



## WILLIAM TIVOL

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.

### **Copyright**

Copyright has been assigned to the California Institute of Technology © 2013.  
All requests for permission to publish or quote from the transcript must be submitted in writing to the Head, Archives and Special Collections.

### **Preferred citation**

Tivol, William. Interview by Charlotte E. Erwin. Pasadena, California, May 19, 2012. Oral History Project, California Institute of Technology Archives.  
Retrieved [supply date of retrieval] from the World Wide Web:  
[http://resolver.caltech.edu/CaltechOH:OH\\_Tivol\\_W\\_alum](http://resolver.caltech.edu/CaltechOH:OH_Tivol_W_alum)

### **Contact information**

Archives, California Institute of Technology  
Mail Code 015A-74  
Pasadena, CA 91125  
Phone: (626)395-2704 Fax: (626)395-4073  
Email: [archives@caltech.edu](mailto:archives@caltech.edu)

Graphics and content © 2013 California Institute of Technology.



**WILLIAM TIVOL**

**CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM TIVOL**

**BY CHARLOTTE E. ERWIN**

**MAY 19, 2012**

**CALTECH ALUMNI SEMINAR DAY**

**PASADENA, CALIFORNIA**

**Copyright © 2013 California Institute of Technology**

**CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview with William Tivol**  
**BS 1962**

**by Charlotte E. Erwin**  
**Pasadena, California**

**May 19, 2012**

**Begin Tape**

ERWIN: So, we're going!

TIVOL: Okay. Bill Tivol. Class of '62. I wanted to say something about one of the student life things that was going on in our era that I know the traditions have since disappeared. And I don't want them lost forever to antiquity, so I figured I'd record them.

ERWIN: Yes. Very good.

TIVOL: One of the social events that our house used to hold two or three times a year—

ERWIN: And your house was?

TIVOL: Dabney House—was barn dances. And, in fact, it wasn't just our house, all of the houses when I came here—so there were only four—held these. There were two events of entertainment that occurred during the barn dances that, in particular, I wanted to discuss. One of them was called “crew races.” Now, the crew team was selected for how rapidly they could down twelve ounces of beer. And there were people who had developed this technique called the “inverse belch,” who could down twelve ounces of beer in slightly less than one second. And somebody, of course, did the experiment. If you take the beer mug—filled with twelve ounces of beer—and invert it, it takes seven-tenths of a second for the beer to fall out. So, in any event, you had ten people that were a part of the team, and then you had a couple of alternates. And these people would arrive at the barn dance sufficiently early to pour out their beer and then they would sequester their mugs off to the side for a couple of hours and let all the carbonation

disappear, which was essential in this process. The way the race worked: The first person—as soon as somebody said “Go!”—the first person would chug down the beer, raise the mug over his head—and it was always *his* in that era—as soon as the bottom of the beer mug cleared the top of the first person’s head, the second person would start drinking. And there was a judge to make sure that nobody jumped the gun, and you were allowed to spill *at most* a shot glass full of beer. The judge also looked to see how much beer actually made it into your mouth. If either of these were violated, the team had to drink an alternate. Now, I think my best time was a little under two seconds and I probably was on the team once perhaps, or twice. But I never did perfect the inverse belch and so I was not a strong member of the team.

ERWIN: So you had to qualify each time before the contest?

TIVOL: Well, you practiced. You practiced. And so we would all sit in one of the restrooms with lots of beer in our beer mugs and pour out bunches of these things and practice chugging them down. You wouldn’t do more than one or two a night because, of course, you had problems that [resulted], and so forth. [Laughter]

ERWIN: Yes, right, right.

TIVOL: And then the members of the team would wear T-shirts and would wet them down to disguise how much beer actually got spilled on your shirt. So there was some strategies involved. Anyhow, that was the crew race.

ERWIN: And that was always at the barn dance?

TIVOL: It was always at the barn dances. The second bit of entertainment at the barn dances was “flamers.” Now, I did drink at least one flamer, but I was never good enough to make the team.

ERWIN: I see. So you’ll explain what this is.

TIVOL: Now, what a flamer is, you take a shot glass. You fill it with something that’s at least 100 proof; light it on fire—

ERWIN: Yeah, I was afraid of that.

TIVOL: And you turn down the lights—this is why people with beards should never demonstrate flammers—you turn down the lights. And there's your second, who's sitting there with a wet towel in case of disaster so he's ready to blot you out. Then, there were various kinds. There was the straight flamer, where you just drank it. There was one that worked from about six inches; one from about a foot; the full flamer where your arm is more or less extended; and the extended where your elbow is locked. And then there were fancier variations where you'd pour it from one glass into another into your mouth, and so there were cascades and things like that, degrees of difficulty and so forth. And, actually, the best one I ever saw was only of moderate difficulty. It was an extended flamer, where, of course, the man is standing there with elbow locked, pours the flaming beverage, got it all into his mouth, and then stood there, and you gargle a little bit and that maintains the flame. And he maintained the flame as, one by one, three flaming drops dropped off the rim of the glass into his mouth—

ERWIN: Oh my goodness!

TIVOL: And then—

ERWIN: Quite spectacular!

TIVOL: Quite spectacular! And as I say, that was the best one that I saw. [Laughter]

ERWIN: Now, did anyone ever sustain injury from this?

TIVOL: Nothing serious. That's why the guy was there with the wet towel. [Laughter] Preventing, you know, anything other than, you know, maybe a blister on your lip or something. And it was a good idea – well, alcohol you can burn a little bit on the palm of your hand, but if it sits there too long, the heat will start to transfer through the liquid—

ERWIN: I've never tried that.

TIVOL: Yeah, and so you can hold something in your mouth for a couple of seconds while the flame goes—

ERWIN: Oh, you can! So the flame eating is—the traditional flame eaters, or whatever, they actually are doing it.

TIVOL: Yeah, they're actually doing it. So, in any event, those are the two traditions that we used to have that have, as I say, since sort of faded into obscurity, and I don't want them to disappear completely from the lore of Caltech.

ERWIN: Well, thank you for nailing this down. This is very, very good.

TIVOL: I'm glad nobody else did it first.

ERWIN: No, no! Now, can you speculate for a bit on why you think those events disappeared from student life?

TIVOL: Things sort of evolved from year to year, and I'm not—I have no clue as to why flamers seemed to have disappeared. But, maybe twenty, twenty-five years ago, when I brought up the subject, nobody knew what they were about.

ERWIN: I've never heard of them.

TIVOL: Yeah, a lot of people [hadn't], of course. Now, at that same time, people had heard of crew, but that had evolved. And the idea was you had ten people sort of sitting around in a U-shaped configuration, with two mugs of beer, which had not been de-carbonated. So they would drink one, the other, the other, the other, the other, and then when they got to the tenth, it would go back around the table to the first person. So that evolved into something slightly different and now, as far as I know, has disappeared. I'm not sure whether barn dances still occur. We used a facility up in La Canada-Flintridge, which was basically this big open space that you could sprinkle hay on the ground. It wasn't a working barn, of course.



ERWIN: The flames in the barn do sound a bit risky.

TIVOL: Space was cleared. We were safe enough.

ERWIN: So, why was it called “crew?”

TIVOL: Oh, because there was a crew of people, I think, more than anything else.

ERWIN: It had no inspiration from the sport of crew?

TIVOL: From rowing? No. No inspiration from rowing other than that both involve a liquid.

[Laughter]

ERWIN: Okay. Okay, well, that’s very nice. Was there anything else you wanted to add or are you—that’s your story?

TIVOL: No, that’s—that’d be about it.

ERWIN: Okay!

TIVOL: Okay, thank you very much.

**[Tape ends]**