



Voices of Lycoming Oral Histories

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Oral History of

Eugene Landon

Alumnus, Class of 1957

Date: January 31, 2008

Interview conducted by: Julie Dougherty and Jane Landon

Transcribed by: Alysha Russo

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Eugene Landon

January 31, 2008

Interviewers: Julie Dougherty and Jane Landon

Transcriber: Alysha Russo

J. Landon: Today is January 31st, 2008. I am Jane Landon and I am interviewing my husband Gene Landon. Alright Gene, for background information, can you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your early life?

E. Landon: I was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania at Williamsport hospital on the 3rd of July, 1934.

J. Landon: Have you ever served in the military and if so, describe your experiences?

E. Landon: Yes, I was a member of the Pennsylvania National Guard for six years and fortunately I was between the Vietnam War and Korea. So, I was in that period but I served my time every summer at camp and at all the meetings.

J. Landon: Where did you go to school in your early life?

E. Landon: I went to J. George Becht School in Williamsport and I graduated from South Williamsport High School.

J. Landon: How did you happen to come to Lycoming College?

E. Landon: When I graduated from high school I wanted to go to college so I took it upon myself to come over and be—I guess sign up or talk with the admissions and that's how I got here; I came on my own.

J. Landon: Do you remember some of your professors from that time?

E. Landon: Oh yeah. Jimmy Scheaffer. Dr. Howe is among my favorites. Dr. Shortess. Oh yeah, in art, Professor Chandler. So they were among my favorite professors.

Dougherty: What was your major?

E. Landon: My major was biology and chemistry. So that would be Dr. Howe and Dr. Shortess. No one could forget Mabel Bower, Miss Bower. She was the chemistry department here and she was a great teacher; very, very tough, hard teacher to get a good grade.

Dougherty: When did you graduate?

E. Landon: 1955, '57, sorry about that—'57. I think my wife graduated in '55.

J. Landon: What memories do you have of student life and social activities?

E. Landon: I guess what every student would have coming to Lycoming, lots of parties and friends. My wife, Jane, who wasn't my wife at the time, she was kind of the social center of Lycoming College. She went on to be the Chieftain when she graduated so that just shows you how active she was and I was part of her life and part of the social life at Lycoming.

J. Landon: How did you meet your wife?

E. Landon: I met my wife the first day I came to Lycoming. We had orientation and this redhead was scurrying around telling everybody where to get their picture taken and where to go and what to do and I thought, "That's my future wife."

Dougherty: Immediately?

E. Landon: Absolutely. I knew it immediately. That took me another four years to finally get her—

Dougherty: To convince her.

E. Landon: Yeah. But yeah, I knew that immediately. I told this to Dr. Douthat—my word he laughs—he knows this story. So I knew it the first day here that she was going to be my wife. And then I find out she lives within two or three miles. I never knew her before I got here and then I find out she's practically my neighbor.

Dougherty: When did you find out?

J. Landon: That he was the one?

Dougherty: Yes.

J. Landon: Couple years.

Dougherty: Couple years—it took you a while longer.

J. Landon: I was a slow learner.

Dougherty: What are some of the incidents you can remember that went on here?

E. Landon: Some of the incidents?

Dougherty: Good things, bad things. Did you live on campus?

E. Landon: No, I commuted; I was a day student. I remember working hard and having a lot of fun in the lab classes—Dr. Howe’s class, Dr. Shortess, Mabel Bower’s chemistry class. I remember the blue books and things—do they still do blue books?

Dougherty: What are blue books?

E. Landon: That’s a test. You’d be given a book, a blank book like a booklet, and that was your test and you filled that out.

Dougherty: I’ve never heard of that.

J. Landon: Essay questions.

E. Landon: Oh yeah, that was common back then, blue books by the stack.

Dougherty: Was this as a freshman or as—

J. Landon: Everybody.

Dougherty: Every year?

J. Landon: Yes.

E. Landon: All the way through.

Dougherty: Wow, I never heard of that.

E. Landon: Blue books – that was the test. If you knew your blue book answer why—

Dougherty: Were you graded on these things?

E. Landon: Oh yeah.

J. Landon: These were for big exams like finals and midterm finals.

E. Landon: Mabel Bower’s blue books, you’d have to fill up with chemistry equations.

Dougherty: Was this at the end of the semester?

E. Landon: Usually. You always look forward to your blue books.

J. Landon: We sat at long tables like this and there might be a chemistry person here and a music person there and a mathematics person down there.

E. Landon: I wonder if I have any blue books left around the house?

J. Landon: I don't know.

Dougherty: And they were monitored by faculty people?

E. Landon: Oh yeah.

J. Landon: And this took place in the gymnasium.

E. Landon: If I have a blue book, maybe I'll bring it up. Chemistry blue book if there's one.

Dougherty: That would be wonderful because this is the first I've ever heard of that and I've talked to a lot of people. This is wonderful.

E. Landon: Well, for instance, Mable Bower—I'm the first person in five years that got an A in one of her blue books—biochemistry class. So she told Jane that and she was quite proud of the fact that I got one of the first A's in five years.

Dougherty: That's wonderful.

E. Landon: If you—I think we were allotted 2 or 2 ½ hours to complete the blue book. But they would allow you to stay longer if you wanted to. If you really knew your subject well and you had so much to impart, you wanted to stay longer and hopefully get a better grade.

Dougherty: So if you didn't do well on the blue book, you flunked the class, you failed the class probably?

E. Landon: Oh yes.

J. Landon: Probably. They were scary.

Dougherty: I bet they were.

E. Landon: That was a final test.

Dougherty: Sounds like a Regents Exam where I was in Syracuse.

J. Landon: Did you pursue any additional studies after you left Lycoming?

E. Landon: Yeah, I went to Cornell University up in New York and I worked on furthering my biology and chemistry up at Cornell; however I did not finish—lack of money. And I was married at that time and so I came home and immediately went to work.

Dougherty: Did you go to Cornell with him?

J. Landon: No, I was teaching here at the time.

E. Landon: Jane taught at Lycoming.

J. Landon: That was kind of difficult with him in New York. At the time when we decided to do it we thought, “Oh, that will be easy”, but it wasn’t.

Dougherty: And how long a time was that?

E. Landon: Well, it was one year but I found out that for me to get my degree it would have taken two or three more years so I did not—I felt we couldn’t do that.

J. Landon: At that time, the Master’s program was dependent on one professor and he was, we found out too late, notorious for making students take five years to get a Master’s degree which was silly.

E. Landon: Yeah, so we didn’t pursue it, which is fine. We did very well without it.

J. Landon: Where did you go to work when you left Cornell?

E. Landon: Well, I came home, immediately got a job as a chemist at the Chemcoat in Montoursville in their laboratory. I worked there for a period of six years. And then I started my own company producing industrial coatings just like I was doing at Chemcoat.

J. Landon: And why did you do that?

E. Landon: Well, I saw an opportunity to expand and to move on so that’s when I started my own company called Landon Chemical.

Dougherty: And how long was that?

E. Landon: Well that company I—I think that was seven or eight years—and then I sold out to a company doing the same thing in Philadelphia and my company then was moved to Philadelphia.

Dougherty: Did you go with it or you stayed—

E. Landon: No, I kind of retired then and I started my career—I call it—in wood working which was always a hobby, a very serious hobby. That’s where I credit Dr. Chandler and Jimmy Sheaffer in the fine arts of life; Jimmy in music and Dr. Chandler in art. I started studying Chippendale and Queen Ann furniture—18th century handmade furniture—and that’s how I got into reproducing 18th century furniture.

J. Landon: Did anything else influence you?

E. Landon: My wife.

J. Landon: No, I wasn't inferring that—I meant such as the restorations that you did for Mr. Buckholds and people like that.

E. Landon: Oh yes. Well of course being in that field I got a lot of hands on and work with original pieces for a gallery in Philadelphia and I was very privileged to restore some of the finest pieces of furniture ever made in this country. Through all of this I became very well acquainted with the museums in Philadelphia and New York and all over, and they allowed me to come into their museums and copy these great pieces that were made 250-300 years ago. In fact, on the 12th of this next month I'm going to Philadelphia and spend a whole day at the PMA—Philadelphia Museum of Art. I'm going to be working with very important furniture that was owned by James Logan—William Penn's secretary—and also a chair that was recently sold at Christie's in New York for 1.4 million dollars. And they are going to allow me to photograph, measure, and reproduce this chair. So that has led me into a vast field of very interesting—people I've met and places I've gone with this. And in the meantime, of course, I've filled our house up with it. My wife is very lucky to have me.

Dougherty: And you her, I might add.

E. Landon: She lives with all this great furniture.

Dougherty: I'm going to come and visit.

E. Landon: You should.

J. Landon: You really must. You have become known for your use of 18th century tools and your rather substantial collection of those tools. Obviously you prefer those over the modern tools. Why?

E. Landon: Well to get the 18th century look, you have to really—the 18th century profile on moldings and the look you get from using 18th century tools you can't get any other way. You can't get it by shapers or routers or anything; it has to be using 18th century tools.

J. Landon: We were talking about using 18th century tools. If, for instance, you decided not to do that—not to use 18th century tools at all and use all modern electronically controlled things—do you think that would interfere with the historic quality and why?

E. Landon: Oh, very much so. First of all, you have to make a lot of moldings which—the cutters are not available to put in modern routers and shapers. Also you can see that that wood has been touched by a machine where if it's done by hand, it's much different.

Dougherty: Now did you collect old tools? You have the original tools?

E. Landon: Yes. I have over 2,000 molding planes just to make moldings. In fact I've got probably one of the largest collections—usable collections—in the country. There's a new book out called *Great Workshops* and my shop is featured in there as the only 18th century shop. In fact the title of the article is “Workshop with a History”—something like that—“Workshop with a Historical Significance”. So what I do is historically correct. My chairs and tables and clocks, everything—if you even knocked it into its individual parts you'd never see that a machine ever was used; like the clock down here.

Dougherty: I'm so impressed, I really am.

J. Landon: Do you like any kind of wood in particular or what is your favorite wood, I guess?

E. Landon: Well I work mostly with walnut, cherry and mahogany. Two of those are indigenous to the United States and mahogany has to be brought in either from Peru, Brazil, Bolivia or one of the southern hemisphere countries, but other than that, walnut, cherry and mahogany are my favorite. Its primary woods—what they call secondary woods that are what drawers and things are made out of—that would be pine and poplar.

Dougherty: Do you look at a piece of wood and say, “I know exactly what I'm going to do with this”?

E. Landon: Yeah, yeah, it's awful. Trees, I look at—she says I look at walnut trees rather than women.

Dougherty: That's a good thing.

J. Landon: Well, other people carry pictures of their wives, perhaps, in their wallets; Gene has furniture.

E. Landon: Yep, I have furniture pictures.

J. Landon: We know that you were involved in the last living Liberty Tree. How did that come about?

E. Landon: Well, one day back in 2000, I guess, I got a call from a man. He said he was in Maryland and he told me that he was the person who has all the remaining parts of the last surviving Liberty Tree which grew on St. John's campus in Annapolis, Maryland and it was destroyed by Hurricane Floyd in October of 1999. He said he has this wood in a warehouse and

he has been on a search trying to find somebody to preserve this wood and make it into various objects. He called me and asked me if I would be interested in this project and I said I maybe could be.

So I went to Annapolis and looked at this warehouse full of chunks and pieces of this huge old tree. The tree was 800 years old or older; it was ten feet around and it was just a huge old tree. It was hollow inside, so all you had was these round pieces that were thirteen inches deep but it was just a ring around the tree. After talking with him I decided I would do it.

He contacted me because somebody in New Mexico called him and said the only person who should do this wood would be Gene Landon. So, because of somebody in New Mexico he called me and I've been involved from the Liberty Tree ever since. I've been making things for the presidents. George Bush has the bible box I made him. Jimmy Carter has the bible box I made him. I carved a huge six foot-wide eagle—imagine this is one block of wood—has a wing span of six feet and it's in the new Constitution Center in Philadelphia. They tell me that at least 5,000 people a day see that eagle.

Dougherty: What a legacy. That's amazing.

E. Landon: It's going to be there for five years, they tell me, and then it's going to move on to the Smithsonian Institute where it will be forever. And they built a special hermetically sealed case for this eagle to put it in and it's got special lights. They never open this thing, it's in a—it's sealed so it will be preserved.

Dougherty: Do you visit it?

E. Landon: Yeah, I've seen it once. But you know sometimes I'll get a phone call at home from somebody in Philadelphia and they'll say, "We just saw that eagle" and they just want to talk to me about it. It's quite significant. The local state senator Roger Madigan got me the eagle that I copied from the state and that's what I used as a copy to copy this thing. Then I—in fact I did that for a group in Philadelphia and the donor of that is one of the largest corporations—it's like in the top twenty corporations in America—so they sponsored it. They spent \$50,000 just for the box to put this thing in.

J. Landon: The case.

E. Landon: Yeah. Then another man then commissioned me to—there are some chunks of the wood left—to carve a bust of George Washington. So I procured an Houdon which is—he's an 18th century artist who carved—never did George Washington—he did it from a life mast. Houdon was the most famous French sculpture in the 18th century.

Dougherty: How do you spell his name?

E. Landon: H-O-U-D-O-N.

Dougherty: Because we'll have to transcribe this and we need to know how to spell it.

E. Landon: So Houdon he did this—so I carved this likeness of that Houdon and gave it to the gentleman and then he commissioned me to do Abraham Lincoln. Jane and I drove to Gettysburg and we drove around town until we found the likeness we wanted to carve—or I wanted to carve—of Abraham Lincoln and so I actually rented that bust, brought it home, and carved Abraham Lincoln. It's now in Philadelphia. In fact the Houdon—or the Washington—the man I did it for actually is a very famous individual. Do you think I should—

Dougherty: Sure.

E. Landon: It's Dr. Templeton, of the Templeton Fund—you know the investment fund? Well Dr. Templeton had me do that and then he had me do Abraham Lincoln and he's working on a special project now using the Lincoln and the Washington and he is doing something very special. I'll be interested to see what that's going to be when it's done. But he's a very patriotic guy and a very nice person who works with me on these projects.

Dougherty: Are there any pieces left of the Liberty Tree? Or are you completely finished?

E. Landon: Yeah but not big enough to carve, unfortunately. All the big stuff has been consumed but there are boards of it, pieces of it. I can make some more bible boxes for other presidents. But it's very precious wood and it's the last—there is no more of it and this is the last tree. Each colony had a Liberty Tree—the original thirteen trees—Boston being the first. But the British hated that tree and they cut it down; that was an elm tree. They cut it down in 1776 and got firewood out of it; they got 13 ½ cords of firewood out of it. So, this tree is very, very, very historic. I also made a bible box for the Annapolis—the Naval Academy there in Annapolis. Jane and I took that down, had a ceremony with it. Through all this—

Dougherty: I'm in great company here today, I can tell.

E. Landon: I have met some great—well, in fact I made a box for President Bush and Jane and Ben and I went down and spent a half hour in the Oval Office with President Bush. And that was fun because he is just the nicest guy. We laughed and we spent a whole half hour with him.

J. Landon: He's very personable.

Dougherty: Oh that's neat.

E. Landon: I took him a bust. Dr. Templeton had the bust cast into bronze castings and so we took one down and gave it to President Bush. Hopefully Abraham Lincoln will be cast and that will go to George Bush also. Now it's interesting—George Bush told us he had three presidents that he liked. One was Washington, one was Lincoln and the other one—and he had bronze

busts of each of those, small ones. Now hopefully the big one will be in his office, the one I did. And the other one he said, "I keep that one in my heart, that's my dad." Then the other bronze in his office was Churchill. So those were his choices.

Dougherty: Pretty good people.

E. Landon: I digressed.

Dougherty: That's fine.

E. Landon: Question.

J. Landon: Should he mention what the Liberty tree is?

Dougherty: Yeah, that's a good idea.

J. Landon: Because in today's world, a lot of people never heard of the Liberty tree.

E. Landon: Well, I thought I mentioned that—that each colony had a tree that they would meet under, away from people eavesdropping on their plans. For instance, Philadelphia had a big old walnut tree that was taken down in the 19th century and that went to the Polk firearm people which they made gun stocks out of. And every colony of the original thirteen colonies had a tree and the last one to survive was this one that I'm working with. So this is the last of the Liberty Tree wood. You stop and think of it—it's the last connection, physical connection, of the 18th century of this country to—

Dougherty: Isn't that something.

J. Landon: To the Revolution because they planned the Revolution under the tree and the Indians and all of that.

E. Landon: Every patriot, yeah. The Susquehannocks signed a treaty under this tree. George Washington—all the patriots met under this particular tree; Lafayette and Rochambeau and all of the Revolutionary War heroes met under this particular tree. Then even during the Civil War one night—well there was the group from Williamsport camped on St. John's campus and there's a letter surviving that talks about the people going out on patrol, not to come back and shoot into this old tree, so that they would empty their rifles shooting into this big old tree. What's interesting, when I carved this tree and worked with it, the thing was full of bullets.

Dougherty: I bet.

E. Landon: From the Civil War.

Dougherty: You could have a collection of just bullets.

E. Landon: Yeah, but isn't that interesting, the Williamsport connection to this tree?

Dougherty: That is.

J. Landon: When you gave the bible box to President Bush, didn't you include a bullet?

E. Landon: Yes, I included a bullet and a nail taken out of the tree and I wrote on that and put it right in his bible box.

Dougherty: He's a lucky man.

E. Landon: He said he cherishes that box, didn't he Jane?

J. Landon: Yes, it was on his desk in the Oval Office.

E. Landon: He said Laura and I have a special place for this.

J. Landon: Where do you get your inspiration for the works of art that you create: the chairs, the tables,—

E. Landon: From my wife.

Dougherty: Truly?

E. Landon: She's my inspiration of course. But—

Dougherty: What a love story this is.

E. Landon: But when I look at and see great wood or great pieces, you know I want to copy it and I never run out of ideas and inspiration. She goes with me to copy this stuff.

Dougherty: Is it difficult to measure and work to replicate the pieces? It's got to be.

E. Landon: Well no, I'm so good at it—(laughs)—you know, I've done it so much. What I do is photograph—lots of photographs. And then the photograph has a ruler in the picture, so all I do is read off the ruler as a reference, see.

Dougherty: You make it sound easy. I'm sure it is not.

E. Landon: Yeah. That's the way I do it. And I do an awful lot of teaching. I try to pass this because I know it's a special gift. So I spend a lot of time passing it on to other people. I helped create the Society for Period Furniture Makers [SAPFM – Society of American Period Furniture Makers].

Dougherty: Is that local?

E. Landon: No, that's a national. Yeah, I'm one of the original founders. In fact it was founded in our kitchen, our keeping room. We had people there from all over, from Boston, from—

J. Landon: Michigan.

E. Landon: Michigan, yeah and Virginia and we all met there because we were kind of the center of it and that's where the whole thing kind of began. But now it has become quite a society and everybody wants to belong to it. It's for the study of 18th century furniture but the whole thing kind of wrapped around our house.

Dougherty: Now how often do you meet?

E. Landon: Well their societies meet individually and then in the summertime they have a seminar and then every winter we meet at Williamsburg. In fact we were just there.

Dougherty: That's why you went to Williamsburg.

E. Landon: Yeah. They have an award they give out—it's a cartouche—which is a fancy carving at the top of a clock—and the cartouche they use as a copy is my one that I copied that's on my clock in Montoursville. So that has been cast in bronze and that's what people every year try to win the Cartouche Award.

J. Landon: And he won it.

Dougherty: I'm sure. How many years has this been in existence?

E. Landon: Ten years, I guess. So but it started in our house which is kind of interesting.

J. Landon: Do you enjoy teaching?

E. Landon: Oh yeah, sure. Like any teacher—Jane teaches every day, she teaches piano—you get a range of students from good to students that don't have any interest and shouldn't be there. But basically it's good.

Dougherty: Can I back up a little bit? What is a typical work day like for you?

E. Landon: Well, I don't have a schedule. I don't have any schedules, fortunately. I had a heart attack in 2001 and ever since then she makes me take a little nap in the afternoon.

Dougherty: Good.

E. Landon: But other than that, my day could go from—you name it. When I get up in the morning to sometimes I'm out in the shop until 10:00 at night. But it hasn't slowed me down. She has.

J. Landon: If you were to give advice to students at Lycoming today, what would you tell them?

E. Landon: Hang in there and go for it. Follow your dreams; follow what you think you want to do. If you want to be an artist, go for it. If you want to be a doctor, do it. Fortunately America's a great place and whatever you want to do, if you pursue it, usually you can do it.

Dougherty: I want to ask again too—impressions of famous people. You already told us about President Bush, is there—

E. Landon: You know, it's so interesting—the people—the higher they are, it just seems the more humble they are. George Bush is just as nice a guy. Jimmy Carter's just the nicest guy. Jack Templeton is just the nicest person. And these are all people that are at the top of their field.

Dougherty: And so are you—a nice guy.

E. Landon: But usually they are very humble. I don't meet too many arrogant people. When I do, I don't have much to do with them.

Dougherty: I think that makes sense.

E. Landon: I can sort them out real quick.

Dougherty: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we have forgotten to ask?

E. Landon: You know I owe everything to Jane and Lycoming.

J. Landon: Thank you.

Dougherty: Wow. Thank you very, very much. We really appreciate you coming in, both of you. Thank you.