.

LITTLE: Oh, yeah. Sure. He was one of the guys that dressed up in the motorcycle jacket and he reminded me that he was one of those, the gang. So we had a big laugh over that yesterday, I guess, or maybe the day before.

ERWIN: Are there other people that you remember who participated in this, whose names you think you could safely reveal?

LITLE: Well, I think anybody would have been proud to have participated in it, and I don't remember the [names]—it was the whole house. It was one of those things that only [could happen] at Caltech.

ERWIN: Yes.

LITLE: There were all these things that came together, and somebody said, "We've got to do something significant." And so they did. But it was pretty much everybody in the house. And as I was a freshman, I didn't know all these guys very well. But it was the people in Ricketts House. I spent my freshman and sophomore year in Ricketts House and then my junior and senior year I was in Page House because it was new then. So we did that. There were a lot of instances like that. I have other ones that are simpler, but I don't know if you want to hear them.

ERWIN: Well, this is the kind of thing we really do like to collect, and maybe this will be yet a new edition of pranks—

LITLE: Oh.

ERWIN: Following on the prior edition.

LITLE: I was going to write this one up, but I never got around to it. But Roger would be a good one. Anybody that was in Ricketts House at that time would have participated, because it was a whole big effort.

ERWIN: Well, I think this should go on – this will be recorded for the Caltech Archives and we will go down in history that way.

LITLE: Did you get any skill game stuff, skill game stories?

ERWIN: No. I don't know what a skill game is in this context.

LITLE: Oh, okay. If you want I'll give you two, and then you can decide if you want it or not.

ERWIN: Oh, okay, let's keep going then. We're at about the thirteen-minute mark.

LITLE: Okay. Well, these are shorter. We had—the houses had quarters that are called alleys. I imagine they still do.

ERWIN: They still call them that, I think.

LITLE: And we used to have inter-alley skill games. The whole idea was to have one alley challenge another alley to do something, and it was usually a challenge that was triggered by something. One of the triggers, for example, was—there was a young guy that was dating a girl in San Marino and he didn't have a car and he was an impoverished Caltech guy. And he walked home one weekend night through San Marino and walked back to the school. Well, the San Marino Police picked him up because he looked suspicious. So that was the trigger. And what we did, we had what we called an “arrest-a-thon.” We chose our six guys from each of two alleys as our teams, and they got up and they wandered around San Marino and whichever team got arrested—all six guys got arrested first, won. And we did stuff like that.

ERWIN: So that was called skill—?

LITLE: Inter-alley skill games were the generic, and that particular one was called the “arrest-a-thon.” Another one was similar and I don't really exactly remember what triggered this, but it was called the “boorishness contest.” And two teams of six people, which is typical, went down to the Pink Pussycat on Sunset Strip. And the idea was you couldn't throw anything, you couldn't do anything physical, but whichever team of six guys got thrown out first for saying inappropriate things, won. And one of our classmates—and there's a whole series of Art McGarr stories—but Art McGarr somehow managed to get thrown out within ten seconds of the start of the thing. I don't remember what he said, but it was obscene and funny and the whole

place cracked up. If you dig, people have all kinds of inter-alley skill games. There must be a hundred of them.

ERWIN: We'll see if we can pull some more out.

LITTLE: Yeah.

ERWIN: Well, I'm going to go to stop.

[Tape ends]