

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown State University Project

History of Youngstown State University

O. H. 260

DR. IRWIN COHEN

Interviewed

by

Terence Lynch

on

May 12, 1977

IRWIN COHEN

Dr. Irwin Cohen was born on February 28, 1924 in Cleveland, Ohio. As a boy he attended local Cleveland public schools. Cohen did his undergraduate work in chemistry at Case Western Reserve University. In June, 1944 Professor Cohen received his A.B. degree. Shortly thereafter Cohen entered the Navy and served until 1946. Upon leaving the armed forces he reentered Western Reserve University to begin study on his Masters degree in chemistry. He received his Masters of Science degree in chemistry in 1948.

In September of 1949, while working on his Ph.D., Cohen was asked by President Jones to teach at Youngstown College. However, Cohen continued his studies and received a Ph.D. in chemistry from Western Reserve in 1950. One of Cohen's outstanding achievements at this university came in 1956 when he, along with Dr. Clarence Gould of History and Gordon O'Brien of the English department began the first graduate program at Youngstown University. It was entitled, "University Seminar" and was offered to the outstanding seniors of the university.

Dr. Cohen, who currently resides at 45 Melrose Avenue in Youngstown, is a Fellow in the American Institute of Chemistry. Cohen received the Watson Foundation Distinguished Professor Award from the university in 1964 and is still teaching chemistry at Youngstown State University.

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INTERVIEWEE: DR. IRWIN COHEN  
INTERVIEWER: Terence Lynch  
SUBJECT: History of Youngstown State University  
DATE: May 12, 1977

L: This is an interview with Dr. Irwin Cohen for the Youngstown State University Project on history of Youngstown University. We are at Dr. Cohen's office in the Chemistry Department of Youngstown State University on May 12, 1977, at 2:00 p.m. The interviewer is Terence Lynch.

Dr. Cohen, would you please speak a little about your background previous to coming to Y.S.U. in September of 1949?

C: I was at Western Reserve in Cleveland with a Bachelors Degree there in 1944. I was in the Navy for a couple of years. I went back to Western Reserve and got a Masters in 1948. Then I was working on my Ph.d. I was not quite finished with it when I came here in September of 1949, but finished it that year and got my Ph.D. in 1950.

L: What was Youngstown College like when you first arrived?

C: Well, physically Youngstown College was the building that we now call Jones Hall, plus various temporary buildings and houses in the neighborhood. The science building wasn't here. There were houses on Bryson Street and on Lincoln. In the area between Jones Hall and what is now the east side of this building, behind the houses on Bryson Street, there were three or four or five wooden structures that were from the Army surplus, I believe, or something like that. I remember classrooms were in there. We were using the building on Wick Avenue, the old Rayen School, as the engineering

building at that time. The science classes, which I am most familiar with, were in Jones Hall, which was then the main building, and we had classes and laboratories on the second and third floors of that building.

In my office, and I was one of the few that had an individual office--it measured about four feet by five feet--there was room for a tiny, little desk. That chair that you are sitting on is a historic chair from that office and there was a hat rack that Dr. Mahaderich has now, and that was it. The office was in the middle of the corridor, the bend in the hallway in the second floor. There was a little entry way next to it that led also into a very small stockroom. Partitioned off from all this was a larger room extending to the windows above the main entrance, between the two "towers"--this was the "balance room" which contained our analytical balances for the analytical laboratory, which occupied a good deal of the wing that ran along Lincoln Avenue. Upstairs, there was a general chemistry lab on Lincoln and a physical chemistry lab on Wick. The organic chemistry lab occupied the corner over above the balance room and my office. Then some more of the offices, some individual, some shared--there were little rooms in the "towers" for faculty offices. Dr. Scudder's office was a room on the third floor on the Lincoln side of the building. The whole area there, of course, has been restructured since then.

We also had a little cubbyhole which is still there, I imagine, on the first floor of the building. I will have to look some day to see if it is still there. But as you go in the building on the Lincoln side, which is right across from the planetarium, there is now on the left the admissions office and down the hallway a little bit from there, there was a very unobtrusive little door which sort of fit underneath a stairway or some area; I don't know, it was a funny little angle. (Drawing) This was our alcohol storage. We had to have a special place for the storage of alcohol. Even now this special steel "safe" door leading from my office to a little specially locked room isn't part of my office, it just happens to be that the architect put that here for the alcohol storage. The Internal Revenue Service comes and inspects it regularly. That alcohol storage room back then was there in the main part of the building. Dr. Scudder took care of the alcohol and no one else had the key to it, and then after a while someone else did, Mickey Maine, I believe, and then I inherited it for a while. It was just passed down to some unfortunate member of the department.

Also, if you come into that main building from that entrance way that I just mentioned, right in the entrance way is a door that leads downstairs. Have you ever noticed that?

L: Yes.

C: Okay, down there are subterranean caverns! At the very foot of that stairway a short hall leads to the right. There was an area, a very nice area which was our main stockroom. It was labeled "ACIDS: BEWARE" or something like that, "DANGER." (Laughter) We had our chemicals all down there except the ones for immediate use kept in the labs. At the foot of the stairs to the left was the passageway that goes to the various operating parts, heating, plumbing, et cetera of the building. But also, there were a couple corners in there which we used for things.

I remember when I came I found an unused corner there. This is where I finished my doctoral work. I set up a little lab down there, down in the "bowels" of Jones Hall; I used that for a little bit of research. There was another area in there in which Paul Luginbill later started setting up some work and then developing that into our Chemical Engineering Department.

Well, let's see, where are we now? We have some places in the basement, we have alcohol storage on the first floor, we have various offices and laboratories and classrooms. Of course, what is now the language lab was our classroom. It had elevated seats and it was very nice on the third floor. We had nothing on the fourth floor. The English Department had all of that. I suppose that you pretty much know the physical layout and the staff of the university. You probably talked to some of these people: Dr. Bridgham; Dr. Beckman, of course, is in California, and I don't know if you will be able to reach him. Paul Luginbill was here in this department and he was the one who started the Chemical Engineering Department. There was Mickey Maine, who was in charge of the stockroom and later, also, he was an instructor. Beckman worked out his Ph.D. at Western Reserve, and Luginbill and Maine commuted to Akron for their Masters. We had a nice informal bunch here. When I came, we had the GI's coming back from the war. When I came on here, it was in the last couple years in 1949, 1950, and 1951. That was a really great bunch of people.

I remember very well some of the ones who have done good work around the community since then. John Tooill, Paul Wigton (of Republic Steel), Joe Ceryan, Lem Stewart, Sam Tochtenhagen, Ed Fuzer--I gave Ed

a special course once out at the Kirk Road TB Hospital when he had to be confined there with tuberculosis briefly, then he went on to develop color television for RCA--I could go on, I suppose. Some of these people are in very responsible positions nowadays. We sent a few people on to graduate school, too. Kids from Youngstown were very interested in doing research. Well, the place was very small, very informal and very pleasant.

L: What was a typical day like?

C: Oh, not much different from now, I guess. We had more classes--more of what we now call teaching load--less time for research; we were still thinking about the students, not as much as we like. We had classes and we had labs at certain times. We talked to our students from time to time about chemistry and other problems, and tried to get a little bit of research activity. We didn't have the facilities, we were not primarily, but almost entirely teachers.

L: Where did you eat lunch?

C: Well, we had a lunchroom then which was later to be called Central Hall. I am told that before I came the lunchroom was in the main building. When I came here it was in the Central Hall which was--I didn't think it was that long ago--but it occupied the place now pretty much where the new library is. This also was an Army surplus place, barracks type building. There was a lunchroom in it which was nice and crowded and informal, and there was a small faculty lunchroom, very crowded and small. I sometimes brought my lunch, but often ate in the faculty lunchroom. The faculty was, of course, quite small in those days. The student body, what was it, I am sure that you have figures, but I would guess that it would be about four thousand of which more than half were part-time. Maybe it was less than that, but it was in that neighborhood. It fluctuated around there for a while before it started to grow. Faculty, of course, was very small and this faculty lunchroom was crowded but it seemed to serve a purpose. There was Walter Mayer from Psychology, Clarence Gould and Mary Smith, and Ed Reilly and Vera Jenkins perhaps were there from the Business School, and people from Engineering and Philosophy. I am sure that you have the names of the faculty at that time: Claire Worley, Chuck Evans, Frank Ellis, Bruce Riley. We would get together and talk about everything. This was fascinating and interesting. Right now there is a bit of a complaint about our very nice Wicker Basket, because the Wicker Basket is set up with these very nice tables that seat four people. Well, over there,

there were big crowds that sat around at these big tables. This was fine and informal and you started up a conversation with almost anybody there about almost anything. We had this great atmosphere, that was pleasant and informal, overworked, I guess, by today's standards. The university was strictly undergraduate then, but now with our Graduate School, we need research more than in those days. Things have changed.

L: What do you think is the greatest change that the university has gone through?

C: Attitude. The physical campus, of course, is so different. This is what impresses the public, rightly or wrongly; it is the nature of things. The presence or absence of a football team of note impresses the public. It stays on people's minds. It is not the university really. The thing that has happened, of course, is that we came from a very informal atmosphere where everybody knew everybody to an operation in which I do not now know most of the faculty. I know now only a small portion of the students. I used to go to graduation regularly, not only because I always enjoyed going for many years, but also because I knew a good many of the students that were graduating. That is not so anymore. I seem to know this one and that one, but there are a great many hundreds and thousands that I don't know. I don't get to see the few that I knew on the campus. Graduation is different nowadays for the faculty. It is a chore--no longer is it fun. I used to know the students very well and the faculty very well. Now we just know certain people. We even used to know the administration very well. We would stop and chat with Dr. Jones in the hall or Dean Smith. (I guess you know the Dean of the university then, is today the equivalent to the Academic Vice-President.) Well, I still can, it is not that I am not on very good terms with these people, it is just that I don't see them. I run into them maybe once in a while in the Wicker Basket, and we say hello, and on a rare occasion we have a chance to engage in a few words. But this is a rare occasion. It is not because of any desire or anything on anybody's part to be distant. The system is getting big and getting complicated so that we no longer know each other. The operation of the university is pretty much as a big university and not as a small college.

L: What was President Jones like?

C: President Jones, have you talked with him? President Jones was, of course, creator of the university. He started it off, he "sold" it to the community and it was all his ball game, his operation. He ran it, as a night school, a college, a university; he watched over it and made it grow. Of course, you can find faults with a lot of details and a lot of procedures if you want to. It was in a sense a small-business operation. We didn't have the money to really operate and get all the equipment we needed and so forth. It seemed like we finally had to go and get modern methods to get the money needed to operate the university. I guess that is true. Of course, this required going into more formal methods than Dr. Jones used and that we have now gone away from, and we have become a more formal community than we were before. Dr. Jones ran it as his place, it was impressed with his personality, his way of doing things. He always maintained this informality, which was very good for the school. I think there was a great advantage to being in a small school. Kids who were here got that advantage. A lot of us would have liked more pay and shorter hours and this sort of thing, but you can't get all of that to go hand in hand with a small school.

L: Do you think that this school is as good academically as it was say in 1950?

C: Well, I have always objected to people who have this idea who say, "They are in the ten best" or "They are in the twenty-five best," and so forth and so on. Places are different, I mean that doesn't mean that they are better or that they are worse. Is an apple better than an orange? Sometimes we even have to ask is an apple better than the word "big"? What are you looking for? What you are talking about is two different things. You are talking about Y.S.U., or you're talking about Youngstown College. The students here get something very different nowadays. I don't know what is "better" or "worse".

L: Do you think the students are any different than they were?

C: The times are different and this makes people of student age different. I think that is the main story. Of students, people who are eighteen to twenty-two today are of a different sort, a different generation. There are several generations, in a sense, between now and 1950. We were a commuter college then and we still are. That has not changed. A little bit more out-of-town now, but still it is basically a commuter school. I don't think students come for different reasons than what they did. I think the reputation



of the university has increased somewhat within the community because of the physical growth. This is fine, I won't object to that at all. As I mentioned, I don't think this physical growth makes the university any better than it was before, just different. At least we have some departments now that we didn't have then, chemical engineering with the efforts of Paul Luginbill. We have lost the law school. On the whole, I think we have added more than we have lost. We have added graduate capabilities. You can go on and get a Masters Degree. And several departments, and certain facilities. It has offered an increase in opportunity. This might attract a few more students. Basically, though, it is the same kind of student.

We had a student newspaper in our department in the 1950's, called the Mortar and Pestle, and I was advisor for it. It was a lot of fun as well as work. Our students today are just as eager, just as good, but somehow there is no longer enough time for that sort of thing.

L: What were some of the campus activities when you first came here?

C: Well, we had a yearbook, a newspaper, The Jambar, we had a drama club, and Don Elser put on a performance which I believe they called "Yocohoey". This was a lot of fun. (Yo Co was the familiar abbreviation of Youngstown College). They put on plays, too. Wilder's "Skin of Our Teeth," I still remember, was one of the early productions, and was performed in Strouss Auditorium. We had the gym, the orchestra from Dana School, basketball, football and other sports. They had May Day as we do now. Spring Weekend or Homecoming Weekend was a bigger operation. Fraternities were a little bigger in those days than they are now, and so there were a couple of major fraternities. I can't think of any major differences in the field of activities from then to now. I am sure that there are some.

L: Was there any code of dress or discipline?

C: I am not aware of any. I wouldn't have been surprised if there might have been. People were less concerned with dress then, than now. I think students now are so concerned about dress that they think it is very important that they must wear what they want to wear. Instead of somebody telling them what to wear, and people then just wore what most people wore. Somewhere in the middle 1950's they brought in a Dean of Students--women students--who was very strict about that sort of thing. Of course, the college had only a very small portion of girls in those days. I had

some classes with none. Two or three in my intro classes, but then I had all male classes. Now that girls are all over the place, it's a different place and very nice. But it is different. Anyway, the dean of women students was very strict with the girls. She called in the girls when their skirts or shorts were too short or something like that. I think this attitude pretty much prevailed until a general loosening up on this sort of thing. I don't recall any problems with anyone. The formal dress code was nonexistent back around 1950 when nobody was worried about such things. After all, formal dress codes are a modern invention. It seems like such a trivial thing to make a fuss over, how long you can wear your hair and whether you can wear sneakers or go barefoot or whatever. People take more trivial things more seriously nowadays.

L: What was the general view of the people of the Youngstown community towards the college?

C: Well, I think the community was rather enthusiastic in a sense, but also, they didn't think that Youngstown College really rated with great universities. I think the college was, in general, looked at as a good place. Now if you had a real brain and you wanted to be a doctor maybe you would see if you could get into Western Reserve University or one of those really established places, old historic places, places with a big football team or maybe little country places like Hiram, for example. I wish I knew more about that.

L: How was the university promoted to the general public?

C: Not very much. We didn't do much in the way of public relations. We had a very nice lady in charge of public relations who did make sure that if any of the students were engaged or things like this that she managed to get it in the Vindicator. The football games were covered on the sports page. Dr. Jones did go around and beat the bushes for the university, or Youngstown College, in community circles. Of course, as far as promotion among the general public, I am not aware that anything very much has been done right down almost to today within the area. In football, yes, but outside of that, no.

L: Was there anything special to the college or to the area that played a role in your decision to come to Youngstown College?

- C: Well, I had sort of a choice to make between the Youngstown College and Bowling Green when I was looking for a place to go. I liked the informality of the small college here at Youngstown. I guess I don't know if that was a "right" or a "wrong" decision, if there is any such thing.
- L: What do you think is your major contribution?
- C: Oh my, let me see. (Laughter) I guess that I taught chemistry for quite a while to undergraduate students. I also did a number of special things. I helped Ivis Boyer to originate the Gould Society, which is our honorary society for liberal arts students. I was one of the people on the Curriculum Committee of the university at the time when we and the Academic Affairs Committee of the university got together to draw plans for the first University Senate. We got that started. I was not a leader in that--I was one of the participants in it. I am sure that you ran across the leaders, like David Behen, for example. Later, when Dr. Pugsley came, I happened to be a member of the Charter-and-By-Laws Committee, and Dave Behen and Phil Hahn and I were the ones chiefly responsible for the complete revision of the Senate and our whole faculty structure. I still think we did a better job than some of the later revisions! My most important contribution to that, I think, was to ensure that the Charter-and-By-Laws Committee was separately elected. In 1972-1973, I was chairman of Dr. Edgar's Campus Action Project, and out of that I originated the Individualized Curriculum Program here, and I believe that that may well be my major specific individual contribution. I helped start the Graduate School. Then I helped a little in having honors being given at graduation, graduation honors. I was one of the people who founded the University Honors Seminar Program, along with Gordon O'Brien in the English Department and Clarence Gould, History. Drs. Jean Kelty and Barbara Brothers (Barbara Hoover then) were among the first students of that program and I like to think that we contributed something to them. Well, that is about all I can think of.
- L: Looking back, is there anything that you would have liked to have changed in your years here?
- C: Anything about the university that I would have liked to have changed?
- L: Yes.

C: Yes. But after all, I think any university is a place where there are things that you would like to change, where you have an opportunity to have something to do with changing things. I had an opportunity to be in on some of those changes. There was frustration a number of times from being unable to affect a change or some type of rule.

L: Is there anything that bugged you that is being run different than it was in the past?

C: Well, there has been an increase in red tape, less formality, the obvious growth, problems in a rapidly growing university. We have developed unfortunate adversary relationships on parts of some of the faculty and some of the administration; that is very unfortunate.

L: Is there anything else that you would like to say?

C: (Laughter) About the university I guess you mean?

L: About anything.

C: Well, the univeristy is still a very interesting place and a good school. I think it does an excellent job for the students. I don't think there will be any full-fledged doctoral-level graduate school soon. As an undergraduate school, the teachers--and at the Masters level!--do a very good job. It is a very good school.

L: Thank you.

C: Thank you.

, END OF INTERVIEW