



WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

## WASCH CENTER FOR RETIRED FACULTY

Newsletter Vol. 4, No. 2  
Spring 2013

# BILL FIRSHEIN: Wesleyan's Roaring Boy

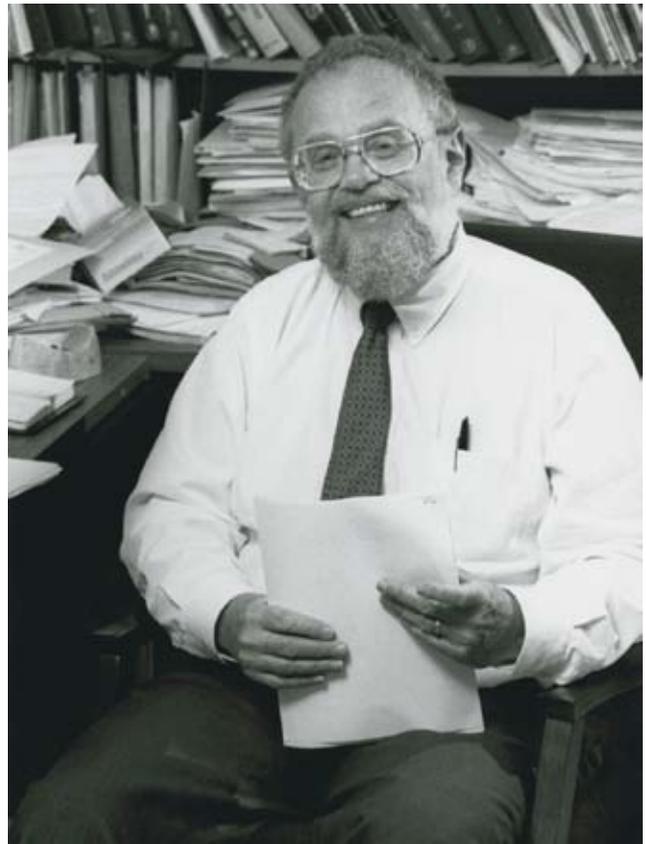
by Al Turco

**O**n September 25, 2012 the following exchange took place between the author and William Firshein, Daniel Ayres Professor of Biology, Emeritus.

**AL:** *In the course of your nearly half-century on the active faculty at Wesleyan, there have inevitably been significant changes, both academic and social. Which one—for better or worse—surprised you the most?*

**BILL:** When I think my way back to when I first came here in 1958, all the way to when I retired in 2005, there wasn't much that surprised me—though there were changes that I was happy or not happy with. The two important things that I was really happy about were the establishment of PhD programs in the sciences in 1967–68 and the admission of women around 1970. The PhD program was very important for the development of facilities, manpower, and programs. We were able to renovate, collaborate, and even establish the new department of Microbiology and Biochemistry in 1984. Wesleyan was no longer a de facto college, but a real university.

Did I just want to teach when I started out here? No, I wanted mainly to do research, but we only had a master's program. I was not intimidated, exactly, but knew that I had to prove myself. Two things I needed to be able to do: the first was to write grant-proposals—without them, there's nothing—and the second was to find out if I could teach. What



the hell did I know about it? I had never taken an education course in my life. In my mind the research was linked to the teaching because research teaches you humility. Things don't always go smoothly in research, and discoveries don't happen one! two! three! four!—I wanted students to experience the difficulties, the frustrations, the ups and downs, the joys.

If the PhD was a game-changer, so was coeducation in a different way. During my first decade or so here, students would disappear on Fridays because they were running up to Holyoke and Smith to see their girlfriends. But as soon as there were women here, the guys stuck around.

*Continued on page 2.*

# LET'S GO TO THE MOVIES!



Another round of classic flicks chosen and elucidated by Joe Reed. Popcorn, too. All screenings will be on Tuesdays (first Tuesday of the month in term) in the Butterfield Room of the Wasch Center at 3:15 p.m.

## **TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5**

RONIN, 1998, starring Robert DeNiro, Jean Reno, directed by John Frankenheimer (121 min.)

## **TUESDAY, MARCH 5**

PANIC IN THE STREETS, 1950, starring Richard Widmark, Zero Mostel, Jack Palance, directed by Elia Kazan (96 min.)

## **TUESDAY, APRIL 2**

THE GAUNTLET, 1977, directed by and starring Clint Eastwood, with Sondra Locke (109 min.)

## **TUESDAY, MAY 7**

THE BIG SLEEP, 1946, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, directed by Howard Hawks with screenplay by William Faulkner (115 min.)

*Bill Firshein* continued from page 1.

It's an abnormal society just to have single-sex schools. Aren't Holyoke and Smith still all female? *Terrible!* It was an explosively wonderful joy to have women here. Back then there were only two sexes; now we have more.

*What were the changes that you were unhappy about?*

The two things that bothered me most, that I didn't like, were the tremendous expansion of the administration, plus—I have I to say—the method used for student evaluation of teachers. To this day I deplore the fact that kids who have no idea of what they're learning should be able to judge a faculty member. Why should someone's position depend on that? On the other hand students who were in the major, the juniors and seniors, did have the ability to evaluate. In my two departments, first Biology and then MB&B, they would have taken several courses, they already had the basic knowledge. There are some fantastic teachers at Wesleyan, and no doubt a few who are just bad. The rest of us are in the middle, we do the best job that we can, we hope to get our ideas across.

When I first came there was a handful that were amazing: Nobby Brown, Carl Schorske, Bob Rosenbaum, Ned Williamson, Ernst Caspari. In that company I shut up in faculty meetings for two years. To my mind I needed first to be able to do research and publish. During my 47 years on the active faculty I must have written the equivalent of a dozen books applying for grants in microbiology and molecular biology—on how DNA is synthesized, how gene synthesis is controlled in microbes. Of the many fellowships and grants I received, the most significant was the Career Development Award from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which paid my full salary for five years (1966–71) to allow extra time to do microbiological research. That was a mitzvah for me. Soon I would drop the idea of moving to a larger, more prestigious research school. I was in on the ground floor; I was a New York boy and liked being close by; I could do what I wanted here. And by then I had confidence in my own abilities to back me up.

*I remember an ancient faculty meeting where you made a case that student evaluation of teachers was no more than a popularity contest because it's possible for a genuinely good person to be a bad*

*teacher or for an apparently bad person to be a good one. The rafters shook in Shanklin 107 as you drove home the point by rising to proclaim: "When I was in college my biology teacher was a son of a bitch, but did that stop me from becoming a biologist?" Should we just give up student rating of teachers as a bad job?*

No. The question is WHO should be judging. One teacher might be a good comedian, con the students and not teach them anything. Another might be reserved, cranky even, and teach them a whole lot but get slammed because he's not an entertainer. I don't like the "check box" where you put X's in those squares. What I think is that in the junior and senior years students should write a little essay about their course. OK, someone has to read it; well, the senior faculty has to read it. I think the only honest way to judge teaching in an intro course is for someone to sit in on lectures and listen to you—I mean another teacher, not some kvetch who can check off boxes or tell whether the professor belches in class or whatever the hell he—or she—does.

*Let's go back to your point on the expansion of the administration.*

When I came here we had a president (we still do), one vice president in charge of finance, someone else in charge of the faculty, and a dean of students. Four people and that was it. Then they all started to propagate! First we got a dean for the sciences—that was Barry Kiefer from Biology. Then came deans for the other two divisions—humanities and social sciences—then more vice presidents. The Committee of Thirty—or was it Forty? There was a special assistant to the president and then an assistant to the assistant and another assistant to him. The whole megillah.

To me, besides a president, a University is three things: it's a faculty, students, and a library. But then there were all the committees; I've been on a couple but never on Advisory or the Educational Policy Committee—I think it was felt that I was too explosive. I didn't trust all those committees. The Financial Planning Committee, I was on that. In fact, when I was part of the junior faculty in the 1960s,

there were a bunch of us, tough mavericks, the "Young Turks," that fought tirelessly as workers for benefits and salaries against the moguls on the Hill. Remember "retrobucks?" I do! Nobody liked to mention money but a good Brooklyn Jew will not hold back on that subject. By then I was ready to stand up at faculty meetings and say what I thought—"This I believe...That is no good"—and all the rest. Everyone listened because they knew I was successful, within limits. But the administrative creep just got worse, there were more and more layers put between the faculty and North College, and I almost stopped going to meetings because you couldn't get anything done.

*Your epochal career at Wesleyan overlapped the reigns of five presidents. Would you like to comment on any of them?*

*Continued on page 5.*

## RETIREMENT SESSION

*Information Session for Faculty Members  
Considering Retirement*

The Wasch Center for Retired Faculty will have a meeting on Wednesday, April 17, 2013 at 4:15 p.m. to provide information to faculty members about retirement benefits and options. The agenda will include the following:

**Rob Rosenthal:**

Ongoing benefits for faculty research and eligibility for project grants;

**Pat Melley:**

Insurance benefits and options, social security, Medicare, dental insurance, and general policies for retirement benefits, including early retirement;

**Mark Davis:**

Gifting options for Wesleyan, including annuity programs;

**John Moriarity:**

TIAA-CREF options and benefit plans—guidance in making decisions.

Invitations will be sent to all faculty members age 60 or above.



# LIFELONG LEARNING

## SIX NEW COURSES IN THE SPRING SEMESTER

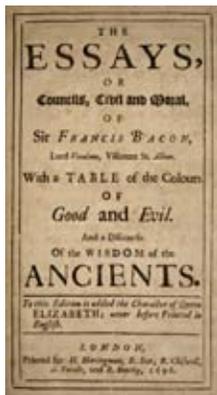
Chartered in 2009 to provide educational opportunities to members of the community, the Wesleyan Institute for Lifelong Learning (WILL) is offering six new courses during the fall semester. For detailed descriptions of the courses, cost, and enrollment information, please visit [www.wesleyan.edu/will](http://www.wesleyan.edu/will) or call the Wasch Center at 860/685-2273.



### The Issue of Succession: Shakespeare's History Plays— Kingship under Elizabeth I

*Herbert Arnold*

Five Mondays: March 25, April 1, 8,  
15, 22, 4:30 - 6 p.m.



### Adventures in Opinion Writing

*Sarah Ruden*

Three Thursdays:  
April 4, 11, 18, 5 - 6:30 p.m



### Middletown's Architectural Heritage

Saturday, May 11, 2013: 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

*Morning Program*

"The Greek Revival at Wesleyan: from Russell House to Kevin Roche" (Joseph Siry)

"Behind High Street's Facades" (Alain Munkittrick)

"An Architect's Perspective on Middletown" (Jeff Bianco)

*Afternoon Program*

Campus Tour (Liz Warner)

Bus Tour of Middletown



### The Housatonic Valley

*Jelle de Boer*

One Friday: May 3, 4 - 5 p.m.

One Saturday: May 4, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.



### The Cycle of Life: A Rite de Passage for the Elder Passage

*Bill Roberts*

Two Tuesdays:  
May 7 and 14, 6:30 - 8 p.m.

One Friday:  
May 17, 6:30 - 9:30 p.m.

One Saturday: May 18, 8:30 a.m. -  
4:30 p.m. and 6:30 - 9:30 p.m

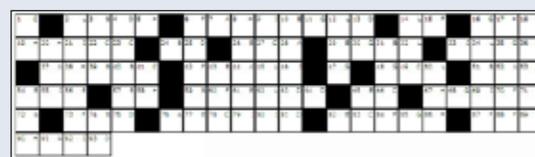


### Exploring the Challenges of Personal Finance

*Richard A. Miller*

Three Tuesdays:

April 9, 16, 23, 4:30 - 6 p.m.



## ACROSTIC!

This issue of the Newsletter features one of Allan Berling's mind-bending Wesleyan Faculty acrostics.

Please see the insert.

Actually not—but I will—on a couple. President Victor Butterfield, a great educator, was a very open and liberal human being. Unfortunately his admissions director was neither, so there still were quotas and restrictions for certain groups—including my people—when I came here. That sort of practice was why I had earlier given up the idea of applying to medical school; I didn't believe I could get in. Colin Campbell was a pretty good president for many many years; I liked him, we could relate one on one. The next guy, who was it? Oh, Bill Chase!—Yeah, I blocked him out good—he was the worst! He thought he could run this place any damn way he wanted without taking advice from the faculty. He seemed cold and stuffy and I'm an open and gregarious guy. Which reminds me of a story. For years we had some parties at my house and Chase was upset that he wasn't invited (Why should we invite him?) and one time he phoned and said I'm coming to your party and I said all right: what else could I say? Now even I wouldn't pull something like that if I weren't invited. Somehow he imagined that I had a lot of power and he thought that by being at this party he would uncover some cabal that was conspiring to take over the school. What a crock.

***How did Wesleyan come into your life in the first place?***

That's another story. It starts amazingly enough, when I was drafted into the Army during the Korean War. Now what the hell could that have to do with it? Well, I was trained as a military policeman and I was going to be sent to Korea to guard Chinese prisoners. I had a bachelor's from Brooklyn College in 1952 and a master's in bacteriology from Rutgers in 1953. Again very close to New York. When the Army saw that I had a master's, they decided to send me instead to Camp Dietrick in Frederick, Maryland—that's where Barbara Fritchie held out the flag, remember? It was one of several biological warfare centers in this country.

Now get this: one of the faculty I met there was a scientist named Werner Braun (no "von" in his name and he was Jewish), a geneticist. In Germany he had known Ernst Caspari, a famous biologist. When the Nazis took over, both of them fled to the newly

founded University of Istanbul where many of the first professors were German refugees. The point is that Braun and Caspari knew each other. That's one part of the story. The other part is that while doing research at Camp Dietrick, I knew I wanted to go to grad school to get a PhD and in those times you needed to have two foreign languages. French I already knew, but not German: I hate talking German. It turned out that Braun taught German at Fort Dietrick: I remember how he kept telling me: "Don't say *ick*, say *ish*!" A wonderful guy, this Werner Braun.

Then a new factor came into play. In 1952 a world-class biologist, Selman Waksman at Rutgers, had won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of streptomycin. That was the first successful antibiotic (he coined the word) against tuberculosis. With the royalties from this award he founded the first Institute of Microbiology in the country—located in New Brunswick—and the next thing you know he hired Werner Braun to be on his staff. Meanwhile my army career was coming to an end, I had to decide what to do, and Braun said why don't you apply to Rutgers? I worked with him for three years and got my PhD in 1958 and when I asked him where I might go next he told me that I...

***Slow down, Bill. All this seems to be getting rather complicated...***

But wait, wait—the climax is coming! When I asked him, Braun told me that his former colleague Ernst Caspari was teaching at Wesleyan University; maybe I should go up there and take a look? So I got myself up here real fast (I was 28 years old) armed only with my resume and a PhD from Rutgers. At that time they just had the Shanklin Lab of Biology, there was not even a science library. I would probably never have heard of this place except for the coincidence of Braun being at Rutgers and Caspari at Wesleyan simultaneously. As it turned out, they hired me on the spot. So that's how I got here and I've been around ever since—82 years old now and still giving everybody holy hell.

***I'm curious as to what motivated you to choose science—in particular microbiology. As a kid, you must have had other interests, other paths***

*Continued on page 8.*

# News & Notes

from retired members of the faculty

Retired faculty members are encouraged to submit short descriptions (150 words or fewer) of their research, scholarly writing, and related activities. The deadline for the next issue (September, 2013) is August 1, 2013.

## Henry Abelow

After retiring in June of 2011, I spent some months just loafing. But during the spring semester of 2012, I returned to teaching as Visiting Professor of English at New York University. During the fall semester of 2012, I will teach again as the F.O. Matthiessen Visiting Professor of Sexuality and Gender Studies at Harvard University. A symposium on my scholarly and pedagogical work was held at New York University on February 16 and 17, 2012. Many Wesleyan alums attended and some participated either as paper-givers, moderators, organizers, or panelists. A program of the symposium is available on-line at [Abelow.wordpress.com](http://Abelow.wordpress.com).

(Note: This contribution was inadvertently omitted from the last issue of the Newsletter. Apologies to Henry.)

## Herb Arnold

Although this feels suspiciously like a submission to a departmental annual report with its inevitable whiff of self-promotion, I must confess to having read my colleagues' reports with a great degree of interest and delight. That might be sufficient impetus to share with you some of my doings that have issued in something tangible.

After an enjoyable teaching experience in a course on Machiavelli in the WILL program this past Spring, I have been busy writing a lengthy review article on a psycho-historical book by Thomas Kohut, called *A German Generation: An Experiential History of the Twentieth Century*, which attempts a generational analysis of group of German upper middle class, educated bourgeois who lived through all the massive transitions of Germany from ca. 1920 through 1990. Their lives began in the shadow of the Wilhelminian empire, endured the dislocations of the Weimar Republic, only to be swept up into the Third Reich, World War Two, and the Holocaust, after which they tried to re-establish themselves in the Federal Republic of Germany, aka the Bonn Republic, before

they experienced the improbable unification of the two postwar German states. Rich material, indeed, and very competently presented and discussed.

While I was working on this review, my own scholarly past caught up with me in the inclusion of an earlier piece I first presented some time ago at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales; it deals with narratives of flight and survival at the end of World War Two in Eastern and Central Europe when millions of ethnic Germans were forcibly displaced in the new ordering of frontiers in that part of the world. It is now included as a chapter in a book on representations of World War II: Refugee experiences in memoirs, fiction, and film in *Studies in Flight and Displacement*, edited by Helga Kraft and Martha Wallach.

At the moment another project is under way, as I am preparing an introduction and notes to an American edition of Joachim C. Fest's autobiography entitled *Nicht ich (Not Me)*, indicating the author's and his father's refusal to be taken in by the propaganda and social pressures of Nazi Germany. The well known conservative German journalist and historian contributed, among many other things, to postwar German intellectual life by helping Albert Speer edit his memoirs, writing books on Hitler and Nazi Germany, and serving as contributor to and publisher of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. It is an interesting memoir in that it is as much about the author's father as it is about Fest himself and reveals much about the conservative resistance to Nazism, a topic not often explored because of the supposedly well-established link between conservative politics and Nazi ideology during the Weimar years.

In short, there are plenty of projects and a new course for WILL to prepare for next Spring.

## Jelle Zeilinga de Boer

Suzanna Tamminen, her staff and I are on track to publish *New Haven's Sentinels: Art and Science of East and West Rock*, this spring. The book is an outflow of the exposition shown at the New Haven Museum. It describes the beginning of landscape painting in Connecticut and growing public interest in the second half of the 19th century and will include more than

three dozen figures of paintings in color. It includes a discussion of the contemporary evolution of geological ideas related to the origin of rocks in which East and West Rock basalts/diabase played a role.

### **Joe Reed**

My etching, an alphabet illustrating events from the life of Samuel Johnson, was given as a keepsake in the 1990s, and distributed once again at the 65th anniversary of the Johnsonian Societies of America, celebrated in Montreal. Two plates from the alphabet are reproduced in the anniversary keepsake book given to all members.

Two of my paintings, "Automatic Tiger" and "The Vinoy," are jacket art for Kit Reed's short story collection, *The Story Until Now-A Great Big Book of Stories* (the Wesleyan University Press) and her new novel, *Son of Destruction* (Severn House, U.K. and U.S.), both scheduled for March, 2013.

### **Arthur Uppgren**

I am editing and publishing a book of Chilean site survey reports made by Jurgen Stock, my PhD thesis advisor and longtime close colleague and friend. For a while, he was Adjunct Professor of Astronomy at Wesleyan and taught a course here. At that time we wrote and published together a book on climate and global warming.

He became the first director of the Cerro Tololo InterAmerican Observatory (CTIO), the first of the big new observatories in Chile for observation of the deep southern sky. After climbing many mountains in the Chilean Andes and observing from them, he chose Cerro Tololo and since that time other nearby mountaintops have been taken over by other institutions for new large telescopes. His extensive notes are thus useful to astronomy. He died before he could prepare them for publication and left them to me. These reports describe in lively detail his plans and activities in site testing and selection, and later the erection and establishment of the telescopes built there.

The merits of Chile were not well known then and it was not always considered the best southern site choice. Early in the twentieth century, South Africa was the favored southern site, but the ravages of apartheid brought an end to the internationality astronomers demanded. Australia, another possibility, has few mountains and good sites. Argentina, just across the Andes mountain range from Chile, suffers from the effects of turbulence and relatively poor image quality.

## *Necrology*

### **ANNA BARRON**

Anna Barron, widow of the late Bill Barron, professor of Music at Wesleyan, died on August 15 in Stockholm. Born in 1929, she worked for the United Nations and later as a translator and as a Swedish language instructor.

### **TANYA NORTON**

Tanya Norton, longtime administrative assistant and staff member at Wesleyan, died on August 10, 2012 in Middletown. Born in Russia (?) in 1921 (?), she was employed by Wesleyan over many years and in many positions and departments.

### **MELVIN STRAUSS**

Melvin Strauss, Adjunct Professor of Music, died on September 5, 2012 following a long illness. Born in 1929, he received his BA from Rutgers and MA from NYU. He was the conductor of several orchestras and taught at SUNY-Buffalo, the University of Pennsylvania, and Rutgers, and served as president of Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts before his tenure at Wesleyan from 1985 to 1998.



**THE WASCH CENTER  
AFTERNOON LECTURE SERIES  
SPRING 2013**

*All lectures are in the Butterfield Room  
of the Wasch Center*

Wednesday, January 23, 4:15pm

KATE BIRNEY

“From Philistines to Phoenicians and Beyond:  
Ongoing Excavations at the City of Ashkelon”

Wednesday, February 6, 4:15pm

C. STEWART GILLMOR

“Life after Wesleyan: The RubyBelle Vineyard”

Wednesday, February 20, 4:15pm

ANN BURKE

“Evolutionary Morphology in the 21st Century”

Wednesday, March 6, 4:15pm

RICHARD MILLER

“Our Bequest to our Grandchildren: The Legacy of  
the Fiscal Cliff”

Wednesday, March 27, 4:15pm

CARVER BLANCHARD & PAULA PAIGE

“Ezra Pound and Douglass Paige: Part Two”

Wednesday, April 3, 4:15pm

RICHARD OHMANN & RICHIE SLOTKIN

“The Junior Faculty Organization and the ‘Academic  
Revolution’ at Wesleyan”

Wednesday, April 24, 4:15pm

LIBBY VAN CLEVE

“Beholding Greatness and Changing it: Performing  
Bach’s Cello Suites on the Oboe”

Wednesday, May 8, 4:15pm

MICHAEL WHALEY

“The Death of Honor Codes?”



*Bill Firshein* continued from page 5.

*you might have taken. Were you brandishing a microscope in your playpen?*

It’s hard to remember the twists and turns. I was born and brought up in Brooklyn. Close to my house there was a public school (P.S. 208) with a special program for “smart kids” who were bused from all over Brooklyn to that school. I was maybe eight or nine, something like that. I don’t think I was all that smart but I did have talents. I was a very good artist; in fact I still have the picture that I won an award for — a knight on a horse with a lance—that hangs in my basement to this day. Also, my sister taught me to play the piano and I picked it up very quickly. So I had these two talents: I could play and I could draw. My parents were so happy, but they didn’t know what to do with me. At the time I had no idea of science at all. Not only did I play piano but somehow I took up the violin too. I was in the school orchestra, I learned French, geography, archeology, typing—you name it. That P.S. 208 was one special school for me! When I finally graduated—that would be in 1944 when I was 14—it was during WW II. We had great fears. My parents knew what was happening in Europe, and then Roosevelt died. WW II was a terrible seminal experience. I followed as much as I could and guessed more—and *that’s* when I knew that I was Jewish.

The next step was Samuel J. Tilden high school, also close to my house. I joined the orchestra there —playing second fiddle. [*Loud laughter.*] By then I was wondering how I would make a living. At first I thought I might play the piano—mostly jazz pieces. I had a great ear; I could just hear a song once and play it: “Begin the Beguine,” “Stardust,” “Melancholy Baby”! I also really liked boogie-woogie because it came from the Blues and I loved playing that. I even tried doing some Chopin but Horowitz could beat me at it. I was interested in art too—I mean commercial art—design, layouts, finishing; that was another possibility. To create something beautiful—a fork, a teacup—it had to be both pleasing and functional. You’re very limited in how you can go about it. I always started a project well but could never make it come out right.

By luck I had in high school a biology teacher named Mr. Berman who was really intriguing. Personally he was ambidextrous, he could draw different things with both hands at once and that just blew my mind.

He drew bodies, cells, everything; and somehow I began to get interested in what we are made of, how cells linked up, what enabled animals to live. He turned me on to science. Not microbes, not yet. I remember him well, Mr. Berman—a jolly big guy with a mustache.

***So college was the next rung on the ladder – your manifest destiny?***

Right. When I graduated from high school in 1948, I applied to two great places—CCNY and Brooklyn College—and decided to go to Brooklyn College mainly because it was closer to home. I took two buses and I was there. That's when I really got turned on to microbes and antibiotics. On the faculty there was a guy named Albert Schatz, an American scientist who had assisted Waksman in the discovery of streptomycin in the early 1940s. That triple whammy—Schatz and Waksman and streptomycin—excited me to no end. So I became a major in microbiology. I took a course in parasitology as well—malaria, sleeping sickness, dysentery—all caused by protozoa that infected us with terrible diseases. No wonder it took me a while to catch on—to really *get*—that most microbes are good for us; they're beneficial for the soil, they help break down dead organisms into their basic chemical parts. If there was no decay, then every organism that ever died would still be here. Who needs that? So the microbes turn them into metabolites that can be used for other processes by other organisms; they're part of the carbon cycle, all sorts of cycles. Without them our digestive systems couldn't function, our immune systems wouldn't work right: they're amazingly versatile, those little buggers. We have far more good microbes in our bodies than our total number of cells; and we now call all that the microbiome, where trillions of bacteria are living with us and changing all the time--on our skin, in our gut, everywhere.

***Just so we're all together on this, would you explain just what is an antibiotic?***

An antibiotic is a substance produced by one microorganism that can inhibit the growth of or destroy certain other microorganisms nearby. Most of the useful ones--streptomycin, tetracyclin,

aureomycin, penicillin – are produced by soil microbes. Why they do it, we're not sure. But whatever the causes... if you then try to grow pathogens in the soil, guess what happens? *Nothing* happens—they won't grow there because the antibiotics kill them. These substances can also zap pathogens in our bodies. Justifiable homicide. The most famous of them—penicillin—attacks the cell wall of many types of infectious bacteria without harming humans because our cells don't have walls. There's no debate about antibiotics: they are chemical molecules. Though the terms sound technical, the basic idea is not hard to grasp. With a bit of help even Einstein would get it.

***There's no doubt that the college experience confirmed your vocation in biology and microbiology; but during this period, did you expand your intellectual reach and grasp?***

A great course I took was Classical Civilization—we read *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*—I just fell in love with that stuff. I hated economics—who doesn't hate economics? I liked French so I took that. There were lounges where you could listen to classical music on 78s. And I became friends with this kid who was very interested in his Jewish identity and he tuned me in to that. At the time there was an attempt in the UN to create a Jewish State in Palestine, along with a Palestinian one, by partitioning the land. So he and I joined a Club together. I did it just to meet girls but soon got inspired by Zionism. I can remember being in a group march in Brooklyn: "Two, Four, Six, Eight; Jewish State in forty-eight"! We actually went to the United Nations and stood in the rain, very far back, when the United States and Russia both voted YES for the establishment of Israel. That was a great thing; we were very very happy in 1947-48.

My college studies almost came to a halt when in 1950, BINGO! the Korean War came, the "police action." I got my draft number, but they didn't bother me until I finished Brooklyn College in 1952. Then I was called up but the board deferred me for one year so that I could get my Masters at Rutgers, as I've said. This was the old Rutgers—primitive equipment, wooden benches, faculty who had been there a thousand years. But they did have a department of microbiology. I specialized in soil microbiology—again Waksman's domain—

*Continued on page 10.*

he was the first to actually look in the soil for organisms that produced antibiotics. I took a course in biochemistry too. That year was marvelous! I was living in New Brunswick, I could go home on weekends and my mother would wash my clothes and feed me: gefilte fish, challah, lokshen kugel. What Jewish kid doesn't think his mother is a great cook? It all comes back to me now; that kitchen smelled like heaven.

***Anyone around here who is unaware that you're Jewish and from Brooklyn is seriously out of touch with reality. Your ethnicity has been a decisive—though not the only—factor in your sense of identity. But did you ever wonder what it would have been like if you'd been born Bill O'Firshein or Bill Firshinelli?***

I would have tried to make the best of it, in either case. But the truth is that I kvelled—which means I enjoyed, basked in—being Jewish. What happened was that my father bought this house in South Brooklyn in 1932 where the street wasn't even paved yet, and that's where I grew up. On the block (East 53rd) most of the parents and kids were Jewish but there were three or four Italian families. No



Blacks or Hispanics yet—just Italians and Jews. We got along very well in that neighborhood, which was the world of my youth. In fact the first time I went out of New York was when I was drafted into the Army and they flew us to Augusta, Georgia; that's where Camp Gordon was, where military policemen are trained, and guess what I found? There were Jews in Augusta too! (Probably still are.) The Army was really good; there was no discrimination, there was nothing. I'm immensely proud to be Jewish but am not religious at all. I'm much more nationalistic, strongly pro-Israel.

***Not even your most fervent critics would accuse you of being a man of few words. Legend has it that Leonardo da Vinci flatly turned down your offer to serve as his model for St. Jerome in the Desert. What do you think you are like?***

I'm a very informal sort of person. Boisterous and loud, but friendly and outgoing. I can start conversations, I can say what I believe, I can tell jokes, I can fit in. I'm not all that articulate; sometimes I get tangled up in words, but I'll keep on talking until I get it out right. I have lots of friends; I don't turn people off—except when I do.

***You have given striking examples of fortuitous turns that affected you professionally. Did anything similar happen in your personal life?***

The way my second marriage came about, to a Russian woman, is a story in itself. In 1966 the first conference of the International Society of Microbiology was organized and guess where they decided to meet. Geneva?... Paris?...London? Believe it or not, the schmucks chose Moscow. [*Loud laughter.*] Moscow at the height of the cold war! Now because I am Russian, and my parents came from there, I wanted to find my roots too so I decided to go. My first wife, when I asked her to come, didn't want to. So off I went. In those days when you landed in Moscow at midnight and looked out, it was as if you were in the middle of a forest. Sort of like Dante, except he didn't have to cope with 3000 microbiologists from all over the world. The Russians were out of their minds; they didn't know what to do with us. They put some of us up at the University of Moscow, which is in Lenin Hills. A great view of the city, but not much else. The toilets didn't work; women were put in with men, divided by a screen--what a screw-up.

I was with a friend from Newark and he said let's go down into the city and walk around to see what it looks like. I didn't know if it was a good idea but I said yeah, I don't want to stay in these Lenin Hills. So we did that, we went down to the center of the city, jammed with people and at one point he said: "Hey, look at those two women." I just laughed: "What do you mean? We don't have to talk to *them!*" But he said "Come on; let's go talk to them anyway." I didn't know that one of them was Anna, my wife-to-be; the other one was a friend of hers. Well, I couldn't speak Russian but her friend knew German so I fell back on my lousy German (finally I had a use for it) and we got along that way. If we hadn't met like that—whether by chance or fate—I would have lost her forever. From 1966 to 1971, I must have gone to Russia ten times to see her. I even learned Russian—at first a few phrases and some jargon—so that I could communicate with my Anna; and after five years (by then I was divorced) we decided to get married at the Marriage Palace in Moscow. Lots of people there, all very nice, even if in the back there was some KGB guy playing the victrola. Then I had to return to the States. After going through a lot of bureaucratic bull to get her out of there, she picked up a one-way ticket on Pan Am and flew to New York. I met her at Kennedy on March 15, 1972—and it was just so overwhelming. Anna had never seen so many cars in her life, and when I paid to get out of the parking lot she thought that she'd have to pay to walk on the sidewalk. So that was another adventure and she's been a wonderful companion for 41 years; we have two boys— one is 35, the other 32. So maybe that gives you a sense of the person I am inside.

***Onto retirement. I know at least a couple of older faculty who are retirement-shy. Often they cite anxiety about finances, but my hunch is that a more obscure cause is fear of a constriction of activity and goals. Yet the metamorphosis of Ralph Baierlein from a physicist here to a forest ranger in Arizona suggests that getting out may also be a way of breaking away. Has that been the case with you?***

Let's see. I had a three-year NIH grant from 2002 to 2005, but I knew that in order to stay on I would have to get more of them—which I doubted I could

do because I'd be 75 years old by then. So I decided, three years before, when I got that grant, to get out in 2005. I was preparing myself, I didn't feel any anxiety, I knew when the end was going to be. Maybe in twenty years, if I was still alive, I might worry about money. *[Loud laughter.]* But when the time came to leave my office, that was the big thing: where would I go? It turned out there was an empty space near the elevator in Hall-Atwater and the next thing you know, there I was. The secretaries and support staff were very helpful—never aloof, always friendly—as I naturally am. There was a big gala in my honor on January 15th—a tremendous occasion, hordes of people, even Campbell showed up (but not Chase—I guess he hadn't heard). It was all very very nice—the last big event at McConaughy before they tore it down.

OK, so I was settled in; now what was I going to do? It was January and damn cold; I was still trying to pull my thoughts together; I had a computer but *it* couldn't think for me. Around that time Don Oliver, the MB&B Chair, came to me and asked if I would like to teach. I said no, but if it would help...and he said yes, it would. For many years I had developed and taught a large lecture course for non-majors which was called "Molecules, Microbes, and Man" (not politically correct but I needed the alliteration) and he said we could use you to teach that course. So I did that in 2006 and 2007; after two times I knew that was it. Then came the years that helped me relax; I just put my feet up and took it easy. I didn't want to become a forest ranger, but I did want to do something with my mind and my beloved germs. So I thought: why not write a book? That would be something new. I had a burst of energy and it just

*Continued on page 12.*

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## Snapping Bones & Sinews: Joe Reed on Real Scary Movies

by Joe Reed

When I first moved into the Wasch Center, Karl asked me if I would be willing to start a monthly film series. Would I! And the availability of DVDs made it possible to show almost anything I wanted to show, so the Wasch Denizens began watching movies together on the big screen in the Kaye Butterfield Room, the perfect place for us and our series.

The audience at Wasch seemed to have few proscip-tions: to wit, most of this audience didn't like scary movies. It didn't want to see anything it thought of as real scary. Easy enough to have a popular series: what was more interesting to me was the audience response, as we were learning about the movies together—a significant American art form.

At the age of five when my father first took me to the Saturday matinees in St. Petersburg, FL, I wasn't scared. Now the more I look at movies, the scarier they are, perhaps because these are more frightening times. Come to think of it, there isn't much scarier than Republicans, Mitt and his ilk. I think Joan Crawford is

scarier than most persons, so I don't have an average notion of fright. I just don't think movies are very scary. I get uncomfortable at contemporary movies that show trepanning and waterboarding—sometimes branding or car crashes, but whipping can strike us as run-of-the-mill. In the first few years of the Wasch series, I introduced the audience to scary epic and Bible-story blood, nothing much scarier than Cecil B. DeMille extravaganzas. Christians and Lions can get to me if they snap bones and sinews, but I think I am pretty immune to movie horror as in, "After all, it's only a movie," no more than a shut-your-eyes sort of scary. Scaring in movies is like watching paint dry: the movie will see to it that we in the audience aren't disturbed.

Over the years I have shown *Casablanca*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *The Rules of the Game*, *My Darling Clementine*, *Rio Bravo*, *A Night at the Opera*, *French Connection*, *Jezebel*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Splendor in the Grass*, *They Were Expendable*, *The Horse Soldiers*, *Kagemusha*, *It's a Gift*.

One of the objects of the exercise is to introduce the Wasch audience to a wide variety of pictures that we can talk about together. It's exciting for me, *Ball of Fire* was a tremendous hit this fall, and I hope everybody enjoys the second-term movies as much as I do.

For schedule, see page 2.



**Bill Firshein** continued from page 11.

flowed. In 2009 I wrote, if not all, a lot of it. The title would be *Germes Are Us...*

**...Which has since morphed into *The Infectious Microbe*. I am reminded of a contrast between the fields you and I work in. Humanists are usually lone wolves, while scientists tend to collaborate on articles rather than books (except for classroom texts); one published paper may have a dozen authors. But this time you are flying solo.**

In science we often need a group with which to collaborate, not necessarily other faculty. Most of the time I mentored grad students and many undergraduates. I think the undergrads who participate are the luckiest ones because they really learn how research in science works. I've mentored about 60 majors on projects of which 25–30 have led

to published papers. It thrills the parents to see their kid's name in print. I've also advised twelve PhD students who have gone on to their own successful careers in molecular biology or microbiology. That's the biggest mitzvah. They have been so thankful to me and one of them has even been giving money in my name to some fund or other for the past eight years—I wish he would just send me the checks. Such wonderful kids, all grown up now, and I feel very gratified. But I've lost the thread—was there a question?

***I'll put in in a different way. Since you've already written 77 articles on the subject, is your new opus meant to be a grand Summa Firsheiniana or do you have a different aim and audience in mind?***

It's based mainly on that course for non-majors that I referred to. I wanted to write a book that someone who picks up the NYT and reads a scientific article about microbes will be able to understand. They call it a trade book. So there's all sorts of anecdotal stuff that I had to put in. Did you know that the Rockefeller Institute was built by the great baron John D. because his grandson died of scarlet fever? That's a famous story, a sad one. But not all of my book is sad or simple. There is a whole section on molecular biology, how genes are synthesized—that has been my work for all these years. The basic thing is still the genetic code—it's the same for every living organism. It has to do with how proteins are made—how the DNA that controls all the information transmits it to RNA which then directs the synthesis of a specific protein. To make these processes clear is hard. I used to tell my students in class: take *this* and do *that* and see *what*. Not all their eyes lit up, but some of them did. So now there's the book, which is coming out from Oxford University Press. Look, it won't make my fortune; I'm not Monica Lewinski...

***Well, she did some inventive biology.***

She certainly did—but with a different Bill!

***Given the many positive—not to say indispensable—functions of microbes that you have described, why is it that so many recent books—with titles like *The Hot Zone*, *The Coming Plague*, *The Viral****

***Storm—sound like pulp horror fiction?***

It's to sell books. There's the fear factor—who would want to read a book called *The INSIPID Microbe*? All this stuff they scream about—put antiseptic into detergent, put it into shampoo too, you've got to get rid of the germs! Well, forget that; you've got germs all over and inside your body, you'll never get rid of them—but most of them are good. We've evolved with an immune system that is able to coexist with microbes and we couldn't live without them. To say the least they synthesize vitamins that we can't make in our intestines. There is an appalling side to it too—up to WW II, many more soldiers died from infectious diseases, typhus especially, than from battlefield wounds. Another sad story. But sometimes adversity can lead to new breakthroughs and progress. Buy my book, Al, and you'll see. [*Loud laughter.*]

***One more question. Looking back over 55 years of your career, there have been many successes. But is there any goal you wanted to reach and did not?***

Oh yes! I didn't win the Nobel Prize. Maybe I won the "One Bell" or "Two Bell" Prize? But what's to lament? All in all, the planets were aligned right. Besides the other things we've talked about, there was my service as Daniel Ayres Professor of Biology for 35 years; or spending seven sabbaticals at schools and institutes in Jerusalem, Copenhagen, Paris, Sidney, Geneva, and La Jolla; or even surviving a whole decade as Chair of the department of MB&B here. I've had a pretty good run! But beyond all that is something even more important to me. I have always felt that I wanted to affect someone else's life positively. I think I have done that, which makes me very happy.

***Shalom, Professor Firshein—for now.***

## Wasch Center Endowment

The Wasch Center continues to build its endowment that might eventually allow funding for professional travel and research expenses, including the purchase and maintenance of computers. If you are considering a gift to Wesleyan, you might designate it, in full or in part, to be credited to the Wasch center. Please contact Karl Scheibe at the Center or Mark Davis in University Relations.

Countless thanks to **Liz Dagnall**, our able administrative assistant, for all her work in keeping order in the Wasch Center. Liz is moving on, but not out from Wesleyan. She has taken a job as administrative assistant in the Physics Department. We will miss her but wish her well in her new position.

*Thank  
You*



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**Welcome!**



Welcome to Liz' replacement, **Amy Bello**, who joins us as administrative assistant at the Wasch Center. Amy will be available Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.--except for Wednesdays when a lecture is scheduled, when she will be on duty from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m.

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