



ROBERT C. PERPALL
(1930–)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHIRLEY K. COHEN

November 15, 1999

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Pasadena, California



Subject area

Mechanical engineering; administration; students

Abstract

Robert C. Perpall was born and raised in Los Angeles. He entered Caltech in 1948 and earned his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering in 1952, and a master's in 1956. Perpall is the historian of Caltech's Gnome Club and a member of the board of SURF [Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships] program. This 28-page interview with Shirley K. Cohen covers Perpall's undergraduate years at Caltech, including his memories of Lee DuBridge, Rodman Paul and George Beadle. As well as discussing his involvement with the SURF program, Perpall's reminiscences include the history of the Gnome Club at Caltech—its early history as a fraternity (Kappa Gamma) and its later revival as a social club.

Administrative information

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Contact information

Archives, California Institute of Technology
Mail Code 015A-74
Pasadena, CA 91125
Phone: (626)395-2704 Fax: (626)793-8756
Email: archives@caltech.edu

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Gnomes of the past, including Frank Capra (far right) enjoy a day at the seaside in 1918. Robert Perpall has worked hard to ensure that the material that documents the rich history of Caltech's Gnome Club will survive. Caltech Archives.

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT C. PERPALL, SR.

BY SHIRLEY K. COHEN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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Interview with Robert C. Perpall, Sr.
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Begin Tape 1, Side 1

COHEN: Mr. Perpall—or shall I call you Bob?

PERPALL: Bob.

COHEN: It's good of you to come and do this with us. Maybe we could just start with a little bit about your family background so we know where you're coming from.

PERPALL: Well, I was born and raised in Southwest Los Angeles. My father was a sheet-metal worker; my mother was a homemaker. I had one brother. I went to Washington High School, at 108th and Denker, in South Los Angeles. I was very fortunate. I went to a grammar school, a junior high, and a high school that were all on the leading edge of the educational movement in Los Angeles. At the time, we had some really respected teachers and administrators. For instance, the junior high coach, after he left that job, went over to UCLA, and his name was [Elvin C.] "Ducky" Drake. And Drake Stadium over there was named after him. But I was very fortunate: I had good, challenging teachers in the public school system.

COHEN: In the LA public school system?

PERPALL: Yes, right, LA. My father was a superintendent of the Air Conditioning Company of Southern California about the time I had to decide whether to go to college. He had a man working for him who was a Caltech alumnus. He was real impressed with how smart this guy

was. I have to say, I was the first person in my family who went to college, so my dad didn't really understand a lot about it. But he said to me, "If you can't get into Caltech, don't bother to go to college."

COHEN: Because he knew about Caltech from this worker that he had?

PERPALL: Right. But anyway—

COHEN: You got into Caltech.

PERPALL: I got in. In those days we took the entrance exam on two successive Saturdays, actually. There were four three-hour tests and, as I recall, they were English, mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Those tests were given worldwide. There were some given in Australia at the same time.

COHEN: So this wasn't a Caltech test then. It was a general test?

PERPALL: It *was* a Caltech test. In those days the faculty went around the world and interviewed the teachers and the parents of the students as well. Dr. George Beadle was the one who came to interview my parents, my teachers and me. But I'm getting ahead of it a little bit—

I grew up in a very conservative family. My father was from a broken home—not matrimonially; the family lost all of its money in the [stock market] crash of 1921. He was very, very conservative.

COHEN: Fiscally, you're talking about?

PERPALL: Yes, right. So it was quite remarkable that I ended up going to college at all. But I got here. And the first year my father had told me, "If you get into Caltech, I'll pay your way through." Well, he ran out of money after the first year, in 1948-49.

COHEN: Right after the war.

PERPALL: That's right. At the end of that time I had to figure out what to do. I went and saw Dean Eaton, I guess it was. And he looked at my grades, which weren't all that good the first year. He said, "Well, you finish up the first quarter of your sophomore year. And then if you don't do better, you're going to have to go to work for a while." But I got all A's that first quarter of my sophomore year.

COHEN: A little incentive, huh?

PERPALL: Well, it wasn't that; I had learned the ropes a little bit. The first year at Caltech was really rough. And, right after the war, we didn't have any full professors. In fact, Linus Pauling was our chemistry professor for about three weeks before he went over to Oxford on sabbatical. So he was gone that year.

COHEN: So who taught you chemistry?

PERPALL: We had grad students teaching, and Norman Davidson was the lecturer. But it was difficult timing for me, because when I grew up it was very easy to get through high school; I didn't have to study that much. Then I got to Caltech and I was competing with other guys who had been to prep schools, junior college, and many who had been in military service.

COHEN: The best students from all over.

PERPALL: Yes, right. So it was a challenging time, but it was great, and I thoroughly enjoyed my life on campus.

COHEN: Do you remember any of the other people you had as professors, teachers, or lecturers?

PERPALL: Oh, yes. Norman Brooks was a grad student and taught our course in dynamics. He was a great teacher. Later on, of course, we did have full professors in our junior and senior years. Robert Daugherty taught hydraulics. Rolf Sabersky was one of my favorite professors.

Duncan Rannie was a professor in graduate school. Dino Morelli was a great teacher of mechanical engineering design, while George Housner was a super instructor of stress analysis. Harold Lurie taught the theory of vibrations and Don Hudson taught us how to do real engineering experiments. There was Peter Kyropoulos and Kent Clark, of course—he was my English prof. He had just come the year before I did, and he taught our freshman English course. Kent was—and is—one of the most engaging persons I know. David Elliot taught a class in modern British history.

COHEN: It must have been fun.

PERPALL: Oh, it was a fun class, yes. And Rodman [Wilson] Paul was a history prof. One thing I remember about him is that he was always out watching the athletics. He was really good about showing support for the teams out there.

COHEN: Now, did you continue to live at home, or did you come and live at Caltech?

PERPALL: I lived in Fleming House.

COHEN: OK. So the houses were already established.

PERPALL: Oh, yes. There were four student houses: Fleming, Ricketts, Blacker, and Dabney. I think they were opened up in 1931 or 1932.

COHEN: Oh, so they were well-established.

PERPALL: Yes. And it was very nice living. It was what I would call gracious living. We had classy tables for eating, and wooden chairs with leather seats.

COHEN: Did you dress for dinner?

PERPALL: Oh, yes. You had to wear a coat and tie for dinner—except if our inter-house team won a game, we didn't have to wear a tie that night.

COHEN: It sounds like things were very different then.

PERPALL: They were. They were quite different. It's difficult for a lot of people to adjust to. I've been around the campus enough over the years that I've seen the changes taking place starting in the sixties. Some people are pretty upset about the apparent disregard that the students have for the student houses, but that's a whole different subject.

COHEN: Right. So you stayed your four years, and then you went into some kind of engineering?

PERPALL: I was in mechanical engineering, yes. In those days, the first year didn't matter. You just took the courses they told you to take. They told you when to take them, the way to take them, and who to take them from. And then the next year you got to decide if you wanted to be an engineer or a scientist. And I said that I wanted to be a mechanical engineer. So I took the engineering courses. And then in the junior year—

COHEN: OK, wait. I have to pick something up. After your first year, your family could no longer support you.

PERPALL: Right.

COHEN: So you went in to talk to—

PERPALL: Dean Eaton.

COHEN: So then, what happened after that?

PERPALL: Well, the bottom line was that after I got good grades in the first quarter of the sophomore year, the school gave me scholarships and interest-free loans to help me finish my four years. And I got a job waiting tables at the student houses. Later, when I returned to grad school, Caltech, without being asked, postponed my loan payments until I received my master's.

It was a typical college career, actually. A lot of us were in the same boat. The thing that is significant, I think, is that my class was the first class after the war that was more than fifty percent non-veteran. I think that there were still a lot of veterans in the class, but—

COHEN: You were starting to get a normal mix of high school kids?

PERPALL: We were getting more and more people right out of high school, including myself. So it was an interesting time. Fleming House in those days had a reputation for being the jock house, because they were the ones who won all the athletic stuff. That's why I went there, because I ran track in high school and I wanted to be in athletics. It turned out that later on I didn't have that much time for athletics, because I had to work. At one time I had five jobs on campus—waiting tables and giving campus tours and working in the mechanical shop and doing calculations down in the basement of Guggenheim. I've forgotten what the other one was, but I remember thinking at the time how lucky I was to be able to work on campus and earn my way through college.

Oh, it was all a good experience. The people here were just wonderful. I like to tell people about the beginning, when we came out here a week before school started and we went to freshman camp up at Camp Radford in the San Bernardino mountains. We spent two or three days there, and they told us about life on campus, how to study, and that sort of thing. There was a freshman history professor—McCreery—who got up and gave us our first assignment at freshman camp. He was expecting us to have read the assignment before we got to class the first time. That was a real revelation. Then we came back down to Pasadena, back to the student houses. We were in freshman rotation at that time; we ate dinner in one house for one night, and another house for another night. We moved around. Then we got to decide which one we wanted to be in. We also went to a reception at the president's house. Dr. DuBridge lived on Arden Lane at the time. And we went down there to a reception. And here I am in the best suit I had, which wasn't very great, walking up in this reception line. And Dean Foster Strong was the

first person in line. And he said to me, “Hello, Mr. Perpall. How are you?” And I said, “Well, I’m fine, but who are you?” And he introduced himself, of course. But the point is that he knew everybody’s name by looking at their face. In those days it was still legal to have a photograph on your application. And he knew everybody.

COHEN: He did his homework.

PERPALL: So he then introduced us to Dr. DuBridge and his wife, Doris.

COHEN: So how many people would he have known already?

PERPALL: Almost 200—180 in the freshman class. That impressed me. Even at that age I was impressed. But it just went on from there. The place was just wonderful. They knew you. They knew who you were. Not too far into the freshman year, they decided to have us take the SAT tests as a comparison, because up until then they had not used them. So our class was the guinea pig. They did a correlation. I don’t know what score I got.

COHEN: It was just for their records.

PERPALL: Yes. So that was the beginning of the freshman year. Of course in those days we’d have the inter-house dance every fall, which was a lot of fun.

COHEN: And where did you get the girls from?

PERPALL: Oh, Pasadena City College and Oxy [Occidental College] and Scripps and Pomona. It’s pretty much the same as it is now, I would guess.

COHEN: Well, they’ve got their own girls now.

PERPALL: Well, that’s true.

COHEN: Maybe they need more. [Laughter]

PERPALL: Yes. The dance was impressive, because there was a competition between the student houses as to which one could do the best decorating. And also Throop Club had a dance, because there were five [dances in total]. Throop Club was in the old—what they call—“Greasy Spoon.” There was a big building there, where the bookstore and student union are now.

COHEN: OK. Was this a dormitory?

PERPALL: It was an old building that had belonged to the Pasadena City Library, I think. They had moved it onto the campus. It was a cafeteria, but the grad students lived upstairs. And there was also a barber up there. It was sort of a student union. But the Throop Club met in the big meeting room in there. The fireplace in Throop Club had bricks with guys’ initials and the year they graduated carved in them.

COHEN: Now, are those the bricks that are now outside the campus bookstore?

PERPALL: That’s right. Those bricks were saved when they tore that building down and built the new bookstore.

So there was a lot of tradition. And of course at that time the Gnome Club was rather defunct.

COHEN: Now, that had already been organized?

PERPALL: The Gnome Club had been the Kappa Gamma fraternity that started in 1897. And there was a house that they lived in with a whole bunch of people. Some of the history of that is lost in antiquity. But then Ted [Theodore C.] Combs picked it up and wrote this book about the history of the Gnome Club up until the time he graduated, which was 1927, I believe.

In 1929 Michael O’Haver graduated, and a few others. One of the things that I’ve always liked about the Gnome Club is that I have been able to meet people from all these different years.

COHEN: I see. So that was really like any other fraternity?

PERPALL: Right. But then what happened was the school decided to not have fraternities anymore and to build the student houses. At that time they formed a task force, or a committee of students and faculty, to go around the world and look at different universities to see how they did it. And they came up with the complex of the four student houses, which is sort of a mixture between Cambridge and all these other places, where the students lived there very democratically. It wasn't a fraternity at all. But we did have our social customs, and we ate dinner as a house, all from one central kitchen for the four houses. Each house had their own dining room, living room, and courtyard. And that worked out very nicely.

COHEN: There must have been other fraternities besides the Gnomes.

PERPALL: Well, there were. I can't remember the names of them.

COHEN: That just disappeared?

PERPALL: What happened was the school said that fraternities weren't allowed anymore. Well, these guys from the Gnome Club moved into Ricketts House.

COHEN: All of them?

PERPALL: The ones that were, at that time, still interested in living on campus. So they went along that way until they graduated. The only thing that kept them together was their desire to stay associated with one another.

COHEN: It wasn't what they were studying, or anything like that?

PERPALL: No. They were just good friends, but there was no longer a fraternity. And yet, these guys were still good friends. They had families. And some of them stayed in the Pasadena area—most of them did, actually. Then, about the time that Dr. DuBridge came onto campus—I

think it was about 1950 or 1951—I wasn't there. But the story is that he was impressed when he was invited to come to the Gnome Club Founders' Night.

COHEN: So this was a subgroup in Ricketts?

PERPALL: Well, originally, yes; but by 1950 it wasn't—they were all gone. What happened was that the Gnomes, like Ted Combs and some others, had stuck together. And they invited Dr. DuBridge to come to the Founders' Night, which is March 9th of every year. The first Founders' Night was in 1897.

COHEN: OK. So this was a yearly event of the Gnomes.

PERPALL: Right. Well, they invited Dr. DuBridge, and he came. And he was impressed with all the tradition and history. He had come here from the East, and he saw that there was a lack of tradition on the campus. So he encouraged these folks to keep the club going, and he gave them permission to recruit the new members from the senior class.

The old members were all interested in school and interested in keeping their social contacts. So they just gathered people together. Well, when they were given permission to recruit new members, it gave them the option of having the club continue on. Otherwise it was going to die out.

COHEN: With these people that graduated that was the end of it?

PERPALL: Right.

COHEN: So that was Dr. DuBridge?

PERPALL: He gave them permission to do that. So then they started doing that slowly.

COHEN: What did they see as their purpose? It's just that they wanted a fraternal kind of thing because they enjoyed it?

PERPALL: OK. Well, there hasn't been a lot of discussion about that. And it's written down in several places in different ways.

COHEN: Well, this is your version.

PERPALL: The Gnome Club's purpose is to keep the camaraderie and the friendship of the alumni going by social events and thereby keep people who are interested in the school around the school to do good things for the school. And that's what's been happening. A very large number of the recent alumni association presidents are Gnome Club members. Also, we've had people like myself very involved in SURF [Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship]. We've got other people that are involved in the Associates—

COHEN: Well, we'll get to that later. I just would like to get this feeling of how something passed from being a subgroup of students in Ricketts, and then you graduated, and then you—

PERPALL: Then there was a period of about fifteen or twenty years when there was nothing going on, except these people were just socializing. When I talk to my friends that are not Caltech people, I say that it's my "alumni fraternity." It's a fraternity of alumni.

COHEN: So that's a unique group.

PERPALL: That's right. It's different. When I was president a few years ago, I was able to get permission from Dr. Everhart to start recruiting at the end of the junior year, so that we have a chance to get to know the students better. But typically what happens is that somebody will be recruited into the fraternity and join, and then they'll be invited to our social events. A lot of them move away, but within five or ten years some of them come back and are actively involved. And they do good things for the campus.

And we do invite people who are not alumni to join sometimes. Anyhow, it's now broadened out. Of course, a lot of things happened. The first big watershed thing that happened was the decision to allow us to recruit new members.

COHEN: Let me go back to the original people that were Gnomes, like you. Did these people have any other thing holding them together excepting their feeling of loyalty to Caltech, their love of Caltech?

PERPALL: Well, friendship and history. Just reminiscing about old times, and that sort of thing. There was no formal organization.

COHEN: And there was no philosophy?

PERPALL: There were no dues or anything. There was a philosophy of—well—“courage, loyalty, and truth.”

COHEN: Courage, loyalty, and truth.

PERPALL: Right. Now, if you look on the Web for the Gnome Club, you'll find a Web page which documents the history.

COHEN: I don't want to get ahead of myself now. So you had this original group. How many people were you?

PERPALL: I don't really know.

COHEN: This was before your time?

PERPALL: Yes, that's right. There were probably ten or fifteen people that kept it going. Fred Wheeler and Ted Combs and half a dozen other guys were very prominently featured in Ted's book about how this kept going. And that's pretty well documented up until 1950 or 1951. At that time they started recruiting new people. So that was a watershed decision that made a big difference. Then the next thing that happened was in the sixties—or was it early 1970—when Caltech allowed women to come on the campus as students. At that point in time we were

struggling along. We would have Founders' Night dinners with ten, fifteen, or twenty people there. Sometimes it would be in the Pasadena Athletic Club, sometimes in the Athenaeum. It was not very well attended, and nothing terribly exciting.

COHEN: Now, did you have dues?

PERPALL: We had \$3-a-year dues, or something like that—just enough to pay for mailings.

COHEN: Did everybody who was a Gnome also belong to the alumni? I mean, they were alumni, but did they belong to the Alumni Association?

PERPALL: It wasn't a requirement, but yes. The answer is they did.

Everybody who was interested in the school as an alumnus was involved. But it was a men-only fraternity. And we said, "If we're going to have women as students, then eventually we'll be recruiting women to the club. We'd better invite the wives to Founders' Night."

COHEN: OK.

PERPALL: And that was another watershed, because as soon as we started inviting the wives to Founders' Night, it became a really nice social event.

COHEN: And what made you do that was the fact that they were getting Caltech students—

PERPALL: Well, we decided we weren't going to make it as a bunch of bachelors, or as a bunch of guys, having a meeting in secret once a year. [Laughter] So we invited the wives and made it an open social event. The biggest event we had was our hundredth Founders' Night, which was the ninety-ninth anniversary because the first one was the night they founded it. And that ended up being 165 or 170 people. We filled up the Hall of the Associates. So it was nice.

COHEN: Now, there must have been a core group.

PERPALL: Oh, there was. There has been a core group right along. But the core group keeps evolving now, because we've had a number of the older guys pass on. Mike O'Haver and Ted Combs and Fred Wheeler were among the guys that I knew the best. But Hal Beck and Bill Mohr, Ted Coleman, Stan Johnson and a guy named George Rice—

COHEN: Now, were these mostly people that lived in the area?

PERPALL: Yes. They've lived in Southern California, but they're older guys. What happened was these guys kept it together and then the younger people came in and picked up the reins. It's been a very informal organization. We have a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and I'm historian now. But for a long time it was just whomever would do it. We don't have any rigid "Robert's Rules of Order," or anything like that.

COHEN: Let me get this straight: You only have one meeting a year?

PERPALL: Well, we have a meeting, like that, which turns out to be a big dinner with a speaker.

COHEN: Right, this Founders' Night.

PERPALL: Founders' Night. In the summer we also have a party at somebody's home, or sometimes it's at the Alumni House. And one year not too long ago we had it in Avery House, when Avery was new. And we also have a holiday party.

COHEN: A Christmas party?

PERPALL: Well, we call it a holiday party, but it is a Christmas party. And everybody brings *hors d'oeuvres* to that.

COHEN: So it's a very loose organization; you don't have any program. I mean, do you have a speaker or anything?

PERPALL: Not at those events. We have a speaker at the Founders' Night.

COHEN: So that's more formal.

PERPALL: Right.

COHEN: So somebody has to work on that.

PERPALL: That's right. We have to get somebody to sign up to do that. Anyway, it's been a really good experience for me because I've been able to meet students from the class of '08 and students from the class of '99, and all the way in between.

COHEN: Of course, you've lived in the area.

PERPALL: I lived in South Bay, in Palos Verdes.

COHEN: Right. I was going to ask you about your work. You went on and did a graduate degree at Caltech also?

PERPALL: Yes. Well, what happened was I went to work at the Garrett Corporation [which merged with Allied Signal and eventually became Honeywell] in 1952. And I was immediately caught up in manufacturing of aircraft parts. But I found that I wasn't able to read the technical literature that well; there was something missing. I went back and I read the catalog for the first time. The Caltech catalog was not a necessary instrument when you were an undergraduate because they told you what you were going to take in those days.

COHEN: [Laughter] There were not that many choices.

PERPALL: It's a little different now. We had one elective. We had an elective in the junior year in the humanities. Well, I went back and read the catalog, and it said that the mechanical

engineering curriculum is a five-year curriculum leading to a master's degree. "Oh. Is that right," [I thought]. I didn't know that.

COHEN: So you had your bachelor's and a job already.

PERPALL: And a wife, and no children. So I wrote a letter to the school and I said that I'd like to come back but that I'd need to have some sort of assistantship or something because I didn't have enough money. I ended up, through the good offices of Ruth Toy, who was then secretary of the engineering department, finding out about the Clarence J. Hicks Fellowship in industrial relations. Bob Gray was the head of industrial relations at the time. So I became a Clarence J. Hicks Fellow and got my master's degree that way while my wife worked on the campus. She worked for Mrs. Toy, and got to meet professor Harold Wayland. She typed his book [*Differential Equations Applied in Science and Engineering*, 1957], and she typed Rolf Sabersky's book [*Elements of Engineering Thermodynamics*, 1957]. She met a lot of the students and made a lot of friends that year. So we knew a lot of the seniors of the class of '56, as well as the students in my graduate class of '56. And I went to Seminar Day that year or the next year—I can't remember which.

COHEN: This was just the one-year program that you did?

PERPALL: Yes, right.

COHEN: You did this master's in one year?

PERPALL: Right. And then I went back to work. Then I went to a Seminar Day, and I liked it, so I signed up to be on the seminar committee. I was on the seminar committee for several years, and then I became chairman. And I went on from there to the alumni board of directors. And that was, I think, from '66 to '69—somewhere in that time frame. Those were exciting times. It was in the sixties, of course, and the campus—

COHEN: Students stopped wearing ties to dinner. [Laughter]

PERPALL: Oh, it was more than that; there were all kinds of things going on. The Beckman Auditorium was built. It made it possible for the first-ever all-student-body meeting, because Culbertson Hall was never big enough. Then they got together. Joe Rhodes was the student body president for two of those years, and he came to the alumni board meetings and was reporting. I remember he was crowing about the fact that he had had this all-student-body meeting and that they were going to demand academic reform. We said, “Now, wait a minute, Joe. This isn’t Berkeley. [Laughter] If you have all this energy and you need to do something besides your studies, why don’t you do something useful for the economy or for the environment?” He said, “Like what?” And we said, “For instance, look how smoggy it is here in Pasadena.” We talked about that, and he ended up with a program with HEW [US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare]. They ended up doing things with the students at Muir High School, and they went on and developed the program. Finally, the electric car race was the upshot of that.

COHEN: I see. So this was you directing Rhodes into more constructive activities.

PERPALL: Well, I and Craig Elliott and a few other guys talked to him and said, “Hey, take it easy.” [Laughter] This is the way Caltech was: people cared about other people. I think it’s still that way.

COHEN: So there could be a one-to-one thing, and it made sense.

PERPALL: Right. I think this school is great that way now. I got involved with the SURF program when I retired.

COHEN: Yes. So this was the Gnome Club sort of taking off there and being part of the alumni association, but a core group that was really here all the time. So did you have people that didn’t live in Pasadena, or didn’t live close by?

PERPALL: Yes. We have members that are active that live all over Southern California. I mean, I live thirty-five miles away.

COHEN: Right. But I mean not in San Francisco, for example.

PERPALL: We don't have people that commute, although if they're in town, they're certainly welcome. And we do send them the news bulletin every year.

COHEN: OK. So you say that the group was really revitalized when you started having your wives at Founders' Night.

PERPALL: Well, that was the second milestone. The first one was recruiting new students. The second one was when the wives—

COHEN: Tell me, if you'd go into a senior class of 150 or 200, who'd you get?

PERPALL: Maybe we'd get anywhere from five to fifteen new members. It depends upon the year. In recent years, it's been up to as much as twenty, although they don't all get active. Some move away and never come back. But Louise Kirkbride, for instance, was a Gnome president, as was Lisa Anderson. Louise Kirkbride's now a member of the trustees, while Phil Neches is a member of the trustees too.

COHEN: And he was a Gnome?

PERPALL: He was a Gnome, and a Gnome Club president. So, yes, we've had a lot of success with getting people involved and keeping them involved with the school. One of the things we did a number of years ago was to start a career counseling program, which was hard to keep going because we didn't have any infrastructure on the campus. But with the good help of the Y, we kept it going a few years. And then the school picked it up as part of the career development program.

COHEN: So tell me, when did you get involved with the SURF program?

PERPALL: Well, when I retired from Garrett—

COHEN: So you went back to Garrett and stayed with Garrett all these years?

PERPALL: Right. And then I retired from Garrett in 1988 because they had merged with Allied and Allied didn't want the old Garrett culture—so they offered me a chance to retire early. So I was looking for something to do, and I talked with Barclay Kamb, who was a classmate of mine, and I told him what I wanted to do. I had been over to the Industrial Associates office, and that didn't look like it would work out. I'd have to come out here two or three days a week, and I lived in Palos Verdes. And they were rebuilding the freeway at the time, so it was really hard. So I talked to Barclay, and he said, "Get involved with the SURF program." I had told him that I wanted to work with students.

COHEN: And you weren't interested in a paid job of any sort?

PERPALL: No, no. I had always had the idea that I wanted to spend my retirement years on the campus somehow. Until my first wife died, I intended to buy a second home out here—at least a condo or something—and live out here near the campus. It just hasn't happened. It could still happen, because I'm as much involved now as I ever have been. But I got involved with the SURF program because I wanted to be involved with the students.

COHEN: This was Barclay's suggestion?

PERPALL: Yes. And so I was able to work a deal when I left the company. I was able to work a matching gift from the company to the school. I directed it into SURF. And Carolyn appreciated that.

COHEN: Carolyn Merkel?

PERPALL: Yes. I ended up being on the SURF board, and we got involved with the SURF activities. I noticed that the students were doing a poor job of presenting their work orally. This was in 1988 or 1989, somewhere in there. So Victor Veysey—who’s another Gnome, by the way—and I decided to try to do something about it, but we weren’t very successful. We were discussing it at a board meeting one day, right after my first wife died, and I said, “Would a prize help?” “Oh, yes.” So we endowed a prize, and it seems to have helped quite a bit.

COHEN: And what is this for?

PERPALL: It’s a speaking prize in the SURF program. At the end of the summer, when they make their presentations, we have judges. The Gnome Club and the Alumni Association help with this. There’s the first cut to select semi-finalists, with about eight going to the finals in January. It’s been going on for several years now, and it’s working quite well. The quality of the talks has been a lot better, so I’ve been happy about that.

COHEN: Right, and it’s so important.

PERPALL: I think it is. I think that if I had recognized the importance of public speaking, I would have learned a lot better when I was younger.

COHEN: I think they’re requiring a course of the students now.

PERPALL: That may or may not be the right way to go. I mean, it’s certainly important for the students to recognize the importance of it.

COHEN: So tell me how involved you are with the SURF program. You say you volunteered for the SURF program. What did you actually do?

PERPALL: Well, I’ve just been a member of the SURF board. But now, because I’m on the SURF board and because I’m Gnome historian, I’ve decided that for this next year to fund a SURF fellowship to do a Gnome history. Hopefully we’ll get you or Judy [Judith R. Goodstein,

Caltech archivist], or both, to help mentor the student. She suggested maybe doing an oral history, which would mean getting a number of people that are much more qualified than I to talk about the Gnome Club history. I didn't join the Gnome Club until I was on the alumni board; I didn't join when I was a senior.

COHEN: Oh, OK. I had the impression you were in on it from the beginning, but that's not so.

PERPALL: Right. I was invited to the party. It was really kind of funny. I was invited to the party that they'd have to vote for prospective members, and I guess they invited me to join, but I didn't know if I wanted to join. I was figuring I was going to leave the school anyway, and I'd had all the fraternity business I wanted in high school. [Laughter]

COHEN: So what are the criteria for asking someone to be a Gnome?

PERPALL: They need to be interested in the well-being of the school. They need to be active doing things. Most Caltech students are going to be leaders of some kind or other, academically or industrially or something, but they need to be social leaders too. There aren't any hard and fast requirements. It's just, "Does this person have Caltech's—"

COHEN: So you have no set number, like you could take in five or ten people?

PERPALL: No.

COHEN: Everybody suggests that this person would be a good Gnome and then there's discussion?

PERPALL: That's right.

COHEN: So it was open-ended?

PERPALL: Right. And so, about the middle of the junior year, we'll go out and ask people like Judy and Carolyn Merkel and Dr. [Steven Clark] Frautschi and others for a list of people that they think would make good Gnomes.

COHEN: Of the undergraduates?

PERPALL: Right. Of the juniors, or seniors.

COHEN: So then, one of you would personally go talk to that person?

PERPALL: Well, what we do is we try to get them to come to an orientation meeting where we show a film that we have of the early days. You see, there was a documentary made of the Gnome Club history. Actually, it was like an oral history—a bunch of the guys sat around and made a videotape reminiscing about that history. But the problem is that these were all guys who were from the very first fraternity. There weren't any of the guys that came later on. Now, unfortunately, a number of the later guys have passed on. Bill Freed was killed in an automobile accident. He was the earliest president that I have a record of in what I call the modern era.

COHEN: The modern age, OK. Post Ted Combs.

PERPALL: Yes. Well, Ted Combs was still a Gnome until the day he died. But the Gnome Club, I would say, is distinguished by the fact that their people are always there ready to help. Now, there are some of the board who feel that we should get a little more formal, and that sort of thing, but it would take away, I think, the valuable aspect that we have of being informal and being able to be flexible and do what has to be done.

COHEN: How many people are on your board?

PERPALL: I think there are about fifteen on the list. Usually there are at least ten or twelve at a meeting. We only meet three or four times a year.

COHEN: And that's when you sort of decide, "What can we do for Caltech?"

PERPALL: Basically, these people are all doing things for Caltech outside of the Gnome Club. We get together and compare notes. Now, John Gee, for instance, is on the board of the Y and he's just been put on the board for SURF. Carl Otte is president of the Associates, and he's on the SURF board now. And I'm a member of the Associates and I'm a Gnome board member, and I'm also the SURF board chairman this year.

COHEN: That's got to be a very big job. SURF has gotten to be a really big thing.

PERPALL: Yes, but Carolyn [Merkel] does all the work. I'm going to go see her when I finish talking to you, but she doesn't give me too much to do. But anyway, we Gnomes get together and compare notes and see how we can reinforce each other's efforts. And there's a group of us that has been working with Chris Brennen, trying to come up with some way of enriching the social life of the students.

COHEN: Do you have anything to do with the Caltech Y?

PERPALL: I personally haven't. I did when I was on campus and Wes Hershey was the Y secretary. There was a period of time in there when I was busy, like everybody else, with a young family, and I just didn't get involved in that. I was too far away. And when I came back to get active again, the Y wasn't that active with alumni. John Gee lives over in West Pasadena, over near Annandale, and he stays involved. He's the year after me. I'm class of '52; he was class of '53.

COHEN: So the Gnomes are a unique organization in that it's a loose organization.

PERPALL: That's right.

COHEN: But the people that are involved are very dedicated.

PERPALL: They're movers and shakers around the campus.

COHEN: Right.

PERPALL: The first time I met Dr. Baltimore, my wife and I were at the Huntington Hotel when he gave a talk, and we had a dance afterward.

COHEN: This was the Associates?

PERPALL: The Associates, yes. And he and his wife were dancing, and my wife and I were dancing. And when it was all over, we were the only ones dancing. And we got acquainted and chatted a bit. And I said to him, "Now you've got to join the Gnome Club."

COHEN: Did he know what it was?

PERPALL: No. I told him. He also wanted to know if that was a national fraternity. I said, "No, it's not a national fraternity, it's very much Caltech." [Laughter]

COHEN: Well, when someone hears about something, they want to put it in a category.

PERPALL: That's right. Anyway, he has joined. He came and spoke at our Founders' Night last year, and he has joined the club. Everhart had joined, too. I don't know whether Harold Brown or Murph Goldberger ever joined. [Tape ends]

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

COHEN: Can you say something concerning your general feeling about Caltech.

PERPALL: Well, the reason I've always liked Caltech is that I find that the intellectual challenge of working with people from Caltech makes it a lot more fun. We seem to talk the same language. We have an analytical approach to things. We don't always agree, but we do have a

lot of fun. And I enjoy the camaraderie of people that I've known for years, and also meeting new people. I'm just delighted with the young people in the SURF program, for instance.

COHEN: That's a wonderful program.

PERPALL: And I get to know them. And of course when they get to be seniors, I try to get them to join the Gnome Club. [Laughter]

COHEN: So the SURF board must take a good bit of your time.

PERPALL: Not really. Of my available time—outside of taking care of the house and things that I have to do around the home—it probably takes twenty-five percent. But that isn't a whole lot of time.

COHEN: But you do come and hear all their presentations?

PERPALL: Oh, yes. Well, not all of them—you can't. They give 200 in one day. [Laughter] I go to as many as I can. But I will be here for the finals in January, and we'll have a dinner for the finalists over in the Athenaeum.

COHEN: So this is still a very important part of your life?

PERPALL: Oh, yes. If I didn't have that to do, I'm afraid that life would be getting kind of dull. For years I sailed. I've been there and done that. I just turned sixty-nine. I'm not *old*, by any means, but I'm not as young and vigorous as I used to be bouncing around the deck of a sailboat pulling on lines and whatnot.

COHEN: So tell me, do you come to, say, the Watson Lectures?

PERPALL: I do that occasionally. It's a long way to drive for that, but I do come for specific ones.

COHEN: Now, the Associates have lots and lots of events.

PERPALL: Yes. We're going to a dinner tonight. We're going to go and hear a professor talk about the ME [Mechanical Engineering] '72 competition. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to be at that this year because we're going to be in Arizona. But I enjoy these things.

COHEN: So you do come to the things that the Associates and the alumni group offer all the time.

PERPALL: Oh, yes. The school in total is a big part of my life.

COHEN: So if you ever had to consider moving away from Los Angeles, that would be a big factor.

PERPALL: Oh, yes. There's no reason I would have to move from the Los Angeles area. If anything, I would move from Palos Verdes to Pasadena. My wife and I have been talking about it. You know, I got married again, and she has a lot of friends in the South Bay, as I do. I always keep coming back home to Caltech, because I feel comfortable here. Now, the place is a lot different than it was when I was an undergraduate, but I don't feel uncomfortable about that, because I've been around while it was going on. You know, I've been involved as the chairman of my class reunion every five years, and some of my classmates come here and they haven't been here for ten or fifteen years, and they say that they don't know the place and they don't relate that much to it. So living in the area has contributed to my interest.

COHEN: Well, it really is great. So are you being successful at recruiting young people?

PERPALL: Oh, yes. The Gnome Club is thriving right now. And I'm trying as historian to get some groundwork laid to have an ongoing record. Part of the problem we've had is that the files would just be put into the basement of the Alumni House. I've talked to Judy [Goodstein], and we've set up an archive now. And hopefully we will get, on a yearly basis now, photographs and

other things that are germane—programs and things of that nature—that will just go here like a file going into an archive. I’m trying to get the club to establish a small endowment, and I need to talk to Judy about that. I’m going to start it out and get some seed money. But we’ll try to get up a \$10,000 endowment, which would then provide \$500 a year, which would be enough to pay a student to file the stuff. If anybody wants to come along and do some research, that’s another issue. So that’s what we’re doing.

COHEN: OK. Well, it sounds very good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

PERPALL: Well, I had an afterthought. I have an autobiography of Robert A. Millikan, and it was inscribed by him to me in January of 1951: “Inscribed by the author, Robert A. Millikan, for his fellow student at Caltech, Robert Perpall, January 9, 1951.” Now, I was impressed with this, because at the time I was going into my junior year at Caltech and Robert Millikan didn’t know me from Adam. But I went and introduced myself to him, because I had bought his book as part of a summer reading program and decided to have him autograph it for me. And he was a humble guy who really liked to work with the students. And I think that’s wonderful. I hope that the young faculty today carry on with that tradition.

COHEN: Do you think that that’s one of the reasons why you’ve stayed active with Caltech?

PERPALL: Oh, yes, absolutely, because I felt like I knew Robert Millikan, even though I obviously didn’t know him very well. And Linus Pauling and his wife would have Fleming House students to their house for parties. You felt like you were part of the Caltech community even as a freshman.

COHEN: I wonder if that feeling is still there now.

PERPALL: I don’t know. I hope so. I hope that the young faculty help to bring that about. Certainly there are a lot of alumni, especially on the Gnome Club board and some of us working with the SURF program, that are trying to infuse that attitude. And we’re trying to find ways of getting more alumni involved with the students so that the faculty will also be involved. I have a

feeling that the young faculty today are awfully busy writing proposals and doing their own research.

COHEN: It's a much more cutthroat business these days. That is true.

PERPALL: And that's a shame, because I think that the thing that made Caltech what it was—and is today, for that matter—was its personal relationship between the faculty and the students. And that's why I got involved with the SURF program. [Tape is turned off]

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