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Authors

Wilkes, John
Rabkin, Sarah J.

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*Creating a World-Class Graduate Program on a Unique Campus:
An Oral History with John Wilkes, Founder of UCSC's
Science Communication Program*

Interviewed and Edited by
Sarah Rabkin

Santa Cruz
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2015

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Interview History

John Wilkes served from 1981 to 2006 as the founding director of UCSC's internationally acclaimed Graduate Program in Science Communication, passing the reins upon his retirement to program alumnus Robert Irion. Many of today's most distinguished science reporters, writers and editors trained under Wilkes, whose literary standards and science-trained student cohort distinguish the program he created from counterparts at other institutions. UCSC's one-year certificate program has been lauded by *New Scientist* as the country's best academic training ground for science journalism; it was ranked by *Nature* as the best such program in all of the US, UK and western Europe.¹

Wilkes' background as a faculty member is uniquely Santa Cruz-inflected. He lived in town with his family in the 1950s, attending Branciforte Junior High School while his father ran an auto-parts business, until the store's inventory was ruined by the San Lorenzo River's infamous flood of 1955. When the Santa Cruz campus opened a decade later, Wilkes enrolled as a transfer student, ultimately completing his BA, MA and PhD in literature at UCSC. After teaching undergraduate science-writing courses at UCSC, he spent two years inaugurating a master's-level science-writing curriculum at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the invitation of Chancellor Robert Sinsheimer,

¹ "Santa Cruz turns out more high-quality journalists in the science writing area than anyone else," says Justin Mullins, San Francisco bureau chief for the international science magazine *New Scientist* . . ." cited in the 1999 UCSC Public Information Office brochure *From the Lab to the Newsroom*. The ranking by *Nature* appears in *Nature*, Vol. 432. November 18, 2004 in a Special Report on careers in science journalism by Virginia Gewin.

Wilkes returned to Santa Cruz in 1981, as a Lecturer with Security of Employment, to establish the science communication program.

John Wilkes' work first caught my attention in 1978. At UCSC for a summer organic chemistry course, I happened across a copy of *Science Notes from the University of California, Santa Cruz*—the handsomely designed publication then being produced by Wilkes' undergraduate students. Four years later, while teaching biology at a Colorado high school, I rediscovered the newsletter in my files. Eager to share *Science Notes'* engaging articles and illustrations with my students, I contacted Wilkes to inquire about opening a subscription. In his reply, he suggested that I consider applying to the graduate program he had recently established. I moved to Santa Cruz the following fall, took up the editorship of *Science Notes*, and, in the company of a congenial and inspiring group of fellow students, began a life-changing education under John Wilkes' tutelage.

Three decades further on, it was a particular honor to interview my former mentor for his oral history. We conducted 7.5 hours of recorded interviews over the course of four sessions in November 2014. The oral history follows Wilkes from his California childhood to his enlistment in the U.S. Air Force, which took him to language school and a posting in Berlin. The oral history also covers his undergraduate years at San Francisco City College, his explorations of the heady San Francisco music scene of the early 1960s, and the "amazing, staggering" teaching he encountered as a transfer student in UCSC's fledgling literature board.

After an abortive week of graduate study in English at UC Berkeley—at "the end of the Summer of Love and the beginning of the Autumn of Hate"—

Wilkes spent more time in Europe before eventually returning to UCSC to begin working toward a PhD under his former undergraduate mentors—“like...getting a Yale education for a good price.” He recounts the series of events that then led to his taking over a newly established undergraduate course in science writing at UCSC. His success in that endeavor—including his students’ distinguished performance as state legislative interns—caught the eye of both M.I.T.’s writing program faculty and UCSC’s Chancellor Sinsheimer, ultimately engendering opportunities to develop graduate programs at both institutions.

Wilkes also describes his own forays into science journalism, including publication of articles in popular automotive magazines in the 1970s and a summer fellowship under acclaimed *San Francisco Chronicle* science reporter David Perlman in 1982. He explores the challenges and satisfactions of carrying sole responsibility for a graduate program operating under the auspices of a campus division, without departmental affiliation. He discusses the hiring of guest editors and instructors to help teach the program’s writing and editing courses and reflects on the history of the program’s science illustration track—which eventually moved off campus, first to UCSC Extension and ultimately to California State University, Monterey Bay. And he muses about the impacts of digital media on a changing profession.

Wilkes credits UCSC’s “freewheeling liberal arts atmosphere” with the personal, intellectual and professional flourishing of his students, many of whom arrived here from “places where research is way ahead of everything else.” At UCSC, he says, they learned to “relax,” to think more expansively, and to report and write about science with curiosity and enthusiasm.

At one point in the oral history, he recalls a moment in 1965, shortly after his arrival at UCSC, when he stood with a few fellow junior-transfer students at Cowell College, gazing out over Monterey Bay. After enjoying that exalted vantage point in silence, the new acquaintances acknowledged sharing the same thought: “We’re never going to leave this place.” In John Wilkes’ case, much to the benefit of the campus that became his professional home, it was a prescient call.

The interviews were transcribed and audit-edited by Irene Reti, Project Director. The transcript was returned to John Wilkes, who carefully reviewed and edited the transcription. We thank him for his hard work, quick turnaround, and dedication to this project. Copies of this volume are on deposit in Special Collections and in the circulating stacks at the UCSC Library, as well as on the library’s website. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Elisabeth Remak-Honnef, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and University Librarian, Elizabeth Cowell.

—*Sarah Rabkin*

Interviewer, Regional History Project, University Library

University of California, Santa Cruz, January 5, 2015

Early Life

Rabkin: This is Sarah Rabkin on November 4, 2014, and I'm with John Wilkes at my kitchen table in Soquel, California, for the first of our oral history interviews. John, let's begin with the date and place of your birth.

Wilkes: The date and place, okay. December 26, 1941. The place was Fresno, California. And my parents had not long before left the East Coast, fleeing from my family (laughs), who disapproved of my mother. My father decided to plant his branch of the family on the West Coast, as far away from his family as he could. She was pregnant. They didn't leave immediately after the marriage. They waited. They gave his family a good, long time to get used to her and they didn't. (laughs) So I was ready to pop out any minute and I popped out in Fresno. So we stayed in Fresno long enough to get me ready to go farther.

Rabkin: So you were the first kid in the family.

Wilkes: I was the first kid. I'm the first of five. And we ended up in Berkeley first. And, of course, Pearl Harbor had already happened. My father was trained—he went to a military boarding school, Norwich—and he was trained as a cavalry officer and he actually had a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army sitting on the shelf somewhere. He had got that when he was eighteen and he was, at this point, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, or so. And he went down to the Army and said, "I'm ready to go in." He was a real patriot. [pauses with emotion]

And they wouldn't take him because he had slightly high blood pressure. They said, "You'll be a combat infantry officer. We can't have anybody with high blood pressure in that role. So we recommend you go to another service where you wouldn't be doing a lot of physical work like that."

So he went to the Navy and they took him. He became a lieutenant gunnery officer on the U.S.S. California, a battleship which was the flagship of the Pacific Fleet at that time. He was on that ship—it was sunk at Pearl Harbor, so it had to be refitted. They actually refloated the ship and got it running and sailed it all the way across the Pacific to Bremerton, Washington, and that's where they rebuilt the ship. Everything from the deck up was brand new and high tech. They had the first radar gun sights for the big guns, for example, and my father was in charge of those guns, or one turret of them. There were three guns on the turret that could shoot ten miles or more. And that was what he did.

Rabkin: How long did he serve on the ship?

Wilkes: Well, the ship was in combat in early '43 until '45, until the Japanese surrendered. So, he was in all the big battles.

Rabkin: And how did you end up in Berkeley?

Wilkes: Well, it just seemed like a nice place. My father had grown up as a rich kid and he had always lived in nice homes. He wanted to continue doing that, even though he didn't really have the financial wherewithal to do that anymore. He couldn't get it through his head that he had to scale back. So he got us a

house up in the Berkeley hills, a nice house. He didn't have a staff anymore, but a nice house, anyway.

Rabkin: So he had been accustomed to servants.

Wilkes: A chauffeur and all that.

Rabkin: My goodness.

Wilkes: And that money came from his mother's side, not his father's side. His father was a Southerner who had grown up in South Carolina. My father used to say FFSC, First Family of South Carolina. And they'd been plantation owners, I don't know how far back. I am not one of those people who traces ancestry. I don't care for that. I think everybody has to kind of make his or her own way in the world. So I didn't pay much attention to that. But my father paid a lot of attention to it. It really drove him to the day he died, thinking that he was a misplaced aristocrat among peasants. (laughs) It was really sad, because I could never see what he meant by that. "Where do you get that, Daddy? We don't have any claim to that."

Rabkin: Because your family life as you were growing up didn't resemble his privileged one at all.

Wilkes: Not at all.

Rabkin: So tell me about your early years growing up.

Wilkes: Well, once the war ended my father bought a little plot of land on top of a hill in Walnut Creek, along with ten other families. They all bought these lots at

the same time and had small custom houses built on them. All of them were veterans; I think they all had veterans' loans. Two of them were enlisted men and the other eight were officers. And this is a major demarcation socially. You know, officers don't even talk to enlisted men unless they're ordering them around. And then, of course, the enlisted men were Democrats and the officers were all Republicans. (laughs) It was really funny.

Rabkin: You picked up on that as a kid?

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. Sure. Because Eisenhower was running for president and Nixon was his vice president. And one of our next-door neighbors—actually he was a Democrat and he was also an officer, he was a captain in the army—but he was Catholic and had a huge family. He had seven kids and a great big house, ranch-style, you know, it just went on forever. He was a Democrat. And he took that Ike and Nixon bumper sticker. It was stretched out like this and he cut it up and wrote "Nix-on-Ike."

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs) But everyone got along fine. Nobody talked about politics with the Democrats. But we had Fourth of July parades. Everything was the ten families on top of this hill, because it was a steep hill. Some of the cars had trouble getting up it, actually.

Rabkin: Walnut Creek must have been a very different place back then.

Wilkes: Oh, tell me about it. The official population was three thousand people, and it's now, I don't know, sixty-something. But where we lived was on the outskirts of town and there's now a huge retirement community called Rossmoor, that backs up against our [old] property, basically. But in those days it was a cattle ranch and it was owned by the Stanley Dollar family. Stanley Dollar was a steamship magnate. He had ocean liners and also cargo ships, lots of them. They had this huge spread. It went on for miles. And Rossmoor occupies the buildable part of it. It goes into the hills that become the Oakland hills and the Orinda, Moraga area. I don't know how big the ranch was, but I used to hike on it. My dog and I used to go for miles.

Rabkin: You had an experience during those days that maybe presaged your eventual career.

Wilkes: Well, I did. I read a lot because my parents subscribed to *Reader's Digest* and *Life* magazine and *Time* magazine, and nothing else, in the way of magazines. They tried different other magazines. There was the *Saturday Evening Post*. I think they tried *Collier's* for a while. But they really liked the other three. So they were always in the house, stacks of them, and I read every word. I just ate them.

I realize now that my writing style came from that. I didn't know at the time but I just—I didn't write much—I did write a little, as I'll get to—but reading was my thing. Reading and hiking with my dog, going out for long hikes. Because we were too far from any school ground for me to play sports. And there was no place to do it anyway. It was all wild country. We tried to play baseball. We did

play baseball, but we kept losing the balls. It was really hopeless. Our dogs would find the balls. One of our dogs was pretty good at that. (laughs)

Rabkin: John, can you characterize the way in which you think those publications influenced your writing style?

Wilkes: Yeah, *Reader's Digest*, in particular—I read all these wonderful stories and they were about so many different things. I think the style of the magazine was aimed at eighth grade or something. All the stories just moved right along. I just loved *Reader's Digest*. I couldn't get enough of it. The jokes, everything. Humor in uniform.

But what happened was when I started writing serious papers, when I got to UCSC especially, Harry Berger wrote at the top, "Too journalistic." And I thought, oh, no. (laughs)

Rabkin: (draws in breath) Did you restyle your approach to writing to make it feel more like academic writing?

Wilkes: I did. I had to learn another style. And I stopped getting those comments after a while. But I got that from more than one; I got that from two or three professors, all literature professors. Berger was the worst. He was really on me about that. He said, "Too slick. Too slick. Unpack it more." (laughs)

Rabkin: Well, apparently there was some deeply seated aesthetic orientation in you that gradually, eventually steered you back to a more journalistic style. We'll get to that, of course.

Wilkes: That's right. But my PhD dissertation and probably my senior thesis even would be unreadable. I mean, I really tried to master the academic style, to the point where if a sentence was comprehensible on the first time through, I added a few more dependent clauses.

Rabkin: (laughs) Did you do that kicking and screaming?

Wilkes: No, I just wanted to do well. I wanted to impress my teachers and that's what it took, so I did it. And they stopped marking in that sense of "too slick, too light," and I stopped making any attempt at humor, which hurt badly. But I did it, of course. I got pretty good at that kind of writing and it didn't pain me to do it. Once I knew I was doing it "well," I just said, okay, I can do this. Whatever it takes to get a PhD eventually and to be able to teach, I will do. That's the way it felt.

Rabkin: Tell me about your very early, first science writing and science illustration experience.

Wilkes: Okay, that was when I was living in Walnut Creek and I was doing a lot of hiking. I discovered that the roads, particularly the road that went up the hill that I lived on, had been cut out of the side of a sandstone rock, basically. The whole hill was one big block of sandstone. And I started—because I was walking up and down the hill, I had plenty of time to look at fossils. You could spot them because they were gold against the beige of the sandstone. Some of them were brilliant gold, like these clams would be sticking halfway out of the rock.

Rabkin: So, marine organisms.

Wilkes: All marine, yeah. And this was on a hill. Now, I don't know how high the hill was, but from the low end of it—it went down into kind of a valley—and on that end it was probably, and that was where the road went up, so it probably was 150 yards high, going straight up. I think it was probably about that high. Anyway, the road snaked back and forth and it was all cut out of the side of this rock. And it all had fossils in it, most of them clam-like shells, but also a scallop shell. I don't know if you know what that looks like?

Rabkin: Sure.

Wilkes: A lot of those too. And then there were actually fish skeletons. I found a couple of pieces of fish skeletons. The sandstone was very soft. It fell apart when you tried to dig it out. But I was able to put it together enough to see that this was a set of bones and they were going in a certain direction.

Rabkin: Was this a revelation to you, that there were marine fossils in this East Bay hill territory?

Wilkes: Well, of course. I was so struck by the fact that they were all marine and I thought, how did they get up here? That was my first question. And I never did get an answer for it. I mean, people told me that the whole earth was covered with water. Our Sunday school teacher, of course, contributed that. She said, "Don't worry about it. That explains it." And then I, much later, realized that the ground itself was shifting and it might have been much lower. It must have been at one time. In some way, it was part of the Coast Range, I guess, the Oakland Hills. It was on the edge of that.

Rabkin: And how old were you?

Wilkes: I was—well, let's see, we built the house in '46. I was then five years old. I was probably seven by now.

Rabkin: And you made a writing and illustration project out of this discovery.

Wilkes: Yeah, I did.

Rabkin: Tell me about it.

Wilkes: Well, I started thinking, I've got to keep track of all of this stuff. I had all these shoeboxes of fossils and I started trying to figure out what they looked like. My parents gave me a *World Book Encyclopedia*, so I had a reference work. Now, at this point I didn't know that there was such a thing as a library, except the school library, which was only for textbooks and no other books at that time. I didn't know there was a library in Walnut Creek. My mother didn't tell me and nobody told me. All I had to read was the *World Book Encyclopedia* and all these magazines. That was it. My father had two or three books. He had one shelf of books and they were impenetrable. *The Omnibus of Crime*, was one. I remember that, and *Horatio Hornblower*. He loved that, of course, being a Navy guy.

Rabkin: So your parents weren't bookish.

Wilkes: No. I never saw either one of them with a book in their hand. None. Not once. Not once! In fact, they didn't even read *Reader's Digest* or other magazines. I mean, they saw I was reading them, so they just kept taking them. They didn't read. They didn't read! My father was very much an anti-intellectual. He had no

use for thinkers. He was a horseman, a jock of sorts. He played polo. He didn't play when I knew him. He had stopped that. He didn't play. But he still had all the uniforms and the boots, a couple of mallets.

Rabkin: So you had not yet discovered that such a thing as a library existed.

Wilkes: No. I didn't discover that, believe it or not until I was in high school. Then I started hearing about—there's a library in Walnut Creek. But by that time I was not interested in books as much. I was interested in hot rod magazines. I read all of them, and all the sports car magazines. I was a magazine nut, is what I was.

Rabkin: But you created your own book at that point.

Wilkes: Yeah, I did, when I was about eight or nine. What I did was I started taking notes—I sorted the samples out that I had and I tried to figure out what they were. And I started writing about each different animal, as far as I could figure it out from the *World Book*. That was the only reference I had. So I started imagining the different things that I had.

Because I did read about discoveries *Reader's Digest* and *Time* and *Life* too. So I got an inkling of what scientists did. They had to classify things and they had to come up with characteristics that were unique to these different organisms. So I was trying to find those. I didn't really get very far with that, but I started imagining them and I made them up. (laughs) So most of what I was writing was fiction. I handwrote in pencil and on the backs of pieces of paper. Paper was not easy to come by in my house. We had things, I don't know what they were, but

they were all printed on one side and the other side was blank. So I used those for my book.

Rabkin: And you both wrote and illustrated your book.

Wilkes: Right. And I drew drawings of what I imagined these creatures to look like, very fanciful, of course. It was more fun to do fanciful ones. But then I could do a lot of details because there was nothing to say I couldn't.

Rabkin: Did you do this for a school project or just on your own initiative?

Wilkes: No, no. It was on my own initiative. My school projects—I was the class artist. My teachers all noticed that I liked to draw. I was reasonably good at it. So they would always have me draw the Thanksgiving—the things they put up on the walls around the room, you know, the turkeys and the Pilgrims with their funny hats. I drew all those things and colored them and cut them out. They put them up. I didn't put them up. That was my job—Christmas holly boughs, little Santa Clauses. The California Missions—I drew all those.

Rabkin: So you were both a writer and an illustrator, from early on.

Wilkes: Yeah, I was actually more interested in art than anything else at that time. I mean, my own art, not anybody else's, because I didn't see anybody else's. I drew my dog a lot and that sort of thing.

Rabkin: Your fossil book project reminds me of an assignment they used to give in the early days of the science illustration graduate program. I have no idea

whether they still do this, but there was an assignment to invent a prehistoric creature.

Wilkes: That's right. I remember that.

Rabkin: To describe it and make it scientifically plausible and illustrate it. And there was at least one of those featured in one of the issues of *Science Notes* at one point.

Wilkes: That's right. And it was drawn by Peter Bauer.

Rabkin: Yes, that's right!

Wilkes: I remember that. It was brilliant.

Rabkin: It was some sort of wart hog-related thing, a flying wart hog. (laughs)

Wilkes: That's right. It was beautifully conceived. Peter Bauer was a genius. I wonder what became of him. I always wonder about the illustrators, because it's such a hard business to make a living in.

Rabkin: Yes, we'll talk more about that. Meanwhile, can I take you back again?

Wilkes: Yes, take me back again.

Rabkin: So, at some point your family moved away from Walnut Creek. Tell me about that.

Wilkes: Okay. Yeah. Now, that was a major shake-up in our family. By that time three other kids had been born. My brother, Jim, was probably a newborn at that

point. So that made four of us. And my father was a traveling salesman. Because he was a gentleman he didn't do anything with his hands. He couldn't even mow a lawn, really, and didn't want to. (laughs) So he was a salesman. Okay, I have to explain how he got to be a salesman. Because I think he was really a very shy man, but he conquered that. And how he did conquer that was his father, I think, was also shy. His mother was not, my grandmother. She was from a Philadelphia Main Line family, very wealthy. And she loved to give parties. She gave at least two or three a week when my father was growing up. And his father, her husband, was not only a doctor—he was a doctor by training but she told him she didn't want him practicing medicine because that was working with his hands.

Rabkin: [inaudible]

Wilkes: She wanted him to be a president of a medical society or something respectable. So that's what he went for and that's what he did. Now, those people don't make much money. They don't need money because they come from wealthy families. And he was, at that point, living on—I didn't know any of this until much later—but at that point that family was living on the wife's money, my grandmother's money alone. Because his mother, actually when he came up—okay, let's back up. [My paternal grandfather] was raised in South Carolina and he was an only child and his father died in his mid-fifties. His mother was in her early forties at that point. They lived on a plantation and they had a lot of land, but of course his father was not much of a farmer and they weren't making much money. When he died, he left his wife kind of stranded.

And so she decided to go—well, by then my grandfather was finished with college. He went to Duke and so did my father. But he graduated with nothing in front of him. So he was headed for medical school. That was the idea, he would go to medical school. And he was down with that, unlike my father, later.

So they said, okay, we're going to get you into the best medical school, which was Penn at that time, the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. So they got him into Penn. They both went; his mother and he went to Philadelphia. He enrolled in medical school and she found herself a husband real fast. Her husband was a judge in Philadelphia. And he kindly took my grandfather into his household while he was in medical school. So he went all the way through Penn Medical School living in the judge's home, with his mother and the judge, and I don't know who else was in the house, servants and that kind of thing.

So he finished medical school. By that time he had met his wife-to-be—"Mimi," she went by.

Rabkin: This is your grandmother.

Wilkes: My paternal grandmother. And she was a real party girl, very outgoing. So that set up a role for my father, who came along pretty soon after they married, a year, I guess. She raised him to be a host of parties, basically. Even when he was little he was carrying drinks around. There was also a butler to do that, but he was following the butler and learning how to do it properly.

Rabkin: This was your father, who you said had a shy streak, but overcame it through this training as a party host.

Wilkes: That's right. So he had to learn how to tell jokes and make everybody laugh and he did that. And, of course, when he went to Duke after graduating from Norwich—he went to Duke because a college degree was sort of required. But he became a fraternity president. I think it was Kappa Sigma. But I'm not sure which fraternity it was. It doesn't matter. The fraternity presidents have one function alone and that is to throw parties. So he was a master at that already. He threw his mother's parties by that time. So that's what he did, which meant he drank a lot, of course. And that was one of his downfalls because he never stopped.

Rabkin: So this served him as a salesman, once he went into sales.

Wilkes: Yeah, so he learned how to be the life of the party, telling jokes, keeping things going all the time. So he got a job as a salesman. And the first job he had was selling auto parts: piston rings, very specialized. Piston rings. Now, this is a guy who could drive a car but he didn't know how to change a wheel. Nothing. He had never worked on *anything*, let alone automobiles. I mean, that's pretty specialized. He didn't know anything about car engines, but he was selling auto parts. And he ended up selling auto parts almost all of his life, his short life. He died at fifty-one. And he never did learn anything about engines. Because I did and I used to ask him questions. He would get stuck. He couldn't answer my questions. I wasn't even in high school yet. He knew how to look up parts in catalogs and identify them. He was very good at that. But if you gave him a car to fix, he couldn't do it. He couldn't do anything.

Rabkin: So his strength as a car-parts salesman was as a charming man and not as someone knowledgeable about automobiles.

Wilkes: That's right. And what he did was he talked about sports—when he went on a sales call, it was always about sports, and it was about politics. It was about everything else. The people he was selling to didn't want to talk about parts. They just wanted to buy his parts, or they didn't, and then he'd be gone.

Rabkin: So your dad was selling auto parts when you lived in Walnut Creek—

Wilkes: That's right. He was selling auto parts and he was on long road trips, two weeks minimum, two to three weeks. He always had a nice car, a brand-new car, and dressed well. In those days men wore hats and he had a collection of hats. All that. He projected the image that he liked to project, a well-upholstered gentleman.

Rabkin: (laughs) And what precipitated the move?

Wilkes: The move was precipitated by this growing number of children, rug rats, that were driving my mother crazy. She loved children; she liked babies, always. But once they got a little older she didn't know what to do with them. So she needed help and we were located so far from town. People who did that kind of help couldn't get there. They needed a car of their own and they couldn't afford one in those days. And she couldn't drive to get them because she'd have to put all of us in the car to go there. She hated to leave the house, for that reason, because with all these kids what do you do? You've got to put them in the car, and the dog too. (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: So she finally prevailed on my father to start considering leaving sales, which he was good at and made a lot of money at, enough to pay for everything we were doing and two new cars every year. The last car I remember, the last new car we had was a '50 Chevy.

Moving to Santa Cruz as a Child

And that's when we moved to Santa Cruz. 1952 was when we moved to Santa Cruz. He finally realized that the only way he could come home every evening and make a living was to sell auto parts across a counter of his own, in his own store. So he took the family money, the entire savings of the family, and found a partner who would put up the rest of the money, and they actually bought a store outright. It was not an auto parts store so they had to stock it with auto parts, which is very expensive. And he had it all set up.

Rabkin: Where was the store?

Wilkes: The store was on a street that no longer exists, in Santa Cruz. The store was almost exactly where the Riverfront Cinema is now. It was on a street called Short Street, and that was off of Front Street. Short Street was known for its— (laughs) not a particularly prime location. It was the last building on the street—

the riverbank hadn't been built up yet at that point. That was done by the Army Corps of Engineers.²

Rabkin: The levee hadn't been built.

Wilkes: The levee, right. It was just a natural river in those days, with huge willow trees on both sides. Beautiful. Always water in it flowing to the sea, all year round. I remember that very well. And there was a wooden footbridge where the concrete footbridge is now. In those days, it was a wooden footbridge and I used to cross it. I remember that too. I could see the steelhead down there.

Rabkin: Wow. And why Santa Cruz? Just because that's where they found this property?

Wilkes: That was the cheapest store they could get. It was on the same street as several Chinese laundries. That was the Chinatown of Santa Cruz, right there. And across the street from the laundries were a couple of whorehouses. That was the red light district of Santa Cruz. My parents urged me to cross the footbridge and go somewhere else, you know. (laughs)

² Known as "The Christmas Flood" of 1955, this was the deadliest flood in the history of Santa Cruz. It took place on December 22, 1955. According to local historian Daniel McMahon writing on the Santa Cruz Public Library's local history site: "The river moved well out of its banks on both sides, and flowed down Pacific Ave. at a depth of three to four feet. Water reached the steps of city hall on Center St., and was over eight feet deep in places on the east side of Front St. Nine people were killed in Santa Cruz, two of these in their house on Garfield St. Water flow had reached the maximum possible at the Riverside Ave. Bridge, and the river had begun to back up behind it as the flood peaked." <http://scplweb.santacruzpl.org/history/disaster/scflood1.shtml> See also Howard Rommel, *The 1955 Santa Cruz Flood* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 1973). Available in full text at <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/rommel>

So people had to go through that—not that it was scary or anything—but to get to my father’s store it was out of the way. He didn’t have a lot of business. When he did have business, people quickly realized he was an easy mark for credit and they started buying things on credit, batteries and parts, everything on a tab. And my father could not collect a tab. He could not do it. So he just let people keep adding to it, and adding and adding.

So that went on for two and a half years. We moved to Santa Cruz in the summer, after school was out, and then two and a half years later the flood of 1955 came and wiped out my father’s store.

Rabkin: Wow.

Wilkes: The water in the store was six and a half feet high, I remember that. It was almost to the ceiling. And it was high enough to inundate all of the shelves. All the parts were wrecked. It was a total loss and there was no insurance on the building or the parts. Nothing. So the building was a tear-down after that. It was just wrecked.

Rabkin: Did that mean financial ruin for your family?

Wilkes: It did. We limped back to Walnut Creek and rented a house that was scheduled to be moved or destroyed for a freeway. So we got a very low rental the first year we were there. And then they actually did move it. They did save the house but we didn’t stay in it. We found another place to live. It was like that. We barely got by. And my father became a clerk in the auto parts store that was owned by the guy who had backed him, had added money to buy that store in

Santa Cruz. And he promised my father that my father would become a part owner of his store, because my father was younger than this guy, and that when this guy wanted to retire my father would buy him out. That was the idea. But the guy didn't show any sign of retiring. And the family grew by another member and there were five of us kids. And all of us actually earned our own money for clothes and things, from the time we were twelve, the girls by babysitting and me by caddying, which I started in Santa Cruz at Pasatiempo.

I knew nothing about golf and I had to go up and present myself as a caddy. I was about this tall. (laughs) People laughed at me but I just kept going back and some people just needed a caddy, somebody to carry the clubs. I could do that and I learned golf that way, just paying attention to everything we were doing. And pretty soon, after a summer of doing it that way, the next summer I was experienced enough to get the next grade. We had pay levels. I was a C caddy the first summer and a B caddy the second. The A caddies were tournament caddies. They were pros. They made a living at it. They were grownups. But the B caddies made \$2.50 a loop, eighteen holes was a loop—the B caddies made a dollar a loop more than the C caddies. The C Caddies made \$1.50 plus a fifty-cent tip and then the B caddies made a \$2.50 plus a fifty-cent tip. In those days, however, a pair of Levi's cost \$3.50, so you can get an idea. That was a lot of money for a kid, for four hours work. So I would do two loops a day. I would come home, with usually, six or seven dollars, which was a fortune for a kid that age.

Rabkin: Yeah. And you went to Branciforte Junior High School?

Wilkes: Yeah. Branciforte Junior High. It was almost brand new in those days. It started with seventh grade and I was a seventh grader, and we went. And [shudder] you know junior high. But I got through it. In fact seventh grade was my best year in school of all.

Rabkin: How so?

Wilkes: Well, for one thing, we had classes that were separate. Every hour was a different teacher and that was revolutionary. Because in elementary school—see, Walnut Creek was just booming and so the schools never kept up with the population and they were on half-day sessions. The teachers had one class in the morning and another class in the afternoon. So I had a lot of time on my hands. And I didn't take school very seriously anyway, because it was so easy. I used to bring *Reader's Digest* to school because I could fit it behind my speller. It would look like I was studying my spelling, and I could spell pretty well anyway, so that was great. But I didn't learn anything much.

So in seventh grade at Branciforte Junior High School I had an English teacher. His name was Howard Rhine and later he became the principal of Santa Cruz High. But he was an expert grammarian. He taught grammar like I never had it before or ever afterwards. That's where I learned every bit of grammar I ever knew and know now. We used to diagram sentences and he used to (laughs)—he and I got into a competition. I used to bring sentences for him to diagram and then he'd bring special sentences for me to diagram in front of the class, up there at the blackboard. So we did that. We had fun.

Rabkin: Uh-huh. (laughs)

Wilkes: We had fun. He was a great teacher.

High School in Walnut Creek

Rabkin: Did you go on to high school in Santa Cruz or were you back in Walnut Creek by then?

Wilkes: No. Back in Walnut Creek. The flood was in '55 and that was my ninth-grade year in Branciforte. But in Santa Cruz they didn't have that arrangement. They started high school with the ninth grade, so I was a freshman. I was a newbie again. I was a freshman at Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek. But I had to start after Christmas break. That's when I started.

Rabkin: Ah. That's rough.

Wilkes: Yeah, so everybody knew everybody and the lines were all drawn. I had to break into that somehow.

Rabkin: Any relevant experiences from high school that you'd like to share?

Wilkes: Well, I was (sighs) I used to be able to write well, and whenever we had a class essay to do I could write the one that got read to the class. But I didn't study. I never studied at all. I couldn't understand what people were doing taking books home. What is that about? You just go home and play with your dog, or you do something else, or you read.

Rabkin: Was that because you were quick enough that you could get through the courses without having to take books home and study?

Wilkes: Well, I started out getting A's before I had friends. As soon as I started getting friends my grades started to drop, and by the time I was a sophomore I was C's and D's. But I was passing. My father was being an anti-intellectual. And the other thing was he was realizing—although I didn't realize it at the time—he was realizing that he was a failure in life and he was never going to have any money. He drank more at that point and didn't pay any attention to me. As long as I was making money and paying my own way, basically—I didn't give him money but I did have enough money to—well, I was a car nut by then, even though I wasn't old enough to drive. I was fourteen. But I had enough money by that time to buy a car, so I bought one. I talked him into buying it for me with my money. And he drove it. He drove it to work.

Rabkin: (laughs) You were so enamored of cars by that point that you wanted to own one despite not being able to drive yet.

Wilkes: That's right. Yeah. I wanted to be able to sit in it and open the door and close it, and look at the motor, even though I didn't want to put a wrench to it because I didn't know anything about mechanics at that point.

Rabkin: Not yet.

Wilkes: Not yet. I learned later. But yeah—so he drove my car. And he did that until I was sixteen. By that time there was another car. I sold that one and got another car, one more hot—"roddable," an Oldsmobile V-8 with overhead valves.

(laughs) Anyway, the more I got into my own thing, which by that time was really serious cars, I didn't study at all. I took the college prep courses. I took the math courses all the way up to—well, geometry. Algebra 2 was, I think, the highest I got in math. But I was able to pass the classes, but not well, not high, without studying, outside of what I picked up in the class. But I didn't care because by that time I'd decided that the people in my high school who were going to college bored me to death. I mean, they were just not my people. My people were the car nuts and the bad guys. (laughs)

Rabkin: And you had a job by this time as a gas station attendant, also.

Wilkes: I did. I worked at several different gas stations. But before that, before I had a car I rode my bicycle out to a golf driving range and I used to work there. I did everything that needed to be done at this driving range. And then adjoining it was a miniature golf course, which I also worked at. I'd sometimes I'd go back and forth between the two.

The guy who owned it, he was a bachelor. He was in his forties. He was living with his parents still, in this palatial house. They bought all this property outside of Walnut Creek. They knew it was going to be worth a lot of money someday and then just put some money into this property and they drove around in a brand-new Cadillac, and he did too. He's the one who started the golf driving range and the miniature golf because he had to have something to do. I was his only employee most of the time and sometimes he would hire one or two other people. When he had carpentry to do, he would hire carpenters to do that. So what did I do? I used to go out and pick up golf balls one at a time with a tin can

at the end of a golf stick, a driver shaft, scooping them up and dropping them into a bucket like this, one at a time, while they hit balls at me.

Rabkin: Oh. Did you ever get hit?

Wilkes: No, it was close a few times but I never got hit. I usually stayed out of range of most of the golfers. I could tell how far people could hit by the way they swung. So I knew when I could be safe.

Rabkin: Did all that golf-course work make you into a golfer?

Wilkes: Yeah, it did. Because when I was working at the golf range, there would be times when there were no customers at all, so I would just take a bucket of balls and hit them all, one after another, driving them. Well, I had played golf as a caddy too. I had learned how to play there, at Pasatiempo. We had a free twilight membership. So after five you could play as long as you wanted for nothing, if you were a caddy. So that's how I learned. And then I was on the high school golf team and I got my letter every year on the golf team. That was my only sport. Because I didn't have time to—I worked—I didn't have time to even practice golf. I just played games. We played tournaments and that was it. My other teammates, they all played regularly and got better. I just sort of stayed the same but I was second man. The first man was the captain. There were six of us. I started out second man and I stayed second man. (laughs)

Rabkin: When did you graduate from high school, John?

Wilkes: I didn't. I dropped out. I would have graduated in 1959 and I dropped out that year because I—I kept getting suspended and the principal got so tired of my misbehavior that he said, "You're not coming back until your father comes back and we have a talk about you." And my father refused to come back with me to talk about me. He said, "I'm not doing it. You've got to figure something else out."

So my girlfriend's father came and he talked. (laughs) I wasn't in for that conversation. I worked for him. That was one of my many jobs. He--it was funny because she was one of the very few Jewish girls in the school. There were two thousand students and there were maybe five or six. Dave Fyne, I'll never forget him. He owned a string of businesses at different times. But at this time in his life he had a string of car washes all up and down the Peninsula. And the one he liked to spend his day in was in South San Francisco. So he would drive me, in the backseat, he would go pick up his sister in Oakland. He was from New York. He had a very heavy New York accent. He'd pick up his sister and they'd switch to Yiddish and they'd talk Yiddish all the way into South San Francisco. (laughs)

Rabkin: Did you learn any Yiddish?

Wilkes: No, I didn't. I said, what language is that? I couldn't figure it out. I didn't ask him. I didn't want to pretend. I don't know. I just didn't ask him. But they had fun talking Yiddish. They were laughing, having a great time.

Rabkin: Did he become a sort of surrogate father?

Wilkes: He did. Partly because his daughter, Geri Fyne, had a boyfriend the year before, when we were both juniors, who was the captain of the football team. And her father disapproved of him and banished him from the house. The guy went on to become the captain of the USC football team. He was that good. But her father didn't want anything to do with him and refused to let her see him. Of course, she found ways to do that. But I became her boyfriend her senior year for part of the year. And that was when Mr. Fyne went in to the talk to the principal. But the principal wouldn't go for that, no matter what he said. So the principal wouldn't let me back in, and I said, "Well, that's fine. I don't want to come back anyway." Eventually I did go back for a couple of weeks toward the end of the year, but it was too late. I'd lost too many credits. I didn't walk, not even a fake walk, you know.

Rabkin: So did you ever get a high school diploma?

Joining the Air Force

Wilkes: I got one in the Air Force. I negotiated something with them. I went straight into the Air Force after high school got out. I enlisted in July and walked the line and raised my hand. Before I left Walnut Creek, I went to the high school and I said, "Well, what do I have to do to get a diploma, because everybody is telling me that I'll be ruined for life if I don't have a diploma." They said, "Well, if you can do one high school course by correspondence—you can do it in any subject you want—but if you get a passing grade we will graduate you." Well, that was very generous because I was much farther behind than that—way, way

farther behind. I should have made up all my last semester, for instance. They didn't make me do that. So I took a course in etiquette.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs) Because my father used to call us the California Barbarians around the dinner table. You know?

Rabkin: And this was a correspondence course in etiquette?

Wilkes: Yes, it was. And I got an A.

Rabkin: Sponsored by what institution?

Wilkes: I don't remember. I found out from the sergeant who ran our language program—I was at Indiana University by this time—

Rabkin: And we'll get to that.

Wilkes: Yeah. I finished the course while at Indiana, and I passed. In fact, they didn't give grades but what they gave me was "with distinction." And the first sergeant who ran our outfit—there were about eighty of us there studying different Slavic languages—the sergeant read this aloud to the dining hall. We lived in a dorm of our own, a little dorm. "John Wilkes is now a high school graduate."

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: Then he said, "How did you ever get into this program?" Because they asked you— When I was in the Air Force they gave us a lot of tests and my test

scores showed that I had some proficiency in languages, even though I didn't know any but English. So initially, they were going to send me to Yale for Chinese. And then the needs of the Air Force changed and the Russians started looking more menacing. And so they wanted more Russian linguists, so instead of Yale for Chinese it was Indiana for Slavic languages, for Russian. So that's how I got there. But in order to get there—at one point we were about to take the language proficiency test and a guy stuck his head in the door of the testing room and he said, "You're all high school graduates, aren't you?" I said, "No, there's nobody here but us high school graduates."

Rabkin: (laughs) You just kept your mouth shut.

Wilkes: Yes. So he shut the door and went on his way and that was the last anybody ever asked me about a high school diploma. Period. In my life. So it wouldn't have ruined me not to have one at all. I didn't need one to get into San Francisco City College because you just had to be eighteen to get in. Then you took tests to determine what classes you could take and I did fine on those tests, so—

Rabkin: I see. So it only came to the Air Force guys' attention once your high school diploma came through in the mail, or whatever, while you were in Indiana, that suddenly they discovered that you had now just succeeded in garnering a high school diploma.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: So while you were studying Russian language at Indiana University, you completed high school by the way of an etiquette course.

Wilkes: Yeah. That's right.

Rabkin: I'm thinking this might be a good time to take a little break. [recorder turned off]

Okay, so we're just back from a break. And before we started our break we were just talking about your experience in Russian language school through the Air Force. You spent nine months there at Indiana University studying Russian.

Wilkes: Nine months. That's right. And remember, I joined the Air Force because I did not want to go to college. I had no idea at all that the Air Force would send me, not only to college, but to a university. I was kind of flummoxed by that: People are trying to push me in a certain direction. It must mean something. Maybe it does. Maybe it does.

Rabkin: It must mean that people were noticing that you had certain aptitudes.

Wilkes: Yeah, because my high school teachers sure didn't reveal any awareness of that at all. I was just a kid that they wished wasn't in the class. (laughs)

Rabkin: You said earlier, just before we turned on the recorder, that curiosity was a really driving element of your character and that it was something that you didn't share with a lot of your high school classmates.

Wilkes: That's right. I was interested in everything, absolutely *everything*. I mean, the slightest thing would catch my attention and I would want to know more about it, and I would find a way to find out more about it.

Actually, in a funny way this leads to my experience in graduate school. When I started graduate school at Berkeley in English lit, I lasted one week because I realized that all the other students in that program were very, very hard working and very focused on finding their writer and finding what they could say about their writer that hadn't already been said.

Rabkin: In a dissertation.

Wilkes: Yeah, in a dissertation. They were already starting to formulate what that might be.

Rabkin: Right at the beginning of graduate school.

Wilkes: Right at the beginning, yes. It scared me, I have to say. I was ready to start another undergraduate degree, that's the way I was feeling about it. And they said, "No, no. You do what we tell you." I wanted to take German language, for example, more German language. They said, "No, you've had enough German language. What you need is Latin and Greek. You have to take exams in both of those languages." I don't know if that's still true but it was then.

I said, "I don't want to do that." I already knew about the Santa Cruz program, the idea of what it was going to be. It would be not a PhD in *English* literature; it would be a PhD in *literature*. And you would have a second language, with

courses in the second language. That made much more sense to me and I wanted to do that. So I quickly realized that if I wanted to do that I'd have to do it at Santa Cruz, not Berkeley. They told me no.

Rabkin: So that's been a theme, really, throughout your life, is your own curiosity and interest in the world, and how that sometimes ran up against institutional expectations about what learning is all about.

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: It's remarkable—it's really astonishing to me, and dismaying, that somehow none of your high school teachers recognized that you were actually an intellectually curious, lively mind.

Wilkes: (laughs) Well, there were a couple who did, but they didn't know what to do with me. Because I just wouldn't do any work. They would tell me, "You *could* go to college. *You* could go to college if you wanted to." And I'd say, "But I don't want to, because these people are going to college and I have nothing in common at all with them, nothing."

Rabkin: So you came to associate higher education with a certain type of person who was maybe more achievement oriented, and more lockstep interested in the credentials, and not necessarily driven by their own curiosity.

Wilkes: Well, that's right. They were driven by the social aspects of high school. They were on all the committees. They were the class officers. They were all of that stuff. I wasn't interested in any of that at all. I realized that I was just

different. I just couldn't be that way. I couldn't do it, because I was already enjoying what I was doing so much.

Rabkin: So did your Air Force experience begin to give you a taste of pleasure in learning at that level?

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. Well, the thing was once we all got through basic training, that's when we started going off to our specialized training. And language school was the first of two schools that I went to before I started actually working in a job in the Air Force. And, of course, language school was reserved for the people who did extraordinarily well on the language aptitude test. Well, for the first time in my life I was among a bunch of people who were like me. I was astounded. Hey, there *are* other people like me! Some of them were from wealthy families, but most of them were from working-class families, which mine was, much to my parents' dismay, but that's what we were. I loved it! I was just happy as a hog in a pen.

We all had to memorize a hundred words the first night in Russian. We had to memorize the alphabet and a hundred vocabulary words both. The Russian alphabet is completely different from ours, of course. So I did that and went in and got tested the next day. How many people were in my class? I think it was about twenty-five Russian students. And I was, I think, third or fourth on the list in test scores on that first test. Because everybody did study—even I studied. It was the first time I'd ever studied for anything. But I wanted to make a mark—bang--and show what I could do. So that's what I did and I ended up high on the

list. So, of course, then I decided: I don't have to study. If I'm going to do that well I don't have to study at all. (laughs)

Rabkin: Oops. (laughs)

Wilkes: It's an obvious, rational conclusion. (laughs) In the meantime, I discovered a wonderful pool hall not too far from the dorm. It was in the student union, a beautiful place, brand-new tables. Everything was new.

Rabkin: Who knew that college was about pool and other enjoyments? (laughs)

Wilkes: That's right. So I ended up spending most of my meager paycheck in that pool room for the rest of the nine months. (laughs)

Rabkin: Did you learn Russian?

Wilkes: I learned Russian well enough to do my job. I passed all the tests. I didn't pass them as high as I passed the first one. In fact, it was like high school. My place on the test, my ranking was in the top of the lowest third, I think, by the time I graduated. But I did not study at all. But we had five hours a day of class—eight people in the class, one native speaker who hardly knew English. So it was all Russian, all the time.

Rabkin: Wow, that's intensive immersion. So you were being trained to intercept Soviet communications.

Wilkes: Right, Soviet air-air and ground-air communications, and air-to-ground.

Rabkin: And you also, before being shipped overseas, you did some radio school?

Wilkes: Yeah. We had to learn how to operate the radios. We had to learn all about antennas, how to configure antennas to capture what you're trying to capture and not anything else, that sort of thing.

Rabkin: So from Indiana you went to Texas, is that right? For radio school.

Wilkes: That's right. We went to San Angelo, Texas, and Goodfellow Air Force Base. What I remember about that is hail the size of golf balls or bigger. We had a hailstorm and when I went into town I noticed all the houses—which were all sort of tract houses, single-story ranch-style houses—they had dents in the roof, like half the depth of a golf ball or more—and they had to replace all the roofs in town. That's how bad that was. That was Texas. This was in the late summer. And when you went to the movies at night downtown, you'd get out of the movies and as soon as you stepped on the sidewalk you'd hear crunch, crunch, crunch. What is this crunching? Beetles. Great big black beetles, so many that you couldn't miss them. You had to step on them.

Rabkin: Wow. Was it a crop infestation that moved into town?

Wilkes: I don't know what it was. I never found out. You see, this is the thing about being in the Air Force, or in the military in general. You're stationed in or near towns and you never learn anything about the towns. I never learned anything about those beetles. But I was just was astounded at how many there were. They were everywhere.

Rabkin: What a phenomenon.

Wilkes: Okay, so that's Texas. And we also could drive to Mexico. It was 110 miles from our base to the Mexican border. So we got down there for recreation. (laughs) But we won't go into that. So what would you like to hear about?

Rabkin: From Texas to Berlin?

Wilkes: Okay, I went home on leave first. And when I went home on leave—I always needed money. You don't make much money in the military, or at least you didn't used to. So I got a job—as soon as I got home for two weeks' leave before going overseas for a three-year posting (I only had two and half years left of my enlistment, so that's how long I was in Berlin), but I got a job in a gas station and pumped gas for that time and made some money. And some of my buddies from language school, who were being sent to Japan and intercepting radio from around there, the part of Russia that's closest to Japan—they came through town because they were going to fly out of San Francisco. They came and found me in my gas station and what a gas that was.

Rabkin: (laughs) So to speak.

Wilkes: So to speak. This car pulled in and four guys, all guys that I had been in language school with—

Rabkin: And you had no idea.

Wilkes: That's right. I had no idea. They found me. They found my home first and my father told them where I was.

Rabkin: How long was this leave between radio school and—

Wilkes: Two weeks.

Rabkin: So, just a quick stint, making some money before you got shipped over to Berlin.

Wilkes: Yeah, say goodbye to everybody. I never called on the phone. I mean, it was very expensive to do that. I just wrote letters and got letters in return from the people who were close to me. I traveled all over the place in Europe, by car. I had a car. I had a Mercedes, an old one, the only Mercedes I've ever owned. It was great. It was a Cabriolet sedan, five-passenger, a big car. It had Landau irons on the sides. It was great. A 1952. It was ten years old. And silver-gray with a black top and red leather and all walnut inside.

Rabkin: Where did you find it?

Wilkes: A choreographer, an American woman. I'll never forget her, Barrie Landauer, a beautiful woman who had been a dancer and become a choreographer. It was her car and she put a notice on—we had a post exchange that the Army and the Air Force used to buy things that you couldn't buy on the German market, like steak, and things like this you could go and get there. She shopped there. She had a connection with the government somehow and she was allowed to shop there. So she put a notice up on the bulletin board. And I said, "Bingo! That's mine." (laughs) \$450.

Rabkin: Oh, my goodness.

Wilkes: That was a lot of money for me. That was five months' pay.

Rabkin: Wow. Sounds like a worthwhile investment.

Wilkes: I had so much fun with that car. It ran like a top the whole time. I sold it for the same price that I got it for.

Rabkin: So what else would you like to tell me about that time in Berlin?

Wilkes: Okay. Let's get serious. Well, the obvious thing is that I was on hand for the building of the [Berlin] Wall, from the first day. It was August 1961, August 13, I believe it was. And one of my buddies and I—we had just worked a swing shift and we decided to go downtown, which we often did, when we got off at midnight. So we decided to go downtown.

We used to catch a cab—I was at Templehof Airport. That was where we were stationed. Templehof used to be a luxury hotel, part of it was, just a small part. It's a huge building. At that time it was the biggest building in the world. The Pentagon hadn't been built yet and that became the biggest building, when it was built. Anyway, we were living in hotel rooms in Templehof. Outside the gate cabs used to line up, waiting for airmen to come out and go downtown. They'd drive us wherever we wanted to go for a low price. And the cab drivers—very few spoke English, but this one spoke a little, and he tried to tell us that something was going on over by the Brandenburg Gate.

And what he was telling us was that the whole East German army was lined up through the city of Berlin, three feet apart, standing at parade rest, while workers

started unrolling barbed wire behind them. And behind them, other workers were piling up concrete blocks in a crude wall, which they replaced after they stopped the flow of human beings across the border. They just improved the wall and improved it and improved it, until it was impassable. It was passable at that point, if you had guts. But they started shooting people right away who tried to cross it.

Rabkin: Wow.

Wilkes: Yeah. It was very fiercely defended. So we went down that morning and we went out and had a few beers and went back and went to sleep. And that morning early, like 7:30, we got breakfast and then went down to the Brandenburg Gate again, where we'd been that night before. We didn't try to go through it, because you used to be able to drive right through it into East Berlin. East Berlin—a lot of people don't realize this but East Berlin was the downtown of Berlin. It was the nice part of Berlin. And when they closed it off, you were in the 'burbs, basically. I mean, the 'burbs of Berlin were pretty nice too. There were several castles and lots of beautiful buildings. But the real downtown was East Berlin. It's now called Mitte. So we went back down and by that time the West Berliners had come out in droves and they were shouting, "*Schweine, schweine, schweine!*" ["pigs, pigs, pigs"]

Rabkin: At the army.

Wilkes: At the army. And the army was facing them with weapons—machine guns, rifles—whatever they could get ahold of. I mean, there were so many

people. And so we went up—we had IDs that showed that we were American forces, my buddy and I. So we walked into the crowd. And we walked up to where we were pretty close to the East German guards, the people who were facing us, and we noticed that their uniforms didn't fit them. The uniforms were all the wrong size. Some tall, skinny guys had sleeves that came to here and their pants were barely below their knees. I mean, it was really a mess. Obviously, that night they had gotten their uniforms for the first time, and their weapons. They probably didn't know how to shoot their weapons either. But they were standing there looking real. From a distance they really—they had full uniforms, complete uniforms. But they just didn't fit. That never got into the newspapers because no reporters got close enough to see that. And in those days I didn't know enough to get ahold of a reporter and tell them that. I would do that now. So it never got out. So that's one of my memories.

And another memory I will tell you is that one night—you have to understand the Cold War became very hot at that point, when they put the wall up. There was a lot of talk of knocking it down from our side. It was pretty serious talk. Kennedy was really upset. He was all for defending Berlin, and did, short of knocking down the wall. Anything else he did do. So he kept them from taking the city over. The Russians really wanted to take the city over completely. It was an embarrassment to them that American forces were inside their territory. So one of the things they did to scare us, was they flew the entire fleet of TU-16 bombers, which was their standard, heavy bomber—not the one that flew lately, I don't know if you saw pictures of this—they had a TU-95, which apparently was a propeller bomber. It's still flying today. It's part of their air force. And they

flew it all over. It was escorted out of Portuguese territory; it was escorted out of Norwegian territory just a few days ago, two or three days ago.

But anyway, back to the Berlin situation—they had a standard bomber, their TU-16's, they had hundreds of them fly in formation over the city of Berlin, in group after group after group, in the middle of the night. You couldn't see them but you could hear them, with all those airplanes, all those bombers. They were jets. They weren't propeller-driven. They made this deep roar. I'll never forget it. It was like—have you ever heard a big didgeridoo playing?

Rabkin: Yeah.

Wilkes: Just multiply that times hundreds and hundreds. [makes deep roaring and thrumming sound] The whole sky was shaking.

Rabkin: Wow.

Wilkes: Literally. You know, your skin was shaking.

Rabkin: You were quite young when you had these experiences. You were what, late teens?

Wilkes: I was seventeen. I was eighteen when I got to Berlin, turned nineteen right away, and then got out when I was twenty-one.

Rabkin: How did that affect your sense of your own life trajectory?

Wilkes: Oh, boy. Well, I couldn't really talk to people my age about what I'd been through. It didn't really make a lot of sense to them. I quickly realized that they weren't really interested. It set me apart in a way that was weird to them.

Rabkin: Except for your fellow military vets.

Wilkes: Right, but oddly enough I got out when the Vietnam War was starting to heat up. In '63 they were sending a lot of advisors and it was pretty clear they weren't advisors. They were fighting men and they were fighting. And so, anybody who had been in the military and was walking among civilians was sort of suspect. "What are you about? Are you still in the military? Do you like to kill people?" That's the attitude. There were three of us at UCSC when I started—out of the six hundred and fifty students, or whatever the number was—three fairly recently released veterans, two Air Force and one Navy.

Rabkin: And you found each other.

Wilkes: Well, we did, but the thing was we didn't really want anybody to know we were ex-military.

Rabkin: Because of that stigma, with the heating up of Vietnam.

Wilkes: Yeah, people were afraid of us. They thought we were going to kill them or something.

Rabkin: Hmm. Yeah—

Wilkes: I mean, they didn't know what to make of it. So we didn't hang out together. We knew each other but we didn't spend time together. Because people would have seen us together and said, "Ooh, what are they cooking up?"

Rabkin: This is a dumb question reflecting my ignorance about such things, but I'm curious about whether, having done your enlisted stint in the Air Force, you were now possibly eligible for the draft, or whether you were immune now for the Vietnam draft?

Wilkes: Well, I was immune from the draft but I was still—I had two more years—your total enlistment in the military is eight years, if you enlist. You serve it in different ways. In the Air Force at that time, you served four years on active duty and then four more years on what they called Ready Reserve, which meant you were completely a civilian; you could go to college; you could do anything you wanted, not worry. You didn't have any meetings to go to. You didn't have to do anything military at all. But if we got into a war—

Rabkin: They could call you up.

Wilkes: They could call you back into your specialty. So I would have gone back into the Air Force and I would have been a Russian linguist again.

Rabkin: And you were subject to that for just a certain number of years, to finish out your eight years of availability.

Wilkes: That's right. Four years. And it was always in the back of my head—oh, my God, what happens if I have to leave this life that I'm trying to make for

myself in college and go back in. That would be awful. But it didn't happen, thank God. I remember the day I got my letter saying, "Your Ready Reserve is completed."

Rabkin: Wow. What a relief.

Wilkes: Yeah. At that point I guess I was fresh out of UCSC. I had just graduated. So I was free of the military. I was starting Berkeley—unfortunately a short takeoff, followed by a disappearance. But I really felt free for the first time in my life.

So I went to Europe for a year.

Rabkin: Should we back up, since we haven't really gotten you from Berlin to college?

San Francisco City College

Wilkes: Right. Okay. Let's back up to that because that's very important. So I knew from even before I joined the Air Force that junior colleges accepted students on the basis of age alone. Eighteen and you could go to a community college in California. I always thought, if I decide to go to college that's going to be the way I will do it. It's the only way I can do it.

And finally it came to pass that I did want to go to college after all. I thought I had a pretty good chance of doing well at a community college. I wanted to go to San Francisco because I didn't want to stay in Walnut Creek. I had had my fill of Walnut Creek. I wanted to go to the big city.

I'd become a jazz fan. That's another thing that happened in Berlin. There was a great jazz club called The Blue Note that I used to go to all the time and heard everybody who was anybody in jazz come through, from five feet away, you know.

Rabkin: So who did you hear perform, for example.

Wilkes: Well, Ella Fitzgerald, to start with. A big name. Coltrane. Miles Davis. Gerry Mulligan; Bob Brookmeyer was with him.

Rabkin: All from a few feet away.

Wilkes: Yeah. Roy Eldridge. These different people. Some were in groups; some were alone and played with the house band because they had a very good pan-European jazz band that played The Blue Note when they didn't have any famous people coming through. Ella Fitzgerald, for example, sang with the house band, and they were terrific.

Rabkin: So that interest in jazz was part of what propelled you to the city.

Wilkes: That's exactly right. I had to live in San Francisco, so I could go down and hear live music. I was so used to it. The problem was I couldn't afford to drink, which was just as well. I just bought the two-drink minimum and I was enraptured and forgot about the alcohol all together. So that was San Francisco.

But City College—now this was critical to my life because I managed to get a job through an old high school friend whose father was a high mucky-muck in Lucky [grocery] Stores. He was a district manager. He got me a job, thank God—

I don't know what I would have done without this job because it was very flexible and it paid well. It was a union job. I made enough money working thirty to thirty-five hours a week to support myself and save money, in my own studio apartment on Potrero Hill, which I loved. I was crazy about that place! Anyway I drove my little Volkswagen, which I had shipped home. I sold my Mercedes and bought a Volkswagen because I knew the Mercedes would not be practical in the States. So I got this Volkswagen that was in really good shape and I drove it for the first two years. I drove it the whole time I was at City College.

But I went there and I got in line with everybody else. At that time City College, SF City College, had about ten thousand students. It now has over a hundred thousand. I don't know how they handle it but they do, or they try to. It's always in hot water with its accreditation.

Rabkin: That's right. That's been in the news recently.³

Wilkes: Yeah. In those days it was very divided between college prep and so-called pre-professional courses, such as hotel and restaurant management, retail floristry. Chef preparation. All that. And then there was a small handful of people—I kept running into them in the classes I was taking, the so-called Cal Parallel Classes, all lower-division, transferrable units. And I ended up making friends—none of them went to Santa Cruz. They all went to Berkeley, almost all.

³ See <http://www.sfgate.com/education/article/City-College-of-SF-to-lose-accreditation-in-2014-4645783.php>

But I had my eye on Santa Cruz. Because we'd lived there, my mother kept sending me these clippings—she took the *Chronicle*—and any newspaper clipping about the new campus they were going to build in Santa Cruz, she would send it to me in Berlin. So I had a little stack of these stories.

Rabkin: She was enthusiastic about the prospect of your attending the new University of California, Santa Cruz, because of her associations with the town, having lived there?

Wilkes: Yeah. Well, she knew I loved it. She didn't love it in Santa Cruz as much as I did, because the family was losing money and so on. The weather didn't appeal to her either. She didn't like the cold mornings, the fog in the summers. Walnut Creek wasn't like that at all. It was very different.

Rabkin: Yeah, that's the banana belt over there.

Wilkes: Yeah, so City College. So I got into the classes I wanted, no problem. I took the SAT for the first time in my life. Well, I should say I took that before the classes started, because that's how I got into the classes I wanted. My score on the SAT got me into these classes right away. I was very lucky with that too, because I was able to graduate from City College in two years. I had some units from my Russian language and they let me use those. I was taking three courses a semester.

Rabkin: In addition to your thirty-five hours a week grocery clerking.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: That's a lot.

Wilkes: That's right. And I did well, despite that. I had practically a 4.0. I had about 3.85, or something.

Rabkin: And hanging out at the jazz club.

Wilkes: That's right. I managed to do it. I was very focused. I was completely a different person from what I'd been all the way up until that time, including in the Air Force. When I got out of radio school, I was promoted Airman Second Class. And I was Airman Second Class when I got out of the air force three years later. I didn't get promoted. That tells you something.

Rabkin: So how do explain or how do you understand that transformation, that sudden focus and drive?

Wilkes: I knew my back was against the wall. I very much wanted to make my living with words, English words, either as a writer or as a teacher. I didn't know what level. I had respected Howard Rhine so much in seventh grade. I realized he really had some really rowdy kids in the class but he kept them under control. He had a ruler, you know, those rulers that have—

Rabkin: The metal straight-edge, right.

Wilkes: Yeah, he would hold that ruler away from the desk and pivot, and he would slam it against the desk. It would make a huge boom and everybody would stop whatever they were doing (laughs) and he'd be frowning at us.

Rabkin: It sounds terrifying!

Wilkes: It was. It did the trick. That's all he had to do.

Rabkin: Fortunately he had other things going for him. Terror alone would probably not have appealed to you.

Wilkes: That's right. It would not. But it was my first year in this new school and I didn't know anybody. When I didn't know anybody, I paid more attention in class. So I did better. But as I got to know people I always—the same thing happened in the Air Force. My real reason for being in the Air Force was so I could hang out and not be worried about where my meals were coming from.

Rabkin: Whereas once you got to San Francisco and City College, you had really turned a corner in terms of your sense of your life and what you wanted to do with yourself.

Wilkes: And I knew it was going to be that way. I had planned it that way. I said, when I get out of this air force I'm going to turn around in a big way. I'm going to be a different person. I'm going to knock myself out in school and at whatever job I have to support myself. That's what I'm going to do until I get where I want to go. And that's going to take some time, I know that, so I'm going to go the long way. And I did it.

Rabkin: So you finished at City College in '63.

Pioneering Class at UC Santa Cruz

Wilkes: No. I finished the Air Force in '63. In '65 I finished at City College. And that's when [UC] Santa Cruz opened, '65. I was in the first group. There were

only about seventy-five or eighty transfer students then. And all different majors. We had one math major and two math professors. So that was a pretty good ratio.

Rabkin: (laughs) Wow. What a college experience that would have been.

Wilkes: Yeah. But I don't know how many professors of English literature we had, but we had more than we needed because we only had about twenty majors, I think. That was probably the biggest major going among the transfer students. Harry Berger was there; Tom Vogler was there; George Amis was there the first year. And George Amis will tell you a story about me if you want to get in touch with him.

Rabkin: Is it a story you want to tell from your perspective?

Wilkes: Sure, I don't mind. I was riding a motorcycle in those days and I had a leather jacket. I think he taught a course in Pope winter, or even spring quarter of the first year. We hadn't met each other yet and I walked into class with my motorcycle jacket and I had a bandana that I used to wear. I didn't wear a helmet. I just wore a bandana over my hair to keep it from flying everywhere. And I probably had it hanging out of my pocket. Anyway, he tells this story every time he and I and a third person are in one place. He says, "Let me tell you about how I met Wilkes here. He walked into my classroom—" (oh, I had boots too, motorcycle boots)—"he walked into my classroom and scared the life out of me."

Rabkin: (laughs) He thought you were a hood.

Wilkes: Yeah. (laughs) But he didn't show it. He didn't show it at all.

Rabkin: Tell me about your initial impressions of and reactions to the Santa Cruz campus when you arrived.

Wilkes: Oh, boy. It was heaven. It wasn't even ready for classes, as those things always turn out. That's why they had trailers the first year. They hadn't built the dorms yet. And the Shakespeare class, the first one I took, was in a laboratory in the Natural Sciences building, with gas jets and sinks in front of you. So that's the way it started.

Rabkin: So the Nat Sci building had been put up.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: And the trailers down in the meadow.

Wilkes: They were in place. But no dorms. They were unfinished. They were working on the dorms, building them, that first year. I think they finished enough to take everybody in by the second year. In fact, they were working on Stevenson too. Because Stevenson opened up the second year.

Rabkin: Were there classrooms when you arrived at Cowell?

Wilkes: The dining hall was working. Yeah, there were some classrooms, but you have to remember that there were only three classrooms at Cowell, I think, at that time. And maybe still. I don't think they've built any more classrooms.

Rabkin: Wow. There was so much room to roam then.

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: Did you resume your childhood passion for wandering around in the hills?

Wilkes: Oh. I didn't, really. I was studying. I had turned over my leaf and I was a different person. I was studying, studying, studying. But, of course, you can't just study if you're used to wandering. I decided, though, that I wanted to do my wandering on the ocean because I'd wandered so much on land before. So I found myself living near a commercial fisherman who had his own small boat. He was an Italian. I heard him talking to his wife in Italian. This was a part of town where there was very little traffic, almost none, and he used to spread his nets on the street, on the cement street.

Rabkin: Where was this in town?

Wilkes: Well, the address was Park Avenue and you'll think you know where it is, but there are two Park Avenues in Santa Cruz. One of them is—you know where the Railroad Trestle hits, not the Boardwalk side but the other side of the trestle, where that end connects with the land? Right in there, one very short block in, is Park Avenue. You get there when you make a sharp right turn out of the traffic into that little neighborhood. It's right in there.

Rabkin: So sort of the Seabright—

Wilkes: It's in Seabright, that's right, but it's in a part of Seabright that's cut off from the rest of Seabright. It's not easy to get to. And so this guy would mend his

nets. He would spread his nets out and find the rotten spots and pull them out, just grab fistfuls of twine and throw it away and he'd start mending. He'd start creating new mesh with his big wooden needle and twine wrapped around it inside.

Rabkin: And this was your neighbor.

Wilkes: He was my neighbor, yeah.

Rabkin: Did you not live in the trailers on campus?

Wilkes: No. We decided we didn't want to live there, so they let us out of the contract. We were assigned trailers. I spent one or two nights in mine and said, no, this isn't—because I was with freshmen. It was just no good. I was six years older than they were. So we just went—a bunch of us juniors—went to talk to [the administrators] and they said, "Yeah, we'll get you out of your contract. Find someplace downtown."

We found a triplex that had three two-bedroom apartments. Actually one was a three-bedroom apartment, that's what it was. The one downstairs was a little bigger. So we had a bunch of us all in that one building. It had just been completed and was ready to go on the market and we just took it. So I spent that first year there.

I saw him mending his nets and I decided to ask him if he wanted help. He said, "Well, you know, you can't do this. This takes years to learn. But I could use you

on my boat. My son just joined the Coast Guard and he was working on my boat with me. But he's now in the Coast Guard and the season is on."

Rabkin: Did you have experience messing around in boats?

Wilkes: None. None whatsoever. It was like becoming a caddy again. I knew nothing.

Rabkin: What an adventure. So did this fisherman pay you to assist him?

Wilkes: Yeah. He did. He paid me the way they pay fishermen. You've read *Moby Dick*. One hundred seventy-seventh of a lay is what Ishmael got paid. I got something like that. When we caught a lot of fish I got some money. And when we didn't, I didn't.

Rabkin: Is that how you put yourself through school?

Wilkes: Well, I did work on that boat for the two years I was an undergraduate at UCSC, until I graduated. I didn't have any other job. I could have got a job in a supermarket and I would have made more money at that, too. But I had a scholarship, and I decided I wanted some adventure.

Rabkin: What was it like going out fishing on the bay?

Wilkes: Well, we fished at night, unless we were fishing for rockfish, which we used hooks and lines for. We used this ancient Italian-designed net called a lampara, that actually they inherited from the Arabs. He was a Sicilian. He'd fished out of Sicily before he came to the States. So we used this net. We were trying to catch a fish called pompano, I don't know if you've ever heard of it.

Pompano was very valuable. It sold for ten times the price of any other fish we could catch, literally ten times. So we wanted to catch Pompano. We weren't interested in any other fish because the net wasn't big enough to catch that many of—to make it worthwhile—anchovies you had to catch ten times worth, and we had a thirty-foot boat. We couldn't do that.

Rabkin: What kind of a boat was it?

Wilkes: It was a Monterey. It was the kind you see. They have one on the [Santa Cruz] Wharf.

Rabkin: Yes. Exactly. Those beautiful old Italian-influenced fishing boats.

Wilkes: That's right. They are. They used to have lateen sails, even in San Francisco. There are some pictures of them in San Francisco harbor with those sails. We never had that. We had a little one-cylinder motor that got us where we wanted to go.

Rabkin: Were you the only crew?

Wilkes: I was the only crew, yes. There were the two of us. He was always in the back of the boat with the tiller, until we decided to "make a set." That's what you say when you set the net out. We would put it out in a great big circle. I won't explain it. It's too complicated. But yeah, we would do this at night. And we would make, usually three or four sets before we'd either catch some fish or not. And we'd go back in, with our fish or without. And then we'd try again some

other night. I would wait for his call. He would call me on the phone and say, "John, we go tonight." (laughs)

Rabkin: And who'd he sell his catch to?

Wilkes: He sold it to the Stagnaro or the Carniglia Brothers on the wharf. They would buy whatever he brought in. Sometimes they didn't give him a good enough price, so he had a freezer truck that he'd spent most of his money on. He would put our catch in the freezer truck and drive it up to Chinatown in San Francisco and sell it in Chinatown. Because the Chinese knew and they understood pompano and they loved it and they'd pay anything for it. So he would sell it to them. I never could trace how much money I had coming. I always had to depend on him and I'm sure he skinned me alive, but that's okay. (laughs)

Rabkin: What an interesting second life you were leading as an undergraduate.

Wilkes: Yeah. It was. It definitely was. Actually I worked on other fishing boats too, after that. The same set-up, but we fished for anchovies or herring—a larger boat, a forty-four-foot boat instead of a thirty-foot boat. We would tow a boat the size of our fishing boat, only it was just a shell. It was basically a lifeboat from a navy ship.

Rabkin: That's where you put the fish.

Wilkes: That's where you put the fish, that's right. And we would have that thing so full, it would be almost to the brim [points to collarbone].

Rabkin: Wow, amazing.

Wilkes: A lot of fish. I had to stand in those fish and shovel them out. They'd be up to here on me.

Rabkin: Whew!

Wilkes: And I'd be getting a scoop full—

Rabkin: Was it hard not to smell like fish?

Wilkes: It was impossible. (laughs)

Rabkin: Did you show up in class smelling like fish?

Wilkes: Well, I tried not to but I suspect I probably did smell a little bit like fish sometimes. Nobody said anything to me.

Rabkin: Wow. Well, tell me what else is important for you about those two years as an undergrad at Santa Cruz.

Wilkes: Oh, goodness. The teachers. I had never been around such brilliant men and women. Tilly Shaw, Tom Vogler, Harry Berger, George Amis. All of them. As far as I could tell, they were geniuses. They were amazing, staggering. What came out in class discussions was just fantastic. I'd never had anything like that before. I was riveted and from that time on I decided I wanted to be a professor somehow and I wanted to have students as good as the ones that were at UCSC. In those days they were, as you know, they were very, very impressive, the freshmen, especially. Not so much the juniors. (laughs) The juniors were okay

too, but there was more of a spread there. Because a lot of them were right out of community colleges—as it was they were taking as many juniors as wanted to get in here and had the units.

So that fixed my ambition to become a professor. The first year, the first quarter was so amazing.

One other thing that I have to tell you is that the first day we all got name tags, just first names. Dean McHenry was looking at us all. He memorized our names and could connect the name with the face, the face with the name, after that. He had a phenomenal memory.

Rabkin: And he had probably seen your admissions files, so he was connecting names with stories he already had in his mind.

Wilkes: Yeah, perhaps. I don't know that for a fact. But that would have made sense, of course. But he was around a lot. He walked among us. But the first day, I'll never forget, some of us got together, the junior transfers, and we were standing in a circle of about maybe six, seven people. And it was over near—it was where we could look out over the Monterey Bay, it was Cowell—

Rabkin: The plaza—

Wilkes: Yeah. We were just starting to get to know each other, having a tentative conversation. And during that conversation we kept looking at the bay and the conversation just dwindled to nothing. And then one person said to another,

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” And the other person said, “I think I am.” And then somebody else said, “We’re never going to leave this place.”

Rabkin: (laughs) It’s become the story of many people’s lives, including both of us at this table.

Wilkes: That’s right. I think this is a good place to stop.

Rabkin: Today is November 6, 2014. This is Sarah Rabkin and I’m in my kitchen in Soquel, California with John Wilkes. Welcome back, John, for our second oral history interview. And John, when we wrapped up last time you were talking about your undergraduate years at UC Santa Cruz. You had mentioned how astonishing you found the instruction in your literature courses, that all of your teachers were brilliant and the classrooms were full of amazing discussions. I wonder if you’d like to talk a bit about the nature of those discussions.

Wilkes: Yeah, I guess the dimension of those discussions that interested me most and completely knocked me over, really, when I first experienced it through Harry Berger, was the close reading approach to literature that Yale apparently fostered and developed. So close, that we would talk for an hour about one line of poetry and still not exhaust it, or come close to exhausting it. Because Berger would keep out pointing out different angles on that one line that you could look at it from, and it would vibrate even more for you. It was staggering because all of the reading I had done had been kind of speed-reading. I just read fast and got the gist of things. And now, suddenly, I’m getting down inside the print itself and looking at the world through it. It was just unbelievable what it did to my

experience of literature, including prose. I mean, novels, everything. So that was my big experience and that's what I wanted to hand on to other people as a teacher because it was so marvelous for me, and still is today. I use it consciously sometimes, every day.

So that's what I had. That was the offering that no other school, including Berkeley in the short time I was there—they asked everyone to read a lot more text than we were asked to read at UCSC. It was more of a historical approach, a lot of coverage. I'm sure some of the faculty went into close reading, just as we did at Santa Cruz, but the main emphasis was different. And that was one of the reasons I didn't stay there.

But I want to—since we are allowed to circle back and cover something that I didn't cover—talk about commercial fishing, because this has to do with the kinds of teachers that we had. One of my favorite teachers was actually in sociology. His name was Bob Werlin and he was very young. He couldn't have been more than twenty-six. He hadn't finished his dissertation yet. You know, the way they hired faculty in the first year was either you were a seasoned veteran or you were ABD [all but dissertation]. And there were a lot of twenty-six-year-old faculty. And he was one of them. He had come from Harvard, I believe. He was having us read Saul Bellow, in particular. I'd never read Saul Bellow before and I thought, whoa, what have I been missing.

Rabkin: This was in a sociology course.

Wilkes: It was sociology of literature, or sociology in literature, I guess it was, probably. So that's the background. He was very impressive. But I was working on fishing boats and one day I was down there with my boots on and my rubber apron, getting the boat ready to go out. And he showed up on the next dock over with the mayor of Santa Cruz, Norm Lezin. He was a guest on Norm Lezin's big sailboat. And he came out of the cabin and sees me on this fishing boat and his (laughs) eyes popped out and his jaw dropped to here.

Rabkin: He didn't know until that moment that you had this job on a fishing boat.

Wilkes: Yeah, none of them did. It was a different world and I didn't try to put them together. He saw me and looked at me and he gave a little tiny wave. (laughs) I gave him a little wave back and then they pushed off and sailed away. I didn't see him again down at the harbor. But it was a kind of funny experience.

Rabkin: Was it mentioned later in class?

Wilkes: No, never. Never.

Rabkin: So those two worlds remained separate for you.

Wilkes: They did. Completely.

Rabkin: This is jumping ahead for a moment, briefly, but I can't help wondering if you have thoughts about how that undergraduate literature experience ultimately influenced your relationship with and teaching of science writing.

Wilkes: Well, that's a good question. It certainly made me more aware of style and how you get certain effects. And it made it easier to teach that in a writing class. So yeah, that's how—it's in a practical sense, not in a spiritual sense, as we had in lit classes. But yeah, in a practical experience it really helped me take a sentence apart and show them how—or a paragraph. The paragraph is basically the largest unit I ever worked with in class, in my science writing classes. We talked about structuring feature articles, you know, three thousand words or more, in blocks and whatnot. But actually keeping the reader in the story—that was a sentence-level, paragraph-level thing, which this helped me a lot with, yeah.

Rabkin: How about your pedagogical style? Do you think it was influenced by those teachers in your junior and senior year?

Wilkes: I wonder. I certainly tried to imitate them, I think. But they were much more razzle-dazzle than I was. Well, Vogler wasn't. Berger definitely was. He was a live wire in class. He was all around you and prodding you forward. He was like the drummer in the jazz band. (laughs) Vogler was very different. He was very reflective. He took long pauses while he thought and you wondered what he was going to come up with after this especially long pause. He was very different. But he kept my attention and I never heard anybody complain about him. But I didn't teach that way. I couldn't stand it.

Rabkin: Pedagogical style is, it strikes me, a lot like writing style, in that we can be inspired and to some degree influenced by our models and mentors and

teachers. And ultimately we become teachers and writers only by learning our own proclivities and developing them as well as we can.

Wilkes: Right. Yes, I know. You have to get away from your mentors in order to do that, at some point.

Rabkin: You did some fiction writing yourself as an undergraduate.

Wilkes: Yeah, I did. Not a lot. I actually did some poetry too. But I never saved any of it. I published a couple of poems in a literary magazine and that was it. But yeah, fiction writing. Reading Conrad just sent me off writing. That's something that I wasn't expecting. That was in Vogler's class. Vogler really seemed to have a handle on Conrad and what he was really about, the immensity of the ocean and the kind of character it took to live on the ocean and work on the ocean. Since I was fishing at the same time, it was especially moving to me. So that was my first story, the first story that I published in the campus literary magazine, "The Roc."

Rabkin: Tell me about the short story competition.

Wilkes: Well, Jasper Rose, who was one of the professors our first year, unforgettable Jasper.

Rabkin: Yes, speaking of inimitable teaching styles and personal styles.

Wilkes: That's right. He decided we had to have a literary competition. So it was also poetry. There was a poetry prize and a short story prize. That was all his doing. Even though he was a professor of art history, he was an Englishman and

he had all of the trappings of being an Englishman, wide-ranging interests—he was a very good artist himself, for instance. Nobody knew what to make of him (laughs) and he offended people sometimes, students, because he would make some remark about their appearance, or something completely out of bounds. But it didn't matter because it was Jasper. (laughs) Men and women. If a man was sitting in the courtyard with his shirt off, he'd say, "Why don't you put your shirt on, young man?" Anyway, I really appreciated Jasper. He always liked to make himself known as an amateur. "I'm an amateur at everything." I thought, that's me, a mile wide and an inch deep.

I don't know, how did I get off on this?

Rabkin: Short stories.

Wilkes: The short story competition, right. Well, there was not much too it. We handed in our work and they judged it.

Rabkin: Were the judges made up of faculty?

Wilkes: Only faculty, right. I think it was only lit faculty, but I'm not positive about that. They didn't tell you who judged your story. But one of them was George Amis, and he came up to me afterwards, after the winners were announced, and told me that they had discussed my story and they told me I should be encouraged. He didn't say in what way.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs) He left it for me to complete.

Rabkin: Did it strike you as an affirmation and a compliment, or somewhat ambiguous? How did you take it?

Wilkes: Well, I took it as a compliment. I was eager for compliments, so I took everything as a compliment. But I was a little amused by his being so standoffish in the way he said it. It was like: can you hear me down there?

Rabkin: “We on high,” in the passive voice, “think that you should be encouraged.”

Wilkes: That’s right. (laughs) Anyway, it was great to have anything at all from a faculty member.

Rabkin: In addition, did you win the competition?

Wilkes: I did. I won the competition. Yes, I should have said that. I won and the second year they had the same competition over again and I got second place. And the guy who won it was the guy who got second place the first year, Tom Cuthbertson. He was one of the more remarkable students we had in the junior class, this small junior class.

Rabkin: Ah. So you and Tom Cuthbertson were in the same class.

Wilkes: Yes, we were. Tom had transferred to UCSC from Stanford, and I had transferred to UCSC from San Francisco City College, as I’ve already said. And so that tells you the range of juniors. There were other examples of that, too. You either came from Reed or Stanford or Antioch, or one of the community colleges in the state of California, and nothing in between.

Rabkin: This too is getting a little ahead of ourselves, but it occurs to me that you and Tom later shared a certain distinction, which is that you both published books with Ten Speed Press.

Wilkes: That's right. And that was Tom's doing. See, Tom and I became friends, after or during or while being literary competitors in the short story genre. We got to be friends. When he published his bicycle book, his first bicycle book, I congratulated him on that. He published a second book too, called *Bike Tripping*, which didn't sell as well. His first book was a real knockout. It sold a lot of copies.

Rabkin: I had a copy.

Wilkes: He was able to buy a house with the proceeds.

Rabkin: Wow. This was called *Anybody's Bike Book*.

Wilkes: *Anybody's Bike Book*, yeah. Anyhow, I came back from Europe and I had a medium-sized pile of manuscript, my Volkswagen book, with illustrations from an eighteen-year-old German girl artist, the girlfriend of one of my German male friends. I had sent it around to the big publishers and they all rejected it. I told Tom Cuthbertson about that, not even thinking, hey, maybe Ten Speed Press would be interested. But he said, "I'll tell Phil." Phil Wood was the owner, the publisher of Ten Speed Press. He said, "I'll tell Phil about this and you can see what he says. He may say nothing." But he wanted to see the manuscript. I said, "Well, how do we do this?" He said, "Well, he'll come to you." I said, "Really? That's unusual." I was living in Saratoga at the time, with Linda, my second

wife, in her family home in Saratoga. Phil came down and we had lunch together at the house and he took the manuscript off with him and published it.

The problem with that book turned out to be nothing having to do with the book at all, because I had plenty of people in Europe, American tourists, say, "Hey, how did you do that?" They would see my old bus with an oval plate, which meant it was meant for export. The only cars you ever saw with an oval plate were brand-new cars. They were delivery-abroad-program cars. And I figured out how to do this with an old beat-up van. It really got people's attention. So I thought there would be a market for it, because it's kind of a hassle to have your own car, especially if it's an old car, in Europe. But it's worth it because you can extend your range immeasurably with your own car.⁴

Rabkin: And at the time it was also then worth it to ship the vehicle back to the States.

Wilkes: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I bought the van for \$300 and put an engine in it for another \$300. Basically that was my total outlay. It cost \$100 to ship it to New York and I drove it across the country, never had a problem at all with that.

Rabkin: So a book about that subject seemed perfect for the times. And there was a big market, lots of young people interested in inexpensive travel around Europe and having a car and bringing it back. But then something happened.

⁴ John Wilkes, *How to Buy a Used Volkswagen in Europe, Keep it Alive, and Bring it Home!* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1973).

Wilkes: That's right. Then something happened. And that was Richard Nixon floating the dollar, taking the dollar off the gold standard and making it a currency that competed in value with all the other Western currencies. That meant the dollar fell in value. That, in turn, meant that hippies couldn't afford to go to Europe anymore and my book died. (laughs) But it was fun while it lasted.

Rabkin: (laughs) Well, let's jump back again, if we may, and catch up to that point. Because we haven't really talked about how you got to Europe that time.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: You graduated from UC Santa Cruz in '67.

Wilkes: In 1967. We graduated in early June, I believe. And that same month was the first and only Monterey Pop Festival, which was epoch-making in the rock and roll world—bands that had been San Francisco bands—Janis Joplin's Big Brother and the Holding Company and Jimi Hendrix and all these people—they all became world famous after the Monterey Pop Festival. And one of the sophomore women, who was then going into her junior year got me a job there. She was the tallest woman in her class. She was about six foot one.

Rabkin: Wow.

Wilkes: And we became friends. Her father was the principal of a big high school in Monterey. And he was well connected—it was an old Monterey family and he was very well connected and got her a job working at the Festival. And she got me as a job as an isle captain—that was my job, basically an usher, and

supposedly a bouncer. Because they were worried about all the hippies just rushing the stage, basically, and getting the most expensive seats and refusing to leave them, which is exactly what happened. I tried to get them out. Nobody would help me and I was all by myself. So I gave up on that.

Rabkin: Wow.

Wilkes: (laughs) And I got chewed out by the head of the ushers. We all had to wear these straw hats that said “Seat Power” on them. Because of Flower Power: Seat Power.

Rabkin: Was there a daisy?

Wilkes: No, no actual flowers. Just the words. And we had red and white striped shirts and looked like something out of the 1920s. Anyhow, it was a fantastic experience. One band after another came up and they just played unbelievably well. I’d heard them already. They were in San Francisco playing in the Panhandle when I was going to City College, and I used to walk down there and listen to them. The Grateful Dead were then called the Warlocks and they had a stage and an electric generator that was run by a diesel engine. That’s how they got their power and you could hardly hear them over the engine, but it was okay.

Rabkin: So your musical tastes extended beyond jazz.

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. I kept up with all the San Francisco bands, although I did prefer—well, they were actually playing something close to jazz themselves. It

was looser and more blues, straight blues. But it was interesting. They [the Warlocks] had some really good musicians then, Jerry Garcia being one of them. I mean, he was fantastic. He started playing country music. In fact, one of our faculty members, Marsh Leicester, played fiddle with him in those days.

So after Monterey Pop I packed my bags and moved up to Berkeley with a lady friend. She found a fantastic apartment in the hills, on Tamalpais Road. This was a basement converted to an apartment. It was a one-bedroom apartment, and on the small side, but big enough. But the best thing was it had a fantastic view.

Rabkin: Out over the bay.

Wilkes: Yes, you can see both bridges and the whole thing. So that's what she found for us. I won't name her because she's still around in town.

Rabkin: I don't suppose you remember what the rent was on that Tamalpais apartment, just for kicks.

Wilkes: I do. It was \$150 a month.

Rabkin: Oh, my goodness. Was it a studio apartment?

Wilkes: Well, no, it had a bedroom. It was sort of long and skinny. The bedroom was at one end and then the eating area and kitchen and then a little living room. It was just three rooms. It even had a little study. That's where I used to write. But it was a tiny study. It was just a box.

A [Brief] Stint at UC Berkeley

Rabkin: So you moved to Berkeley with the intention of going to graduate school.

Wilkes: I did. I got an honorary Woodrow Wilson fellowship. The fellowship had money attached to it until my year. And they ran out of funds. So they just called it an honorary Woodrow Wilson, with the idea that any school that got one of us honorary Woodrow Wilson fellows would give us a nice fellowship from their own money, Berkeley being a case in point. And they did. They gave me a fellowship. But it wasn't quite enough to live on. And I was not eligible for a TAship the first semester there. But I had saved a fair amount of money. I was good at saving money because it was fashionable to live close to the earth in those days. So I did. (laughs)

So I started classes. But it was the end of the Summer of Love and the beginning of the Autumn of Hate. Stop the Draft week was going on the first week of classes. Telegraph Avenue and Sproul Plaza were full of demonstrators. A police helicopter was dropping tear gas on Sproul Plaza.

Rabkin: In '67.

Wilkes: Yeah, fall of '67. That was the year before—there was another big bad fall, in '68. But this was the first one. It was not as bad as the second one, so it's not remembered as well. But I can tell you there was a helicopter. You had to walk through tear gas to get to class, literally. People were coming into class like this.

Rabkin: Squinting and eyes running.

Wilkes: Yeah, it was serious. There were highway patrolmen up and down Telegraph and the National Guard came one day. I thought, Man, this is no fun. I can't concentrate.

The other thing that happened to me in my first week of graduate school at Berkeley was they gave us in one class a long list of books to—secondary sources—and they wanted us to read as many of them as we could during the semester. I went to the library and found they didn't let you into the stacks as they did at Santa Cruz. You had to give somebody at a counter an order and they'd go in and get it for you. I gave them the whole list and I said, "Whatever you can find on this list I would like to take out." They came back and said, "Nothing. Not a single book on this list."

Rabkin: At the UC Berkeley library.

Wilkes: That's right. And that was basically what killed me.

Rabkin: Was it that those titles had already been checked out?

Wilkes: Yeah, I think that's what it was. I think people got to that library before I did, in my class. It was probably that simple. But it was demoralizing for me, because I was used to have everything I wanted at Santa Cruz.

Rabkin: At your fingertips.

Wilkes: Yeah, it was too much of a change for me.

Rabkin: That's ironic, given Santa Cruz, the tiny, little spunky start-up campus, and UC Berkeley, the venerable, old founding institution.

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: And that the resources you had access to at Santa Cruz were so much more abundant in that particular context.

Wilkes: Well, it was in every way, because they [UCSC] started with more than they needed to. They wanted to have some real critical mass at the very beginning. And then they had this tiny group of students. And Page Smith, he said—let's see if I can get it right—"Never has so much been done by so many, for so few." He said that at one of the first talks he gave us.

Rabkin: So that would have been a very heady time to be a student at Santa Cruz.

Wilkes: It was.

Rabkin: The admissions process was so highly selective because it was so competitive to get in. And the institution had more resources than they needed for that small, initial group.

Wilkes: That's right. They hired far more faculty than they needed to teach the classes. They had more books from the library. They didn't have that many but they would get them from the other campuses through interlibrary loan. It was very active. We used it. Never lacked for the books we needed, never.

Rabkin: Was Santa Cruz already running that jitney between the campus and the Berkeley library?

Wilkes: Yeah. It didn't start immediately, I don't think, but it was definitely running when I started graduate school at Santa Cruz, which was in the fall of '68. The jitney was running then.

Rabkin: So you were at Berkeley initially for a week.

Wilkes: That's right. Initially and—

Rabkin: Terminally. (laughs)

Studying German in Europe

Wilkes: I just said, okay, I've got this money here. I'm going to buy a one-way trip to Europe and stay as long as I can. And while I'm there I'm going to work on my German and hope that I can get into the UC Santa Cruz PhD program in literature, which will reward me for that approach to my education.

Rabkin: Did you need proficiency in German in order to be accepted into the grad program?

Wilkes: You needed to have made a pretty good start at proficiency, at least. They wanted people who were fluent, if they could get them. But that wasn't going to be the top priority for them. So I thought, well, I have some background in German already and if I can get it up higher, I will. So I went to Europe that way, without knowing how I was going to go about this.

I went to Vienna first because I wanted to reach out to my father's history in Vienna. He was there when he was seven, eight years old, nine years old—I don't know how long they were there, two or three years. They were living in the Schoenbrunn Palace, which had been the home of the Habsburg emperors of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Rabkin: How did your family manage that?

Wilkes: How did they manage that? At the end of World War I, the empire collapsed and the royal family moved out of the palace. My grandfather, my father's father, had befriended Gustav Krupp, head of the Krupp industrial complex. And Krupp had an apartment in this palace. It was about one-fourth, maybe, of the second or third floor of the palace. So Krupp said, "Why don't you live in our apartment? We never use it. We have a staff and you can make use of that. And a car—" So they did.

That was when my grandfather was there helping the Austrians develop a national health program. This was right after World War I ended and Austria was—the country had never had any kind of national health program. It was just individual doctors and patients. So he went over there to organize such a thing and got it going. And that was his reward, was the free apartment and—although Krupp, the Krupp family was in Germany and Austria both. You've

heard of the Krupp family. It's pretty well known. They built all the armaments for Nazi Germany, among other things.⁵

Rabkin: So your father had spent some childhood time in Austria.

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: And you went there initially in recognition of that, trying to connect with those roots.

Wilkes: That's right. Actually, he took riding lessons in the Spanish Riding School, which is centuries old. It's right next to the Opera House, you know the Lipizzaner?

Rabkin: The stallions.

Wilkes: The stallions, the ponies, I call them, but they're not ponies. They are trained there in the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. So I went in and watched them train the horses. The horses were jumping around, beautiful. So I felt like I connected with my dad.

Rabkin: And did you say you enrolled in a Berlitz course?

Wilkes: A Berlitz course, yeah. I thought, well, how do I take German here? Well, here's a Berlitz course. I was living in a pension, a very cheap one, downtown in the medieval part of the city. And there was a Berlitz course the

⁵ In Nazi Germany, the Krupp Works was a center for German rearmament. The Nuremberg trials convicted members of the Krupp family for the company's extensive exploitation of Jewish slave labor, primarily from Auschwitz.

next block over. I went in. It was just conversation, just here's what German sounds like. And then you repeat it. And I thought, this is not the way I study a language. I want to study the grammar and do it right.

But I didn't know what else to do. So I ended up going to the University of Vienna, which is also nearby, and they also offered German courses. So I enrolled in one of those. And it was a lecture course. There were two hundred students in the room and there was a nice, young woman trying to teach us German. She spoke English but not everybody spoke English either in that class. It was all races and nationalities. So I wasn't getting anywhere with that either.

Then I heard about the so-called Goethe Institute, which is run and financed by the German government. And it's for foreigners to come and spend an immersion, six hours a day of class, five days a week. You just sign your soul over to the Goethe Institute for three-month sessions. They start with basic German and they go to *Mittelstufe*, intermediate. And then advanced.

I was able to test well in German. That's my only strength in life, I can test well in things. I got a good score on the German test and I went right in with the—there were two levels of *Mittelstufe*, two levels of middle German. I got into the first level of intermediate on my testing. And the other people in my class—and the classes were small. It was very much like Russian language school, very much like that. The teaching was all in German. The teachers were PhD's. In Germany a PhD is not quite what it is in this country. It's easier to get one there. It doesn't take five years or six years. The dissertation is the next level up, and that's the *Habilitation*.

Rabkin: So you can earn a PhD without a dissertation, and then you can elect or not to proceed to the dissertation-writing level.

Wilkes: That's right. And you have to be accepted, yet again, to that level. Very few people go beyond the doctorate. But they are quite good people. They often end up teaching high school, the gymnasium, the top 10 percent of the German high school students.

[phone rings]

Rabkin: I'm going to stop this for a second.

Okay, back from that little break. Where is the Goethe Institute?

Wilkes: Okay, the Goethe Institute is located in probably eighteen different small, very picturesque German towns, most of them in the Bavarian Alps, or southern Germany, but a few scattered through northern Germany. Now that East Germany is part of Germany again, they've probably extended them into there, because East Germany is probably more picturesque than West Germany in some ways. It was the heartland of Germany.

I was in two different towns. One was Kochel am See, which is near Munich. By near, I mean you go straight up into the Alps from Munich, and one of the first towns you meet, or run into, is Kochel. It's a true Bavarian town with huge, beautiful murals painted on the sides of the houses and everything is very Bavarian and just gorgeous. By this time it was winter and it was snowing a lot. It was even more beautiful then.

I was able to quit smoking. I was addicted to cigarettes. I'd been smoking for ten years by that time. I was twenty-six years old and I looked around at all this snow and these beautiful trees, with deep-bending branches with lots of snow on them. And I said, how can I keep smoking when I'm in an environment like this? I cannot do it. And I quit cold turkey, never smoked again.

Rabkin: Literally cold.

Wilkes: Yeah, literally, yeah. So I'm proud of that.

And the teaching and learning at the Goethe Institute was at a very high level. It was exactly what I wanted. And the students there were also very interesting. They were from all over the world. Most of them were sent by their governments. It was for diplomats and most of the people there were, in one way or another, in the diplomatic corps of their countries. They were from Arab countries, Turkey. The Turkish chief of police for the whole country was in my class.

Rabkin: Did you make friendships or social connections that lasted?

Wilkes: Yes. Well, they lasted for a while. I mean, they haven't lasted to now, because this was '67, '68, winter of. But they lasted long enough for me to get back to Europe and visit some of them. Yeah. They visited me in Santa Cruz too later, a couple of them. But it was just gorgeous. And I got a fellowship.

Rabkin: From?

Wilkes: From the Goethe Institute itself. That paid for my room and board and instruction.

Rabkin: Wow!

Wilkes: I mean, it really covered almost everything but beer. Because the food was all provided by a restaurant. We would go there and we had chits and we would get two meals a day at the restaurant. Breakfast was at the actual Goethe Institute, where we got the traditional German hard roll and jelly/jam and butter, as much as you wanted. And good coffee, as much as you wanted.

Rabkin: It sounds like a hard-working time, but a beautiful respite from what you'd been the midst of in Berkeley.

Wilkes: It was. It was exactly what I wanted. And I didn't even know it existed, when I went there. I found it. So I was very pleased. Basically, the Goethe Institute supported me the whole time I was in Europe. I went through three, three-month classes and got out. At the end of the last one, I had met another student, another American student who had been accepted to Berkeley's graduate PhD program in art history. So he was going to be driving to Berkeley, so we drove together in his sports car. He had a special unbelievable car. He was a rich kid, a Texan from Amarillo. Driving into the town [he was from] there was a great big grain elevator with his last name on it vertically. (laughs) You get the idea. He had this car custom-equipped. It was a Sunbeam Tiger, which had a Ford V-8 engine with racing equipment on it, and racing wheels. And a roll cage, not just a roll bar, but a roll cage. We drove that thing across the country.

Rabkin: Pretty fast, I imagine.

Wilkes: Well, you had to pay attention not to go a hundred miles an hour, because all you had to do was touch the gas and it was gone.

Rabkin: So you flew back from Germany to New York or someplace.

Wilkes: No, we didn't fly back. He and I found out about a student ship.

Rabkin: Oh, fantastic!

Wilkes: It went from London to New York and we came back on the student ship.

Rabkin: Those were the days.

Wilkes: Yeah. It was \$150. That included everything—you know, food and ten days of good times.

Rabkin: And he was from this agricultural overlord family of some kind.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: Born with a silver something in his mouth—

Wilkes: Yeah, with a strong Texas accent. He ended up dropping out of the art history program, too. He did. He liked Volkswagens—we both had that in common (although I didn't have one, that was not the trip where I had one, that was my second trip)—but he bought a van and he also met a Texan who had a great, big automotive garage in Berkeley which rebuilt Volkswagen engines.

That was its specialty. And transaxles. And this guy got my friend to invest in his garage. My friend gave him a lot of money so he could put in hydraulic lifts, because as it was they were using hydraulic jacks to get the cars off the ground. It was a big space, a concrete floor. My friend lent him enough money to do this very expensive job equipping the place with lifts. He never paid it back. The guy was a total crook. But my friend decided to go into the dope business at this point. So he went back to Germany and bought two VW vans with false bottoms. Now, they had these false bottoms to protect them from rusting out.

Rabkin: Oh, I see. Under the undercarriage there's another level, layer.

Wilkes: Another layer of sheet metal. And you can unbolt it; it comes down. He filled the false floors of two vans with hashish. Full. I don't know how much that was but it had to be half a ton, at least.

Rabkin: Was this before the era of dope-sniffing dogs?

Wilkes: Well, no, because they caught him. The German cops caught him. He didn't even get them out of the country. He ended up in a German prison.

Rabkin: What a story!

Wilkes: Yeah. So he studied German in his German prison cell and when he came up for parole he told the judge why he was there and what he wanted to do. And the judge said, "You speak German as well as Thomas Mann."

Rabkin: (laughs) Did that help him out a little?

Wilkes: (laughs) Yeah, he got out.

Rabkin: Wow. Okay, so you zipped across North America in this Sunbeam and then what happened?

Graduate School at UC Santa Cruz

Wilkes: I came back to Santa Cruz at that point and got an apartment with the same landlady I had had when I was an undergraduate, a year later, and started graduate school. There were eighteen or twenty of us, I think, in the first class.

Rabkin: Was this the first graduate class in literature?

Wilkes: First graduate class in literature. People came from all over the country. We had an Australian in the class. It was a pretty impressive group for a brand-new program at a school that was known, but not necessarily for graduate education yet. And we got going.

Rabkin: Were there any other former UCSC undergrads in your cohort?

Wilkes: I don't think so. I don't remember any. Good question, but I don't remember any. If there were, there weren't many. They were all strangers to me, if I can remember. Yes, there were, there had to be—

Anyway, I don't know what to say. In some ways it felt like a speeded-up version of undergraduate education.

Rabkin: You had many of the same professors.

Wilkes: I had *all* the same professors because I basically stuck to them on purpose. I liked the Yale approach. I was feeling like I was getting a Yale education for a good price.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs) People advised me to reach out and try [other professors]—because by then Murray Baumgarten was teaching.⁶ There were people from Berkeley and Harvard teaching, Durling—I don't know if you remember him, but he was—

Rabkin: He was a good friend of my parents', so I knew him when I was a kid.

Wilkes: (laughs) Okay. Yeah, he was a really nice guy, and very smart, a really good teacher. But I sat in on a class of his and he started right off talking about the historical context of the work we were going to be reading. And nobody had done that in a Yale-y class. I thought, oh, I don't want to do this. That was stupid but that's what I did.

So I stuck to the old profs that I had had before and got pretty quickly through the program, since I was able to put full time into it. By that time I had got the GI bill. The so-called Cold War GI Bill came into effect in '67 or '68, just in time for me to use it for four years of graduate study. It wasn't as munificent as the one they have now, which pays everything, living expenses—it pays enough to cover

⁶ See Irene Reti, Interviewer and Editor, *Murray's Universe: An Oral History with UCSC Professor Murray Baumgarten, 1966-2014* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2014.) Available in full text and audio at <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/baumgarten>

the rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Santa Cruz, believe it or not, two thousand dollars a month or something for housing alone. And then food and then all your tuition. It's amazing. Mine was not like that. But it was welcome, in any case.

Rabkin: Did you work while you were in grad school?

Wilkes: I did not.

Rabkin: You had TAs.

Wilkes: I had TAs. I had TAs and fellowships all the way through. And that was enough. I got through in five years, including my dissertation.

Rabkin: Pretty good.

Wilkes: Not bad. I was pleased, although I think they took pity on me because I went through a divorce. Right when [my wife] and I took our orals we split and I think I got some sympathy out of that action. (laughs)

Rabkin: Which helped expedite your completion of the program?

Wilkes: I think it did. I think it made my semi-acceptable writing acceptable. (laughs)

Rabkin: Well, tell me if there were any memorable courses or teaching experiences that you think are important to talk about.

Wilkes: Well, for me personally the most memorable teaching experience I had was taking over Tom Vogler's three-quarter Romanticism sequence, so that he

could go on sabbatical. They gave me a 50 percent time lecturer appointment to teach these three courses. And they were lecture courses. I had never taught a lecture course before. I had never lectured to a large group of students. I had always been a section leader. I liked being a section leader just fine but I was nervous about lecturing, it turned out with good reason, because I wasn't good at it. I really wasn't. I would write my lectures out and then I wouldn't read what I'd written. I would just talk and I'd wander like I'm doing now. And the students would look puzzled. I realized I wasn't doing a good job and I just didn't know what to do about it because I couldn't seem to improve. I wrote outlines and I wouldn't follow my own outlines. I thought, this is boring, and then I'd start talking and exfoliating things that maybe didn't need to be—It just didn't work. I didn't feel good and I don't think they enjoyed it. I mean, my evaluations weren't horrible but they weren't great either. My section evaluations were better, always.

So I decided that I was not meant to be a lecturer. And because I was training to be a professor of English, I was going to have to be a lecturer. I mean, there was no way around it. And in job interviews they would probably include lecturing to a large audience. I would have failed, probably.

Rabkin: So that was a turning point for you.

Wilkes: It was. It definitely was. And the other turning point is an odd one because it actually stemmed almost directly from my learning the Yale close reading approach to literature, which allowed me to experience poetry, in particular, on an emotional level that I had never experienced it before. What

happened to me then, of course, when I started teaching poetry as a graduate student was that I got choked up. I would get emotional and I couldn't seem to stop doing that. Whenever I tried to read a beautiful passage or a passage that especially moved me, I would be stopped dead. So I thought, I can't lecture and I can't even read a poem in class. I mean, what am I doing here? I couldn't imagine teaching without reading a few things out loud. And yet, I couldn't seem to overcome the lump in the throat.

Rabkin: I think if I were a student in a poetry course and my section leader or teacher choked up reading a poem I would find it moving and inspiring.

Wilkes: Well, I don't know, maybe somebody did in the class, but I found it horribly embarrassing. I couldn't get over it.

Rabkin: Interesting.

Wilkes: So I thought, maybe this just isn't for me. Maybe there's something else I can do.

The Beginnings of Teaching Science Writing at UC Santa Cruz

And that's what led to science writing, in a way. Because meanwhile, I had started writing for magazines already. While I was writing my dissertation is when I did that, in fact before then. I found it very exciting to do that and I didn't have to worry about audiences at all. So that seemed a perfect combination.

Rabkin: Live audiences, immediate audiences.

Wilkes: Exactly. Sorry, yes. Human flesh and blood audiences in my face.

Rabkin: (laughs) Real-time audiences.

Wilkes: So I was trying my hand at that without having to depend on it for money. So it was fun and no pain.

I was still teaching. This was the year I taught Vogler's three-quarter Romanticism sequence. It was the winter quarter of that year and what happened was the Natural Sciences Division got a grant to start a class in science writing for the public. The grant was enough money to hire somebody for two quarters, to teach two quarters, the same course in the spring as in the winter. As the teacher of that course they hired a man named Richard S. Lewis, who had been a newspaperman most of his life. He had been the city editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. He retired from that and then he became the editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Then he retired from that and made himself available to UCSC.

The people behind that course were physicists—well, they were not only physicists, but the physicists at UCSC have always been the strong group. They are very active and distinguished and articulate at meetings (laughs) and things like that. They basically decided they wanted him because he was editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. They read that *Bulletin* and they wanted to talk to him about his political position, because they thought he was a little too pro-nuke, I think (nuclear power, not nuclear weapons). They wanted to straighten him out and he wasn't about to be straightened out, it turned out. So they ended up not liking him. They hadn't met him in person, see. It was all by paper, correspondence. This was when flying across the country was a big deal. In fact, they offered the job to Isaac Asimov. He was then in Boston. He was a professor

at BU [Boston University]. I don't know if you knew that, but he was a professor in biology. And he said, "I don't fly."

Rabkin: Really! Amazing.

Wilkes: I saw the letter. He hand-wrote it.

Rabkin: He was a wonderful science writer.

Wilkes: Oh, I know he was.

Rabkin: When I taught high school biology, fresh out of college, I ended up finding some of his books about science and using them as texts with my students, because they were not only lucid, but so engaging and lively.

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. I know. I'll never forget when *I, Robot*, his first collection of stories came out. That was in 1953, or so. I was fresh in Santa Cruz. I was going to the East Side Library, which used to be on that little pie-shaped piece of land where Soquel [Avenue] and Water [Street] come together, that horrible intersection. There was a little library there on that spit of land there. It's not a spit. It's an island. I used to ride my bike there and I got *I, Robot* out of that library as a brand-new book and read it. I was just floored. I said, wow! This guy is really something.

Rabkin: So had he been a flyer, he might have ended up teaching science writing at UC Santa Cruz.

Wilkes: He would have had the job. It would have been a temporary job. But because he was already a professor at Boston University they probably would

have arranged a full professorship for him. I think that would have happened. I'm *sure* it would have. I know on the Santa Cruz end it would have been very welcome. He didn't want to leave Boston. That was clear.

And this other guy interested the physicists and then they ended up not agreeing with each other.

Rabkin: Did they bring him out for a while first?

Wilkes: They did. He taught the course. Yeah, he taught the first course. It was during that winter quarter that he fell out with them.

Rabkin: And what years are we talking about here?

Wilkes: This was 1975-1976.

Rabkin: Wow. And was it the physics faculty that was initially behind enterprising this whole idea of having somebody teach a science writing class?

Wilkes: Well, it was a group that included physicists. And it was George Hammond, a professor of chemistry. He had been the dean of natural sciences. And then there was a molecular biologist, Ed Dratz, who also wanted to see this happen. And they all got together and decided to do it. And as I said, they got this grant. It was good for two-quarters and then they were going to have to decide what to do next.

Rabkin: And where did the money come from?

Wilkes: The Dreyfuss Foundation. I'd never heard of that either and haven't heard of it since. It's not that big a foundation, I don't think. But it was a foundation grant.

What happened was I heard about this course through the grapevine and I thought, Richard S. Lewis would probably like to (because I know how hard it is for people to get to know the UCSC campus. It's just baffling to new people), so I said, I can show him around. I can introduce him to people, and to the town, the campus. By this time I had already sold an article to *Road and Track*. It didn't come out in the magazine—you know, they take forever to come out in the magazine, but I'd sold it to them. So I said, I'm going to learn how to do this from a pro. And he was a pro. He had been a war correspondent in World War II. In fact, he had a limp, a fairly bad limp. He'd walked on a land mine as a war correspondent. So he was in pain. He could get around but it wasn't fun. And in those days you had to carry typewriters, electric typewriters. And you had to carry these overhead projectors to have a class. Different things needed to be carried. Equipment was bigger and heavier in those days.

Rabkin: So you were probably a godsend for him.

Wilkes: Yeah, I was his pack mule. I carried everything. So he was grateful to me, and he said, "Look, I can help you get into this business by reading your stuff and telling you what I think of it." I said, "Can I audit your class? I want to see what you do as a teacher."

So I audited the first class. And during that quarter was when he fell out with the scientists, especially the physicists, because they didn't agree with his views on nuclear power. So he said, "I'm not going to do the second course." He'd thought he might want to get a job at Santa Cruz, a permanent job, a third job in retirement. It might have been possible if the science faculty had accepted him, but they didn't, after meeting him and talking with him for a while.

So they had this money left over. They had enough money for a second course and he didn't want to teach it. So they advertised it. That's when they tried to get Isaac Asimov, at that point, and I saw his letter then.

I applied and got it. I taught the course. One of the reasons I got it was that I had already sat through his first course and I had his syllabus. I had everything that he used. They thought that was enough to make me a candidate, even though I was coming in from outside science. He, too, had come in from outside science. He had been a journalist. He wasn't trained in science at all. So, in that sense, I wasn't that far off the beam.

So I got the second course. In that course I had some excellent students. One, in particular, was a senior in biology—these were undergraduates mostly (there were a couple of graduate students too), but the best students were undergraduates. And the best of all of them—and there weren't that many; there were like eight or nine—was Pat Murphy. You may know her.

Rabkin: I met her.

Wilkes: You met her. She was unbelievable. She had already published science fiction in *Amazing Stories* and one other well-known science fiction magazine. And she won a Nebula science fiction writing award for stuff she had written at UCSC as an undergraduate. Anyway, she was so good and so hard-working I said, "Okay, I'm going to get you an internship somehow so you can do this for real, out in the world." I didn't know how to do this. I'd never done anything like that before. But I was so full of energy given to me by my students. I was taking it in from them, you know. They were so excited to be writing for their parents and their grandmothers and all this, that they could never do with their classes in science (because they were all science majors).

Rabkin: I see.

Wilkes: I just thought, wow, this is the kind of teaching I had always hoped to be able to do, with no drawbacks.

Rabkin: Yes.

Wilkes: So I got in my car and drove up to Sacramento. I said, "I'm going to find you something to do with the state legislature, even though I don't know anything about the state legislature. I don't even know what the houses are called. One's the senate, but what's the other one called, the House of Lords?"

Rabkin: (laughs) The Assembly of Lords.

Wilkes: Anyway, I knocked on doors and I quickly found the place where Pat Murphy ended up, which was the Assembly Office of Research. They have such

a thing. The Senate does too, but it's only like two people. The Assembly Office of Research is like fifty people. It's big. They help with researching bills. That's the main thing they do. But the other thing they do, and where we came in and Pat Murphy came in big time, was they summarize bills. Just before the Assembly has to vote on them they have to get one-page summaries. They don't have time to read the whole bill. There are too many of them.

Rabkin: And they run to tens or hundreds of pages.

Wilkes: Yeah, some of them do. So they get one-page summaries that follow a very distinctive formula. But not many people can write these things, it turns out. They can't read fast enough. They can't write well enough.

Rabkin: They can't process the information well enough.

Wilkes: That's right. So Pat could. She was a star at this. She knocked them out. I mean, she really knocked their socks off. So that was our first internship. That was our beachhead. We called her our shock troop. That was a summer internship for her.

Rabkin: Had she just graduated?

Wilkes: She had just graduated and that was a summer internship that paid enough to live on. She opened the door for more to come. So they gave me the job of teaching the course every quarter. They came up with money somewhere. I don't know. They didn't get another grant. It was funded from the natural sciences slush fund. But they paid me half-time to teach a course. It was two

introductory and one intermediate, I guess you'd call it workshop, at the end. The third quarter was a workshop. But it was all the same kind of thing.

I didn't start *Science Notes* either. One of the secretaries in the natural sciences division started *Science Notes*.

Rabkin: So this was the first issue of *Science Notes* from the University of California, Santa Cruz. And it came out in the early seventies, '73, '74.

Wilkes: Somewhere around there, yeah. There might have been two or three different issues of it. She got a promotion and a better job, and didn't have as much time to do that as she had had. So she said, "I don't want to do this anymore. I don't need it anymore. I got what I wanted. Do you want it?" Because I had gotten to know her. She was the secretary to the dean of natural sciences. I said, "Sure, I'll take it over."

Rabkin: And did that then become a vehicle for your students to publish their work?

Wilkes: That's right. That was the first one. So it all fit. And Pat Murphy, in the meantime had become so popular with the legislators, with the assemblymen and women, that they had her pose for a picture with the speaker of the assembly. And they sent that to UCSC. I saw it. And the next thing that happened was I sent them four interns. That was the winter quarter. I had a nice class, a bigger class, because I advertised it myself. I put handbills all over campus and I got about fifty people and I cut it down to fifteen and taught them.

They were all terrific. Nobody ever quite reached Pat's prominence, in many ways. But they came real close in different ways.

So I taught the class in the fall and I had four people picked out for winter quarter internships. Pat had left such a good impression—she had left there by then and went to work for—I think she went to work straightaway for Sea World, I think it was.

Rabkin: So she went from the legislature to Sea World, and then Sea World eventually to the Exploratorium, where she had a long career.

Wilkes: Right. I think so. There might have been another stop along the way but she never had any trouble getting jobs, that's for sure.

Anyway, I stayed in touch with the people that she put me in touch with and drove back up to Sacramento, talked to them some more. They took four interns and paid them full time, not a lot of money, but enough to live on. They did the same thing Pat did. They had specialties. They asked for that. They wanted somebody in computers, somebody in marine science, especially in mariculture (oysters, abalone, especially abalone because they were trying to do that and they weren't succeeding).

Sea Grant was interested in that too, and I sent interns to Sea Grant, in San Diego. Richard Harris—he was in the Southwest Fisheries Center, Richard Harris was. Dan Warrick, Joanne Silberner, Shannon Brownlee, and Pat. Pat did a second internship for us before she took a job. That's how she got to San Diego and how she went to Sea World. She went to Sea Grant and they produced, in one quarter,

a sixty-four page booklet for the public about what Sea Grant does. Sea Grant had never had such a thing before. The director of Sea Grant entered it into a competition for San Diego businesses and it won first place.

Rabkin: Best publication of a San Diego business, or something along those lines.

Wilkes: Right. So that got a lot of attention at UCSC. That redounded to my benefit, of course, and to the program's benefit that I was starting to envision by now. This is something that the world could use. This is not just a makeup, let's have fun teaching something or other. This is real.

So that's how it all started. I had interns going to San Diego to Southwest Fisheries. Martha Brown was at Southwest Fisheries. And Sea Grant and the state legislature.

Rabkin: Was Martha Brown in one of those undergraduate classes before becoming a graduate student in the program?

Wilkes: She was in Peter Radetsky's class. Yes, she was in an undergraduate class. She definitely went to Southwest Fisheries Center, because she was their best volleyball player. (laughs)

Rabkin: Can I ask you a question about these initial internships?

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: I'm wondering what pointed you toward legislative writing? It seems to me there might have been other venues or outlets where you might enterprised

internships for those first undergraduate students you taught. What made you decide on Sacramento as a place to try to create internships?

Wilkes: Well, I didn't have any entrees into any other kind of writing. I knew undergraduates who took my science writing class and my literature classes too, who had been in Sacramento working as interns for the legislature. They said it was a great experience.

Rabkin: I see. So legislative internships were kind of an established phenomenon that you could plug into.

Wilkes: They were. And they did require writing. Santa Cruz students in those days were good writers. In fact they, you've probably have heard this story, and you should have and so should anyone else who knows anything about Santa Cruz. The students were so good; they were such good writers that the literature faculty who would have been tasked with creating a writing program if such a need were recognized, said, "We don't need one. The students are already such good writers that we don't need a writing program." So there wasn't one for a while.⁷ And when they finally realized that the students we were getting were not quite as good writers as they had been in the first couple of years, or three. It wasn't more than three or four years. I remember when Don Rothman was—he was the first [lecturer in writing] hired, I think. And Carol Freeman was already here because Michael Freeman had been hired as a professor of history.

⁷ See Sarah Rabkin, Interviewer and Editor, *Teaching Writing in the Company of Friends: An Oral History with Carol Freeman* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2013.) Available in full text at <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/freeman>

Rabkin: From Yale.

Wilkes: From Yale. They met at Yale. They were both graduate students at Yale, and Carol finished her PhD in literature, I think it was American literature, at Yale. She was waiting to be invited to teach and she was invited to teach. And she taught literature but then she thought, what about the writing program? So she and Don—I think they were the first two. So that's how that got started.

Rabkin: But initially, the students were so strong as writers that the faculty didn't see a need for a writing program.

Wilkes: Exactly. That's the way it was.

Rabkin: And you were able, then, to send them to Sacramento, knowing that they would make the institution proud.

Wilkes: That's right. I knew they were up to snuff. Pat, of course, was the most in that way. But the others were not at all far behind her. Martha was another one like that. Martha was a terrific natural writer from the start, and a good person, the kind of person you could send into an internship and not worry about what would happen. (laughs) That was also a consideration. Fortunately we had students who could handle those kinds of pressures and enjoy it. They really liked it.

So internships were part of my plan from the very beginning. I depended on them, in a way, as a way to give students a next place to go after classes.

Rabkin: At one point did you begin envisioning graduate instruction in science writing?

Wilkes: I guess it was after a couple of years of teaching lower-division science writing and doing my own freelancing. It was in 1976—let's see—'76 was the first quarter that I first taught science writing myself. So '76, spring, fall '76-'77; '77-'78, I taught three quarters of science writing, two of beginning and one of intermediate. And then '78-'79—at the end of that year I went to M.I.T.. So that year I was doing the same thing over and over again and enjoying it very much.

And then what happened was I got a call, this was the most amazing thing in my life, I think. Do you recognize the name Emma Rothchild?

Rabkin: [shakes head??]

Wilkes: Emma Rothschild is the daughter of Lord Rotchchild, the English Rothchild family. He married twice and she was his last child. She ended up being invited by the president of M.I.T., who was a friend of their family, Jerome Wiesner—he said, “Why don't you come and take over the writing program because it's been politically problematic for M.I.T..” They were a bunch of radicals upsetting the engineers. (laughs) Emma was writing—at that point she had written a book about cars, a fascinating book in which she predicted the Zip Car and the Google car. This book came out in '73 or something. She was unbelievable! Brilliant.⁸

⁸ *Paradise Lost: The Decline of the Audio-Industrial Age* (1973).

Rabkin: What's a Google car?

Wilkes: The Google car is the car that you can program. It's out in your driveway and you get in and you can tell it to go someplace and then sit back and it will drive you there. It's completely robotic, completely. She saw that coming.

Rabkin: So she was a visionary, brilliant.

Wilkes: Yeah. And she was a terrific writer, too.

Okay, so that's background. I'm a resident preceptor at Crown College and teaching one course a quarter in science writing, and trying to get some writing done of my own. And the phone rings in my apartment and it's Emma Rothchild. I'd been reading the *New York Review of Books*. She was also writing long reviews, essay reviews for them. I recognized her name and her British accent, the very plummy accent she had. She said, "Would you be interested in—we're offering a job"—she was kind of hesitant, the way she talked because it was a cold call—"we've heard about your program. We wonder if you'd like to possibly apply for our job. We're going to launch a master's degree program in science writing at M.I.T.. It's already been approved by the senate and the woman who was going to direct it is going to have a baby soon and she decided she wants to spend at least a year with her baby at home. So suddenly we're in need of a person to launch this program that's on the books and has students coming to it in the fall."

Now this was in the spring. This was April, maybe.

Rabkin: Was she inviting you to apply for the position, or was she inviting you to come and do it?

Wilkes: She was inviting me to apply for it.

So I said, "Well, my goodness. I like it here a lot and I'm having a good time doing what I'm doing. But I know nobody says no to M.I.T.. So I'm interested."
(laughs)

She said, "Good. Then we'll arrange a hotel room and a flight for you to come out and talk to us." And that's what she did. I don't know how many other people applied or were interviewed, but they gave me the job within a week or so of my visit out there.

Rabkin: Had you finished your PhD at this point?

Wilkes: Yeah. I had. And that was important to her.

Segment 3

Writing for *Road and Track* and Other Publications

Wilkes: By the time I interviewed at M.I.T., I had written—the things that they liked were my Volkswagen book, believe it or not, and my *Road and Track* articles. What I had done that they *really* liked was that I had taught writing to executives at a large corporation, the Food Machinery Corporation (FMC) in the Santa Clara Valley.

Rabkin: How did that come about?

Wilkes: My brother-in law-was a vice president there. He said, “Do you want a job? We have some people who can’t write and they have to write. They need help.” So I said, sure. I drove over the hill and met with them for several sessions, read their work, edited it carefully, and showed them individually what I was doing. And that really rang the bell, not with Emma Rothchild particularly, but for the engineers who were involved in helping her choose somebody. Because half of my job was actually teaching technical writing. It wasn’t science writing at all, it was technical writing. So I was helping people with their master’s thesis on the inertial guidance system on the MX missile, for example.

Rabkin: Literally that.

Wilkes: Literally that. (laughs) So she thought I could do both and I could.

Rabkin: Tell me more about the *Road and Track* writing. How did that come about?

Wilkes: That came about when I was trying to write my dissertation. It was in the afternoon, a hot day. I was bogging down on my dissertation. The house in Saratoga was on more than an acre of land. And there was plenty of room for wrecked cars. It was behind trees so the neighbors couldn’t see it. And by this time I had two Bianchinas, neither of which ran, but between the two of them they were complete in terms of all of the parts.

Rabkin: This is a Fiat model.

Wilkes: This is a Fiat, right. I had been working on them with my wife's grandfather, Linda's grandfather, who was a real pro mechanic, eighty-two years old. That's all he'd ever done. What an amazing guy. So I was an apprentice mechanic, I guess you'd say, but I was working with him just about every day, late in the afternoon, on whatever project he was working on, not my cars. And then I thought, well, maybe he would be interested helping me get this thing running so I could write about it. So I asked him if he would. Most of the work he did was actually for clients who wanted him to repair their very expensive hand tools, you know, carpenters and people with special saws and drills and things like that. He was very good at fixing them up. He didn't really need the money and he liked the company. We had a lot of fun talking. He was German by birth. He'd grown up in this country. So he said, "Sure. Bring the engine over. We'll take it apart and look at it." I could pick it up and put it in my car. It was like a motorcycle engine. (laughs)

Rabkin: This is a very small car.

Wilkes: Yeah, it's very small. I mean, it makes a Volkswagen look huge.

Rabkin: Sort of comparable to those little Metropolitans.

Wilkes: Smaller than that. You've seen the Fiat 600s, the Fiat 500s that you now can buy for a pretty good price.

Rabkin: Those new ones that are so adorable.

Wilkes: The new ones, yeah. Those are actually half again as big as this car.

Rabkin: Oh, my goodness.

Wilkes: Yeah, that will give you a picture. And half again as heavy. So these things are nothing. They are tiny little things. They had engines that were smaller than most motorcycle engines. And they were ubiquitous in Italy when I was over there. So I thought, gee. They imported them into this country for about two years and they were a big flop. One of the people who bought one was George Lucas, when he was in high school. And he got into a terrible accident. He almost got killed in this accident, in one of those.

But anyway, it's got a funny history. They still restore them and drive them around. So we got the engine running, mostly due to my grandfather-in-law. Got the engine running, put it back in the Bianchina and did everything else that needed to be done to make it drivable. And I started driving it around, even on the freeway, believe it or not. That was insane. But I did it.

Rabkin: Because it was so small and crushable.

Wilkes: Yeah. And slow.

Rabkin: And not powerful.

Wilkes: Yeah. So I only did it once and never did it again because it would only go fifty miles an hour and that's not fast enough.

Rabkin: You know, I have a photograph of my parents on my father's Fulbright year in Italy. They spent a year in Rome. And they had a car during that time. This photograph is of them standing in a car which had a sun roof. And they

are—the car goes up their mid-thighs or something. They are sort of dwarfing the car. It was just absolutely tiny. I wonder if it was one of those?

Wilkes: It could well have been. Yeah, because that's the main model they made.

Rabkin: This would have been in the fifties.

Wilkes: The one I got running was a '59. They made cars the same forever in Italy. They'd just keep stamping out the same one over and over again. So yeah, it could well have been that.

Rabkin: So how did you come to write about this for *Road and Track*?

Wilkes: Well, I wrote about it just because wanted to write about it. I wrote a story and I didn't even have *Road and Track* in mind, really, when I wrote it. But when I was in the air force one of the things I used to love to read was *Road and Track* because there were all these great, interesting races going on around me in Berlin. Berlin had a race track and they had races there. And I went to them with a friend, another buddy, who was an expert in all European forms of car racing, including Formula One all the way down. So we saw all of it. And I thought, okay. I was reading *Road and Track* to keep up with all the cars that were being built and raced and road-tested. I thought, I love *Road and Track* and I probably have absorbed their style by now, so I think I'll just send this story to them. Well, they didn't publish stories like that usually. They published technical stories and racing stories, new car stories.

Rabkin: How would you characterize the story you'd written?

Wilkes: Well, they characterized the story for me when they came out with their annual list of every story they published for the whole year. It was the annual story list. And there were only two stories in my category. It was Humor and Fiction. In fact, I sold them two more articles. One you might have seen in my collection was “How to Buy a Used Car in Europe.”

The other one was about a BMW, a 1937 BMW Cabriolet Roadster that this guy who went to races with me bought and had restored in Germany, in Berlin. I wrote about that car. And the editor who bought my other two articles bought that article, or he *agreed* to buy it. He didn’t pay for it, though. Because they paid on publication. That’s the way they did it. That was it.

So I said, “Fine, thank you.” Then he got reassigned. They sent him to become the European editor of the magazine. And they put somebody else in his place who didn’t want the article. This happens all the time. Articles get orphaned. He said, “No, we’re going to spend more space on race results and technical articles.” So that was the end of me and *Road and Track*. But it was fun while it lasted.

Rabkin: Tell me about publishing that first article. What was that like for you?

Wilkes: Oh, yes. That was the story of my life. I sent the article off—I didn’t know how to present a manuscript to a magazine. I had no idea how to do it.

Rabkin: They didn’t teach you that in English literature graduate school.
(chuckles)

Wilkes: No, they don't.

Rabkin: Or any literature grad school.

Wilkes: So, one afternoon, as I said, it was a hot afternoon. I had not gotten the car running, so that made some of the article fiction. (laughs)

Rabkin: So it was both humor *and* fiction.

Wilkes: That's right. It wasn't finished yet. But I could imagine the next steps well enough, so that's what I did in the story. So I took my dissertation pages and I put them in a folder and put them over here. And I got my lined yellow legal pad out and I hand-wrote this story that you read. I didn't even write every other line; I wrote every line, because it came to me full blown.

Rabkin: Hmm.

Wilkes: So I just went through it. I made some notes in the margin. (I'd left margins for myself.) I made some notes in the margins and then typed it up on yellow draft paper. I had some *Road and Tracks* lying around, so I just found their address and put it in the mail to them, hand-corrected typos, ugly looking. At least I didn't single-space it; I double-spaced it. I did that much. I left wide margins, too.

I sent it off. Nothing happened. Weeks went by. A second month came and went and I thought, well, they didn't like it. Too bad. It was fun writing it anyway. And then I went out to the mailbox one day and there was an envelope from *Road and Track* in the mailbox. It was a business-shaped envelope but it was

larger than a business envelope. I said, "This is odd." And it was thick, you know, it was thicker than I would have expected. It was not thick enough to be the manuscript coming back, but it was thicker than a note would have been. So I thought, what the heck is this about?

I carried this thing into the house and opened it up, and pulled out a burnt in half, an ordinary normal-sized business envelope that had been burned in half with a stub of a note sticking out from it, also burned in half. And wrapped around that was a new letter, not burned, from the editor of *Road and Track*. And it said, "We're so sorry we're so late in getting this to you, but the original letter, which went as follows, "Will you accept \$250 for this?" was in a post office truck that crashed and burned on the LA freeway. *Road and Track* editorial offices were in LA. And this post office truck was in a collision and it caught fire and everything burned. They had to sort through all this burned mail. And they got it back and got what they could to the people who had sent it. So it went back to *Road and Track* and they re-sent it to me and I got it the second round. It asked me if I wanted to take \$250 for my little story, which took two hours to write and another hour to retype and that was it.

Rabkin: In, what was this, 1974?

Wilkes: No, it was actually in 1973. The thing came out in '74.

Rabkin: In 1973, \$250 wasn't to sneeze at.

Wilkes: That's right. It was great money. I had never earned so much per hour in my life.

Rabkin: What a story! Wow.

Wilkes: So that was a true turning point in my life, it was.

Rabkin: What was it actually like to see it in print?

Wilkes: Oh. Heaven! I could walk into any bookstore, any supermarket, and I could see that magazine sitting on the stand, and I could open it up and see my name. I did this several times. It was such a trip. Yeah. (laughs) Of course, I did it to show people too.

Rabkin: So here you had been a literary scholar, and you wrote your dissertation about Blake, is that right?

Wilkes: Blake and—well, it was really a collection of essays. I took papers I'd written for classes and just developed them further. One was Heine. Another one was Donne. Blake was the main one. Flaubert, and James Wright, the poet James Wright. Five essays.

Rabkin: Hmm. And how do you articulate, if you do, a bridge between your focus as a literary scholar and this new career that you were beginning to move into as a popular writer and a teacher of science writing?

Wilkes: Well, apart from the choking up, I'd liked teaching small sections, small being anything under twenty. I loved it, and wanted to keep doing that somehow. But I couldn't figure out how, until I started realizing that I could teach people how to popularize science. Because even though I hadn't studied science, I had read a lot of popular science. I had always read it for pleasure. That

part I haven't talked about. I used to read *Scientific American* for pleasure, and later *Science News* too. But the reason why I loved those two publications was that they were so well edited that, no matter what the subject was, I could read all the way to the end with some comprehension, or at least the illusion of comprehension. But I felt like I was understanding it and I'd be able to tell somebody else what's in that article. That made me feel like I was walking on air. It was a wonderful experience, a reading experience that I'd never had anywhere else.

And I thought, well, I suppose the people who read these articles are scientists themselves and just happen to have a gift for writing for the public. Well, it turns out (I learned later) that those stories in those days—now, that was in the sixties and seventies—they were heavily edited. I mean, they were rewritten by the *Scientific American* editors. I didn't get to *Science News* until later, until after I actually got back to Santa Cruz. So it was just *Scientific American*. That was my tutor. I just loved it. I loved the feeling it gave me to feel like I really mastered the content of this seemingly impenetrable article. I thought, if I could do that for the rest of my life I would do it.

So what I did was I made sure I didn't learn anything serious about science from the beginning to the end of my career. Whatever I learned, I learned from my students through their writing and by making them rewrite stuff that was not clear to me. When it was clear, it was okay. When I could understand it easily, then they were good.

Rabkin: One of the aspects of being a popularizer of science and one who gets the content right, is not only understanding the concepts but also understanding the world of scientific professionalism and how a scientific endeavor is conducted. So that's one of the arguments—again, this is maybe getting ahead of ourselves—but that's one of the arguments for bringing people into the graduate program who have science backgrounds and not just writing backgrounds.

Wilkes: Right.

Rabkin: But that wasn't the case for you, at least not at the outset. It sounds like you had relatively little, if any exposure to the insides of laboratories and to the practice of field science and so forth.

Wilkes: That's absolutely true. I had no exposure to either of those things. And I never tried to get it because I didn't have time, for one thing. Once I took on this new path I was completely immersed in the immediate needs. If you look at my record—apart from automotive technology, I didn't write about science at all. I wrote about social science. I wrote about psychology and social psychology, but that's all.

Rabkin: Did that lacuna feel at all like a deficit to you at any point, as a teacher of science writing?

Wilkes: No, it didn't. It probably should have, but it didn't, because I knew that a lot of the best editors—I knew at *Discover*, for example—when they launched *Discover*, the guy who ran it, Leon Jaroff, was an engineer by training, not a scientist. And the person who took the magazine over—they decided—"they"

being Time, Inc. decided that the magazine wasn't exciting enough. And they fired him, basically, for that reason. And they hired somebody, I think he had come from *Sports Illustrated*, but he was definitely not a scientist. He was from as far away from science as you could get, even farther away than I was, if that's possible. And he said, "If I can't understand it, it's not good enough for the magazine." That was his mantra. So that gave me a kind of confidence that I was on the right track.

Rabkin: Yes. There's even, as you were implying earlier, a certain advantage to a certain kind of naiveté about the scientific world, because if you are curious and interested and intelligent, then it makes you a demanding reader and it gives you quick insight into what's missing from a story written by somebody who's supposed to understand it.

Wilkes: That's right. And you really want to know the answer to that question. It's not just an offhand thing at all. It's a stepping stone. In a line of stepping stones, you can't miss one. That was one thing that I tried to drive home to all of my students always, was that the reader is always looking for a reason to stop reading and you can't give him or her one, because if you do, they don't come back to it.

Teaching Science Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Rabkin: Yes, well perhaps this brings us back then to where we were a little while ago, on the brink of your founding directorship of this new program at M.I.T..

Wilkes: Yes. The very fact of having been hired by M.I.T. at all gave me unbounded confidence. I could start any program, any program they wanted. I could start one in nuclear physics, if they wanted one.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs)

Rabkin: That must have been a great frame of mind to be in when you landed in Cambridge.

Wilkes: It was. Very heady. I was among all these New Yorker writers—Ellen Voigt, the poet, she was in the writing program with me. And she'd play piano and we'd sing. (laughs) It was great.

Rabkin: So you were among M.I.T.'s writing faculty.

Wilkes: Yes, in the writing program.

Rabkin: Under the aegis of the writing program, I see.

Wilkes: The writing program was under the department of humanities—they called it a department of humanities, not a division, because it was so small. But we were separate from, but equal to the English department, English Lit. But we handled all the writing courses.

Rabkin: And how many colleagues did you have in this science writing program? How many people were teaching in the program?

Wilkes: Oh, I was the only one when I was hired. And they brought in—they liked to hire part-time people who were local and really good. So there weren't that many staff, full-time professors in that program.

Rabkin: So you were both creating and running the program and doing most of the teaching in the program.

Wilkes: That's right. But I immediately told them that to make it a good program we really ought to bring in some local talent. So we started doing that right away, both as individual speakers and teachers of courses. And in fact, one of them was Bill Bennett, who wrote *The Dieter's Dilemma*, which never got to be a big book but it was noticed when it came out. That was probably in 1980 or so. He was a Harvard BA/Harvard MD, who wrote a lot for the public in different ways. We hired him and he ended up taking over the writing program when Emma decided she'd had enough of it. So that was one way it went.

Then they started the M.I.T. Knight Fellowship program, and those people had a role in the writing program. That was after I left. Those people had a role in teaching science writing, not much of one, not as much as you might think. But they came and talked to classes a lot.

Rabkin: Can you say a little bit about that Knight Fellowship program?

Wilkes: The Knight Fellowship program was started at M.I.T. to take non-scientists, for the most part, who had become science writers and put them in laboratories as part of a fellowship program, not the whole part. But they'd spend some hours a day in a laboratory every day of the week.

Rabkin: Actually working on somebody's research project.

Wilkes: Yeah, or they would go from one lab to another and just look over people's shoulders. Sort of like the ride-along with the police.

Rabkin: Yes.

Wilkes: They could do whatever they wanted with that part of the program. But they also had seminars with science writers and editors, and they wrote and handed each other manuscripts to mark up. It was a nine-month intensive workshop that included laboratory time in some form, but as far as I know, not field time because it would have been too hard to do. They needed to be at M.I.T. every day.

Rabkin: What were your students like at M.I.T.?

Wilkes: One of them came straight from Santa Cruz, Sana Siwolop. She was an undergraduate in a class I taught. Imagine our surprise when I opened the door the first day of class, for the first day of the graduate program in science writing, and she was sitting in the classroom and I walked in. She said, "I didn't know you were here!" And I said, "I didn't know you were here either."

Rabkin: Had she become an M.I.T. grad student, or had she transferred as an undergrad to M.I.T.?

Wilkes: No, she graduated from Santa Cruz the year I accepted the offer, but stayed until the end of the academic year. So she moved to Cambridge and I did too. And we met in the classroom.

Rabkin: I see. Somehow she had arrived and not realized that you were the person teaching the program.

Wilkes: That's right. She knew that they were going to launch a program that year. They had made that clear. And they told people the outlines of what would be required in it and they stuck to those. And, of course, that gave me the opportunity to look very carefully at how well those requirements worked in practice, which ones of them I could steal and which ones of them I would leave behind. So I created my own program [later] based on what worked and didn't work in the M.I.T. program.

Rabkin: Because those requirements at M.I.T. had already been established and you sort of moved into a program that had already been created.

Wilkes: They had. That's right. It was an artifact ready-made in the last detail. I didn't try to change anything, precisely because I wanted to see how well it worked. We have to talk about what happened, but when Emma Rothchild made me the offer of a place at M.I.T. I had to do the academically proper thing, which was to take the offer to my UCSC dean and say, "Do you want to counter this in any way?" By that time it was May and apparently, according to the American Association of University Professors, you're not supposed to make offers to people in May. You're not supposed to make offers after April for the following academic year because people can't respond to them fast enough and properly enough. So my dean was very angry at M.I.T. for having done this at all. I got a three-year contract; that was the offer that was in the letter [from M.I.T.]. My dean looked at it and he just rolled his eyes. He said, "I can't match this." It was

an assistant professorship. It wasn't a lectureship. It was a real promotion, a real step up.

Rabkin: I see.

Wilkes: So he said, "We like what you're doing here but I can't match that." That was my dean of natural sciences.

Rabkin: Who was it?

Wilkes: George Gaspari, professor of physics. Well, somehow—oh, yeah something else happened that you have to know about. The California legislature, after having hosted several of my interns over a year or more, they decided to pass a resolution honoring the Santa Cruz science writer interns. They did that. I didn't know about this until after it happened. And a copy of that resolution on vellum went to [Chancellor Robert] Sinsheimer, but not to my dean, just to Sinsheimer and to me. Sinsheimer called me into his office. He'd never heard of me before. I was just a little fish. He called me into his office and he said, "What are you up to, anyway? I've never heard of you. I should have heard of you if you're doing this, but I haven't."

Rabkin: This was relatively early in Sinsheimer's stint as chancellor?

Wilkes: Yes, it was. So I told him what I was doing and he said, "Wow, I didn't know any of this." I don't know why he hadn't heard of it. Nobody ever talked my program up on campus. That was something that never changed.

Rabkin: Why?

Wilkes: Well, I'm not sure. I just don't know. And it didn't matter because I was able to do what I wanted to do.

Rabkin: And the program's reputation was growing outside the campus by leaps and bounds.

Wilkes: That's right. And I realized very early that, for whatever reason, the campus was never going to recognize me in a way that really meant anything. They were just going to put up with me while I did what I did because it was never going to be a major; it was never going to be a graduate program, as far as they could see. So—let him do it—the students seem to enjoy it. They like it.

And then this happened. And Sinsheimer called me in and said, "Look," he said, "I like what you're doing and I don't think you're getting enough attention here, or being treated well enough." And I said, "Well, you know what? M.I.T. seems to feel the same way. They just offered me a job." (laughs) At that point, at the point where he called me in, I hadn't accepted it yet. I had said, "I'll think about it." I didn't accept it on the spot. So I was right in that in-between space. I said, "M.I.T. has offered me a job and I'll show you the letter." In fact, I had the letter with me when I went in. And he looked at it and he said, "Well, this is quite a bit better than we're doing for you. We can't put anything like this together that fast because we have procedures we have to follow here. But I'll tell you what, if you go to M.I.T. and tell me what it would take for me to get you back here, I would give it serious consideration. I would like to get you back here."

Rabkin: At the conclusion of your three-year contract at M.I.T.. Was that the implication?

Wilkes: Well, he didn't say that. He said, "When you decide—" Because he knows that I can break that contract any time I want. So I wrote him a letter six months into my time at M.I.T., after I had figured out what was wrong with the M.I.T. program and what I could do better at Santa Cruz (I'll get to that in a minute)—I wrote him a letter telling him what I wanted. I said, "I want lecturer with security of employment. I don't want an assistant professorship. I want a lectureship with security."

Rabkin: Why?

Wilkes: Because—and this is what I learned at M.I.T.—what they wanted me to do at M.I.T. was write scholarly articles for communications journals—that was to be my research, see. I did not want to do that. I told them so. I said, "Look, I want to write articles like this one that I just wrote for *Technology Review*.⁹ And that's going to be the cover story in the coming issue. Isn't that good enough?" "Well, no. It's not. That's a nice hobby to have, but what we want is real research, academic research for scholarly journal articles. And books along that line too."

Rabkin: So if you had a professorship, you would be expected to publish or perish in a scholarly milieu.

⁹ A consumer magazine edited at M.I.T.

Wilkes: Exactly. And I was not about to do that. And I knew Sinsheimer was going to meet my demands.

Rabkin: So a lectureship, which wouldn't require you to do that, which would allow you to focus on teaching and running the program, security of employment, so that you weren't constantly worrying about your longevity at the institution.

Wilkes: Right. Now, I didn't know that it was possible for him to give me this. And it turned out to be possible for him to give me this without any search. There was no search. It turns out that the chancellor, and that includes all the chancellors at UCSC—had this right, really, to take one of the FTE that came down from systemwide every year and hire a professor with it.

Rabkin: So a chancellor has a discretionary FTE?

Wilkes: That's right, if they want to use it. But most of them—I told [Chancellor] George Blumenthal this very story. I said, "You could do that too. You've got an FTE if you want to use it that way." And he said, "Well, I don't want to use it that way. I like working with the senate. I like going through the senate, using senate procedures." I said, "Well, Sinsheimer apparently didn't care for that because he didn't do it and I got my security of employment. It stood. And all the promises he made to me—which he couldn't enforce because he was moving on, for my whole career after that—nobody tried to violate them. I didn't have everything I wanted, but I basically had what he promised me, for my whole career.

Academia tends to foster, I think, a kind of inward-turned bunch of people. They're interested in their own career paths and they need to be if they want to get anywhere. So they don't want to put any energy into anything else that's outside that. And my program is definitely outside anybody else's career path, totally outside it. So I really had to make it work by way of the students. And it worked. And it did work.

Rabkin: And Bob Sinsheimer really was in a position to champion your program [at a key moment].

Wilkes: Yes, he picked up on it immediately and did something about it. He did something very unusual by offering me this tenured slot when I was thirty-eight years old, without having done much that he could see, except teach these students and place them. That's not enough for a tenured position, in most people's eyes. It would not have flown with anybody else. But it was a slam-dunk for him. We talked and then he said, "This is what I'm going to give you. And you can ask for more. Ask for whatever you want." He gave me everything I asked for.

Rabkin: That sounds essential.

Wilkes: Yeah, it was essential and it was highly unusual.

Rabkin: After Sinsheimer left, you might have been given a harder time. Somebody might conceivably have tried to rescind those promises, but nobody did.

Wilkes: Well, if they did, I didn't hear about it. I didn't have to fight anybody off. And I didn't have to take students I didn't want. I didn't have to take adjunct faculty I didn't want. They tried me on those things. They did. But I said, no. And when I said no, that was it. No was no.

Rabkin: And you were in an unusual position administratively because your program was not under the auspices of any department.

Wilkes: That's right. And they asked me if I wanted to be in a department. I said no. I said, "I'd rather not be. I'd rather take my chances as a loner outside the departmental structure, for two reasons. One is, I'd always be the weakest member of the department, and I might as well be the weakest member of the division as the weakest member of the department. That may be better because the division has a bigger slush fund than any department does. And the other thing is that I don't want to be identified by the outside world as being a science writing instructor in the biology department or the physics department, because they'd just jump to the conclusion that I was only teaching writing about biology, or etcetera. So that was my other reason. And Sinsheimer bought that. I mean, he bought everything I asked for, lock, stock, and barrel.

Rabkin: You mentioned scrutinizing the M.I.T. program as you were working in it, and learning some lessons about what you did and did not want to transfer to Santa Cruz, and how you would like to do things differently at Santa Cruz. Do you want to say more about that?

Wilkes: That's right. Sure. What I saw at M.I.T. that was not working—well, there were two things—the main one was that they were taking non-scientists into M.I.T., but they had a requirement written into the master's program that every person in the M.I.T. science writing master's program had to take an advanced graduate seminar in a science and pass it.

Rabkin: Even though these people didn't necessarily have an undergraduate background in science.

Wilkes: Most of them did not. Most of the first students that I had did not. Sana was the only one who did and she could do that.

Rabkin: Is this as problematic as it sounds?

Wilkes: It is impossible. I had women, especially, crying in my office over this requirement. They couldn't understand what was going on in class, so they'd go to the teacher and the teacher would say, "Well, you're going to have to take some math; you're going to have to go back to Algebra II and start with that and see what you can do." They didn't have time for that. It didn't work. And I told them, "This isn't working. This isn't working. You should make a science background a requirement for this program." They said, "No, no. We don't want to do that. We want to get humanists into the science writing program. That's the way they do it at Columbia. That's the way they do it at Johns Hopkins."

Rabkin: But then what was the rationale for expecting them to be able to pass a graduate-level course in a science?

Wilkes: The rationale is that it's—this is an *M.I.T.* program. That's the rationale. "Our students can do this, even if they don't have a science background."
(laughs)

Rabkin: I see. So that was one thing you didn't want to replicate.

Wilkes: That's right. I knew I could get the kind of students they wanted at Santa Cruz, I thought I could, maybe not right away but eventually I would get them. And it happened pretty fast. Because all the students who came to the program wanted to be among their own kind. They didn't want to go to a journalism school. They knew that. They didn't want to go to a general university or technical institute and take journalism under that umbrella, if it was going to be like a regular journalism school, which *M.I.T.* wanted it to be. They did. And that's why the *M.I.T.* night fellowship program was started, because that gave *M.I.T.* what it wanted. Most of the people in that program were not trained scientists. They were humanities people. They were the kind of people *M.I.T.* wanted in the master's program.

So the main thing that didn't work was the kind of students they were asking for and getting. There were two other things. (So there were three things.) They wanted—and they still ask for this—they want each student to do a master's thesis-length piece of writing. This is a piece of writing that has no real home in the magazine business, or the newspaper business, or any publication. But they want the students to do this. They want them to do at least a 100-page manuscript piece.

Rabkin: Of popular science writing?

Wilkes: Of popular science writing, yeah.

Rabkin: Unpublishable virtually anywhere.

Wilkes: Unless you're a *New Yorker* writer, yeah. And that's not going to get into the *New Yorker*. So that's something M.I.T. absolutely insisted on: you can't have a master's degree without a master's thesis, and this is it. So I said, "That's not going to work and I'm not going to have that in *my* program."

Okay, so. And then the third thing was internships. I wanted to start getting students into internships right away. And they said, "Oh, no. We didn't hire you for that. That's not appropriate for us. We are an educational institution. We teach our students in-house. They have enough to do in our programs. They don't have time for internships and we don't want our people wasting time lining up internships for students. You've got research to do. You've got a program to run. You've got too much to do already. We don't want to dilute your program any more than that." And I said, "Okay, this is not a program for me to run."

So I negotiated my terms with Sinsheimer and he gave me everything I asked for. I had that in oral form after six months at M.I.T.. However, I decided that I would do my own program more good, and M.I.T. more good too, not to go back to UCSC after a year, but to go back after two years, if I could negotiate that with both Sinsheimer and M.I.T. I would do that.

Rabkin: You would serve two years of your three-year contract at M.I.T. before going back to UCSC.

Wilkes: Right. That would give M.I.T. plenty of time to replace me. It was just better for everybody. So they all agreed to it readily and that's what I did.

Rabkin: Would that be a good place to stop for today?

Wilkes: Yeah, it would be.

Rabkin: Great, thank you so much, John.

Editing *Introducing the University of California, Santa Cruz*

Rabkin: Once again, this is Sarah Rabkin. It is November 11, 2014, and I'm in my home in Soquel, California with John Wilkes for our third oral history interview. And John, there was one item that we did not talk about last time that I wanted to bring up with you, ask you about this time. You wrote a booklet that won some kind of an award, titled *Introducing the University of California, Santa Cruz*. Can you tell me about that?

Wilkes: I can tell you about that with pleasure. Now, this was a time when I was teaching science writing half-time, one course a quarter—that was half-time in those days.

Rabkin: And this was some time in the late seventies?

Wilkes: This was mid-seventies. The booklet came out in '76. The admissions jargon term for this genre is the campus "viewbook." In the college

recruiting/admissions game, this booklet is the first expensive piece of public relations literature sent to a potential applicant.

What had happened was Bruce Rosenblum, who was professor of physics and had become my protector in the Division of Natural Sciences. He was about six and a half feet tall, so that made him a good protector (laughs), and he was just a great guy and saw things differently from other science faculty. He was much more broad-minded and had much broader interests than most of the ones that I knew.

Anyhow, he was chair of the Admissions Committee at that time and he commissioned a booklet to be written by two former editors of *City on a Hill Press*, or one current editor and one former editor. They completed a manuscript of this booklet. It was supposed to be the recruiting booklet for the campus for the next few years, really. They turned in their manuscript and the Admissions Committee, chaired by Bruce, found it not quite what they had in mind. They didn't know what to do. They thought it needed a heavy edit, is what they thought. So Bruce called me in. I was just teaching one course a quarter and I was available for freelance work. I was doing freelance work. I was writing for magazines at that time. So I came into a meeting and he said, "This is what we're looking at." Then he gave me a stack of—these are called view books—that's the professional term for them. He gave me a stack of view books from other universities from all over the country. The stack was like two feet tall.

Rabkin: This is the kind of publication that an admissions committee will send out to prospective students and their families?

Wilkes: That's right. And it's on request. These things are very expensive to produce. So they don't send them out unless you ask for it. And they're usually sixty-four pages. That's a standard number of pages for one of these things.

So Bruce gave me a stack of these things. And he said, "I want you to look at all these and I want you to come in with a proposal. Give me an outline and a rough description of what you'd like to do." So I took this stack home and I put it in a corner, and then thought about it and wrote a proposal without looking at any of them, which is my usual approach to things. (laughs)

Rabkin: You didn't want to be swayed by what other institutions had done or what the conventions were for this kind of publication?

Wilkes: I guess not. I thought, you know, UCSC is different from other schools. Let's just keep that in mind and try to write something that sounds like UCSC. So what I did was I started nosing around for surveys of alumni who had written about their experience at UCSC. I thought there must be a place where such material was collected. That's what I wanted to read. I wanted to see what people thought of the place after they left it. Did they have a good experience here and so on?

Rabkin: This was about ten years into the life of the institution.

Wilkes: That's right. Just, exactly. So I managed to get, I don't know, two or three hundred responses to a survey, where people actually wrote a paragraph or more from a looking-back perspective.

Rabkin: Did you generate a survey and put it out, or were you looking at an existing survey?

Wilkes: No, it was an existing survey. It was exactly what I wanted and I was delighted to find it. So I went through it and I pulled out all the most interesting comments, the comments I thought were right on. And I created the design for this thing too. What I did was I divided each page into my text in boldface type (I wish I could have brought the thing, I could show you)—but in boldface type these floating quotes, usually three or four lines, maybe five lines at the most, maybe just two lines—they ranged in size, blocks of boldface type on the outside of the page, and on the inside of the page was my narrative. And what I did with my writing was to distill what was in the course catalog, describing each major we had and what the campus offered in that way, in smaller, lighter serif type. It ended up winning a design award and a—I didn't do the actual designing, once I laid out the idea, I said, "I want it to look like this—and then the designer, who was really good, the one we had on campus—she just took my idea and played with it.

Rabkin: Do you remember who that was?

Wilkes: Alix Wills.

Rabkin: So she followed your suggestions about design and just executed them beautifully.

Wilkes: That's right. She had graduated from Parsons School of Design. So anyway, the booklet—well, first of all, they [had] wanted to hire me to edit what

these *City on a Hill Press* editors had written. I read through what they'd written and I said, "This is impossible. This is unsalvageable. I'm not going to edit it. I won't take that job. I'll write a new one. That's what I'm offering. If you want an editor, find somebody else." So they said, "No, we want you to write a new one."

So we agreed on a price and then I went home and wrote it up. Basically I boiled down the catalog copy for all the majors to something popular and easily accessible. That was fun because some of the majors I had a little trouble figuring out how to present. I mean, I could boil it down but then it began to sort of disappear.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: And I thought, where's the substance here? It sounds like fairy castles. It sounds fine in the catalog but when you try to extract the core of meaning from it, it sort of vanishes. Or it did for me, anyway. Anyway, I did it and nobody objected. So it worked out.

Then, of course, there's a national organization called CASE, Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, that's the acronym. CASE. They have a competition for admissions publications and they hold a national meeting at which they give awards for all the publications that have been submitted for these awards by all the colleges and universities in the country. The top publication in each category won a gold medal. And we won a silver medal in the viewbook category. We won second place, basically, for view books.

Viewbooks is a very hotly contested category. Because if your view book isn't hot, then your potential applicant loses interest and nothing happens, you know.

Rabkin: And yours won second place in the whole country after your decision not to look at anybody else's models, but simply to go with your sense of what makes UC Santa Cruz unique and appealing.

Wilkes: That's right. The design was very striking. It was black and white, unlike any of the others, which were very rich colored. It was black and white but the printing process—I don't remember what it was called—but it involved printing, it's like a lithograph, like an engraving. Printing several layers, so the blacks were very rich black and the grays were silvery, and it was a really beautiful thing.

Rabkin: Did it use photographs?

Wilkes: Yeah, just photographs.

Rabkin: How did you find the photos?

Wilkes: They were in—the news office, I guess, collects alums' photographs, and we went through them all. Bruce and I went head-to-head on this one thing. He wanted captions for these photographs. He wanted to, like with newspaper photographs, name the people in the photograph and what their majors are and all that stuff. I said, "No. I don't want any captions at all. I want to set an atmosphere here." And the designer, Alix Wills, she said, "Okay, I'll let you guys fight it out." (laughs)

Rabkin: Why did you think captions would detract from that atmosphere setting?

Wilkes: I don't know. I didn't want to ground those photographs that much. I wanted them to float. Anyway, it worked. Maybe next time I come I'll bring a copy of it and you can see.

Rabkin: Yeah. I'd love to see it. I don't think it was in that big box of materials.

Wilkes: No, I didn't even think of it.

Rabkin: Special Collections must have a copy or two.¹⁰

Wilkes: They may. But anyway, it's worth looking at because it really is different.

Rabkin: Thanks. I'm glad you told me about that and it also introduces Bruce Rosenblum as one of the physicists who was particularly a champion of yours.

Wilkes: Yeah, he really helped me in many ways. I had no obstacles to overcome as long as he was watching out for me.

¹⁰ The viewbook *Introducing the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1978* is part of the collection at the UCSC Library's Special Collections Department.

Founding and Directing the Graduate Program in Science Communication at UC Santa Cruz

Rabkin: Now, when we last left your story, you were at M.I.T.. You had decided to serve out two years of your contract there, before returning to Santa Cruz under the conditions that you and Sinsheimer had hammered out together.

Wilkes: That's right. I asked both of my deans, at Santa Cruz and M.I.T., whether I could stay at M.I.T. for a second year, first of all—because I asked them before the first year was even half over, I mean that's how quickly we put this in place. [M.I.T. was] unhappy, of course. They said, "People are always raiding us." M.I.T. is not usually the campus somebody left, but in this case it was. But they said, "Yeah, we'd like you to stay a second year so we can have time to work this out and decide what we want to do." I was happy to stay a second year because it gave me a lot of time to really think about the program I wanted to run myself, and how realistic it was to use M.I.T. as a model, since M.I.T. is private and can do whatever it wants. And UCSC, even though it's "experimental," it's still a state university and has certain constraints.

So I came up with a plan that I thought would work and I put it in writing, and that got through the senate at UCSC. Once they agreed to what I was proposing, I started recruiting. I put out the word to people at M.I.T. with posters. I said, "Just come to me. I'm in the writing program. Here's my name, here's my office number, here's my phone, blah-blah-blah."

I got a few people interested that way. I'll just use one of them as an example. He was a chemistry graduate student at M.I.T., Doug Smith. He came to my office and he said, "I'm not happy here. I want to write. I also like to draw," he said. "But I don't know if there's room for that in this program." I said, "Well, so far there isn't. I'm hoping to add that but it won't be in time for you. So this is just going to be a writing program next year." That's the year we were talking about. So Doug said, "That's fine." So he did apply and he went through the program and he's now the editor of Cal Tech's alumni magazine, and has been for years. I said when he graduated in 1982, this guy belongs at Cal Tech. He was in Southern California anyway. He was doing commercial writing for companies, writing brochures and annual reports and that kind of thing. That's how he was making his living. I had sent a UCSC intern to Cal Tech before going to M.I.T. and through that I got to know a couple of people there. So they called me up and they said, "We need somebody to write articles for the Cal Tech magazine." So I said, "I've got just the person for you." So Doug went over there.

Rabkin: As a freelancer, to begin with?

Wilkes: Yeah, as a freelancer. And then once they'd worked with him they said, "This guy is just right for us." So they gave him the job and he worked his way up to editor of the Cal Tech magazine. And he did it fairly quickly, within five or six years of going to work there. So that would have been eighties, I guess, or maybe 1990 at the latest. But not only did he do well professionally there, he got involved in—see at Cal Tech, it's such a small campus, I think it's only about three or four thousand students—the faculty and the staff and the students all

play football together and they act in dramas together. They do everything together. He'd been a football player, so he played football for Cal Tech. And he was in all the theater productions. He did everything. He was a real Cal Tech person. So I was delighted with that outcome, and am today, because it's still going on.

Rabkin: Wonderful. So you recruited heavily at M.I.T. among the students there. How did you reach out beyond M.I.T. for prospective students for your first class [at UCSC]?

Wilkes: Well, I didn't expect to have a first class, actually, for a while. But the late Peter Radetsky, who had taken over my program, "my" program—

Rabkin: The undergraduate courses [in science writing].

Wilkes: The undergraduate courses. I said, "Let's try to keep that going," because it was turning out some really great students. So he kept going with the undergraduate courses and the workshop at the end. So we had two undergraduate courses, fall and winter, and then spring quarter was an intermediate workshop preparing people for full-time summer internships. Very hands on. And he took that all over. I said, "Okay, Peter, I'm getting some interest here. See if you can get some interest there, and we'll put together an entering class, a first class for my certificate program."

So he did. He supplied me with some other people. I cannot remember when I sent out that first flyer that had the Ansel Adams photograph of the campus on it.

Rabkin: 1982, I think you said.

Wilkes: Okay, '82. Then that would have recruited the second-year's class, and others after that. So anyway, I ended up with a class of nine students. Most of them were freshly graduated from UCSC. I'd have to look at the photographs, but I think most of them were from UCSC.

Rabkin: A full class was how many?

Wilkes: It was twelve then. I got it down to ten after the first three or four years, because it was too many people. I know it's hard to imagine, given the size of classes these days, but the kind of editing I was doing to student papers was intensive. I was writing as much as they were sometimes. I couldn't handle twelve people. I managed to talk the dean into letting me shrink it a little bit and then we stayed at ten from then on.

Rabkin: You said you hadn't initially expected to jump in immediately with a first class, after arriving from M.I.T..

Wilkes: Yeah, they didn't expect me to. That wasn't part of my contract, coming in.

Rabkin: You thought you would spend a year developing the program, getting everything in place, and recruiting a first class. And then the following year you would begin teaching.

Wilkes: Exactly. That was what everybody else did. But I thought, what the heck. If I've got enough people who want to take this program, let's do it. So we did.

Rabkin: You mentioned Peter Radetsky and that he had taken over the undergraduate courses while you were at M.I.T.. Tell me about how you and Peter encountered each other and how his appointment ended up happening.

Wilkes: That's an interesting story, too. Peter started out writing fiction. He was writing novels at home and managed to get a job with the campus writing program. I don't know when he started with the campus writing program, but I think it was around '79 or so.

Rabkin: Hmm. So he was teaching composition courses.

Wilkes: Yeah, and I think maybe one course in short story writing or something other than composition. But anyway, he had an office at Crown [College]. Before I left, I got to know him. He had an office for the last year I was at UCSC, which was '79. So that was when I got my offer. I don't know which quarter it was because it wasn't really long. But we really hit it off; we liked each other and we ended up spending time together socially that last quarter of my time at UCSC before I went to M.I.T.. And I said, well, this guy can teach those courses. He'd be perfect. So I asked him if he wanted to and he said, "Sure, yeah. I'll do it." So he took them over.

The other person who ended up teaching one course a year, I think, was Jean Atcheson, who—Jean Atcheson was the campus editor. In those days we had an editor who looked at everything that went out in printed form. She was a former *Life* magazine copy editor. She was a black belt editor. She was good! British. And (laughs) she was marvelous. Her husband was a magazine editor himself

and had written for *People* magazine. In fact, he was writing for *People* magazine then. And *People* magazine was the biggest news in the magazine world. It saved *Time* magazine's hide for a while. Still is, I guess, in a way. It's the biggest moneymaker they have. So these people were pros. These were national-level pros. It was great to have them and to have them teaching in the program. The husband didn't teach. Jean was the only one who taught, but the husband would come in and talk, you know, tell war stories about the magazine business to the students. They loved it, of course.

Rabkin: So they were teaching in the undergraduate classes.

Wilkes: That's right. In the undergraduate classes only.

Rabkin: Did Peter Radetsky have a science background?

Wilkes: No. No, he was a lit major, had a master's degree from the University of Colorado and had taught at Colorado, taught literature as a lecturer at the University of Colorado before he came to UCSC.

Rabkin: He became a really superb science writer himself.

Wilkes: Yes, he did.

Rabkin: Did that happen after he began teaching the courses?

Wilkes: Yes, it did! That's the way it worked. He was introduced to it that way and found it very interesting and fun. So that's how he got into the business. And after I got back, he continued teaching undergraduate courses for several years, until he got too busy with his own writing and had to stop. He continued

teaching those undergraduate courses and they were very successful all the way to the end.

So I started with my first class and immediately set about trying to drum up internships for them at the same time as teaching *all* the courses the first year myself. That was interesting, because I'd never worked for a newspaper. I, in fact, didn't even read newspapers regularly at that point. But I knew the students needed, in order to be marketable as interns, they needed to have some exposure to newswriting. So I had to fake it, and brought real news editors in to talk to them and tried to give as much texture to the class as possible from the real world. But in order to do a better job teaching newswriting, I got myself appointed an AAAS fellow at the *San Francisco Chronicle* for summer 1981, the first summer after my first year teaching in this little graduate program.

Rabkin: So that's the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Wilkes: That's right. David Perlman, at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was kind of the non-academic godfather of the UCSC science writing program. UCSC consulted with him and he urged them to start such a program at UCSC. He said, "It's the perfect campus. The cross-disciplinary emphasis at Santa Cruz is great for producing science journalists." So he set about on his own initiative to get an AAAS Mass Media fellowship for me, an unpaid one. So I ended up supporting myself that summer.

Rabkin: Tell me about those fellowships and how they worked.

Wilkes: Well, normally the AAAS offered about fifteen of them a year. And the way it worked was they attracted advanced graduate students in science who wanted to spend a summer at a major media site, most of them print sites, but not all. There were television and radio AAAS fellows too. And in fact, some of them enrolled in my program afterwards.

Rabkin: Barb Masters, I think, in my class, had been an AAAS fellow before she came to the program.

Wilkes: That's right. And others too. There were many of them. I can't remember all of them. There was almost one a year. The idea of the AAAS Mass Media fellowships was that they would take scientists who were about ready to begin research careers, but who were interested in the mass media. They would later contact people for the mass media inside the science fortress. So they would understand the needs of the reporters better than anyone else in the lab, because they would have done it.

Rabkin: So the idea was not necessarily to woo them away from scientific professions into journalism, but just to create these translators who could work from within science, to help out the journalists who were trying to translate for the general public.

Wilkes: That's right. They would be ambassadors, in a way. And they would do whatever the journalists needed. Like, for example, scientists, when they get calls from journalists they don't realize how journalists have deadlines and they have

to have calls back right away. Scientists will call them next month or something, and by then the story has been published and put on the bottom of a bird cage.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: So the AAAS Mass Media Fellows were going to be expected to make sure that the scientists were aware of the deadline situation and would get right back to the journalists who wanted to talk to them. They did things like this and that part of it worked. But some of the people enjoyed their internships, their Mass Media Fellowships Internships, so much that they wanted to change careers. And they *did* change careers. And one way to do it was to come to my program, which was for scientists, people trained in science, at least. I mean, they could be undergraduates but they had to have worked in a lab full time for six months or longer to qualify for a place in the program. I made exceptions, but not often. I don't know if I made one in your case or not.

Rabkin: I do not recall that you had that expectation at the time when my class was admitted.

Wilkes: Maybe I imposed that later.

Rabkin: And I squeaked by before you started expecting that. (laughs)

Wilkes: Yeah, but I did require a degree.

Rabkin: You wanted a degree and you wanted people to have been working—in my case, I had been teaching high school science for three years.

Wilkes: Right.

Rabkin: Maybe you considered that a suitable alternative to what, in general, you were expecting was lab time.

Wilkes: Yeah, well it was a suitable alternative because you'd been explaining things in lay language to high school students, who count as a lay audience. So that was fine.

Rabkin: Though I didn't have the deep immersion in professional science that you came to expect of people.

Wilkes: Right. Well, I wanted to position our program outside of the usual real estate claimed by science writing programs. Because there were already a dozen full-blown science writing programs in the country, graduate programs, and many others in master's in journalism programs. You could take a science track through a standard master of journalism program and they'd have one professor of science writing. I was competing with these programs. What did we have to offer? So I was always thinking about marketing our graduates. And also having students who were really deeply rooted in science in a way that no other program had, because the other programs didn't—

Actually, people tried to discourage me, including David Perlman. He said, "Are you sure you want these science nerds? They really are going to be hard to convert to what we do." I said, "Well, I think I can do it." That was my test (laughs). Can I do it? I knew I could.

And I'll tell you why I knew I could, because the last time I taught English literature at UCSC or anywhere, the last year when I had Tom Vogler's three-

quarter sequence in English Romanticism, some of my best students were science majors. They were writing papers for me on Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge and on and on. They were writing some of the best papers of any of my students. I had a lot of literature majors in my classes and they were writing better papers, more accessible to a non-specialist, than the literature majors, who had already picked up the critical jargon and were throwing it around with gay abandon very well. But it wasn't something that a general reader would want to read, whereas my science majors were writing sort of naturally, the way that they would write if they were writing for the public about science. So I said, they can do this. They're perfect. I'm going to recruit people like that.

Rabkin: And it occurs to me that you also were not recruiting any old "science nerds." You were recruiting the very people who had decided that they weren't happy being specialists in a scientific subject, and they were coming to you because they were curious and interested in exploring a broader swath of scientific ideas and communicating them to the public.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: I mean, if you just sort of randomly lassoed a dozen science graduate students into your program, it might in fact have been more as David Perlman projected. But you were getting the very people who were primed to be translators.

Wilkes: That's right. And, in fact, even when I was still teaching undergraduates before I went to M.I.T., I had several UCSC science graduate students in my

classes. So, I had that experience too and they were very enthusiastic about reaching the public, too. So I knew people like that existed. Santa Cruz tended to attract people like that, who were more socially oriented, I guess you might say, than pure professionals, hard, nose-to-the-grindstone scientists. They had other interests and they were interested in society and the effects of science on society. I thought, they do exist and they probably exist even at a place like M.I.T.. And once I got there I found that they were there. There weren't many of them, that's also true, but they were there. There were enough for me. That's all I needed. So I created my program around my knowledge that these people were out there in the world and were looking for a program like mine.

And what happened—and this is interesting to me too, still, after all this time—every time our program was reviewed by external reviewers, they always asked the students—because this program is not a master's program—it's a certificate program. And everybody knows that certificates are kind of questionable documents—what's that mean? And they all said it didn't matter what they called it, "I already had a master's degree; I already had a PhD. I didn't need another advanced degree to do what I wanted to do. I needed training." That was one thing. The reviewers would interview the students individually when they were on campus and they would ask them, "Where would you have gone for your advanced training in journalism, for your training in science writing, if you hadn't come to Santa Cruz?" And they all said, "I wouldn't have gone anywhere. I would have tried to do it on my own but probably would have failed, I realize now. I'm so glad this program exists." That was the usual response.

Rabkin: So they were affirming your decisions about the ways that you wanted to distinguish the Santa Cruz program from all of those more traditionally J-school oriented programs.

Wilkes: That's right. They would tell the reviewers and me that they wanted to be among their own kind when they were studying science writing for the public. They wanted to be among other scientists doing it. They did not want to be among journalists. They had the same disdain, I think, for journalists that scientists tend to have for newspaper science writers who don't know any, who don't actually work with them. They just don't like journalists. They think journalists are dumb. They don't think they can understand anything really properly and so on. So if you go to journalism school, you're going to be among those people. There's a certain amount of truth to that, I'm afraid, at most of the journalism schools. There are some journalism professors who are science writers themselves. We know that. But there aren't many of them. There are only five or so in the country who are teaching graduate students and practicing the profession themselves, writing science.

Rabkin: And there are some great science writers out there who don't have science training.

Wilkes: Absolutely.

Rabkin: Including David Perlman.

Wilkes: Yeah, he was a history major, for example.

Rabkin: Can we jump back again to David Perlman?

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: Because you had begun to talk about your initial year with the program and having to teach all the courses yourself, including newswriting, and realizing that you were at something of a disadvantage not being a newswriter yourself, or even much of a reader of newspapers. So you were bringing in newspaper editors to help coach and guide the students, but you wanted to get some more experience yourself. So you landed yourself this AAAS fellowship. And you were telling me that those fellowships generally were designed for advanced graduate students in the sciences, which you were not.

Wilkes: Which I was not.

Rabkin: So how did that happen?

Wilkes: Well, David Perlman made it happen, basically. He did it all. He said, "Leave it to me. Let's see what I can do." And he had to sell the idea, not only to the AAAS, but also he had to sell it to the union, the Newspaper Guild, because I was coming in as an unpaid intern, taking what they viewed as a job (because my articles were going to appear in the newspaper; I was going to be doing the work of a union member, a guild member.) So they didn't know if they wanted somebody like me there. So David had to convince them. And they did. They approved me. And once they did, that was the last obstacle to my getting that internship for the summer.

Rabkin: Tell me about that summer internship.

Wilkes: Oh, boy. Well, I was supporting myself. I was on a nine-month salary at UCSC. So I was living on savings, basically. What I did was I rented a room in a fraternity house at Berkeley. (laughs) I rented—that's where I spent the summer. I'd ride BART across every day and fortunately it came very close to the *Chronicle* building so that my commute was easy. I would dress up in a coat and tie and take the elevator up to David Perlman's floor, which was the same one that Herb Caen was on and Art Hoppe and all the other legendary *Chronicle* columnists. The columnists' floor was one floor above the newsroom, which was where all the beat reporters were. And Dave said, "I'm going to keep you in my carrel here, so you can watch me and we can talk about things." So I was literally at his elbow while he was there. Now, it turned out—he didn't know he was going to do this, but he was invited to go to China for a long tour, about a month. So one of the three months of my summer he was completely gone and I had his carrel all to myself. I was ready for it by that time. I used his system and I wrote my stories.

Rabkin: What editor did you write for at that point, when he was gone?

Wilkes: Well, I just sent my stories to the desk, that's what you did. The desk was manned by assistant city editors. And the city editor would occasionally look at a story, but mostly it was the assistants. There were four of those at the *Chronicle* at the time and they would read my stories and usually take them the way they were. They might make a few little changes but—

Rabkin: Was somebody assigning you stories, or were you enterprising all of your own?

Wilkes: I was enterprising them. I was writing pitches to the assistant city editors and they would basically—I don't think they turned me down for any of them. They all got in.

Rabkin: How did you find your story ideas?

Wilkes: I don't know. Phone calls would come in. The assistant city editors would come to me. They would get phone calls, too. Like, I wrote the story about invisible braces, braces behind the teeth instead of in front of the teeth. That was a pitch that came in from the American Orthodontists—whatever their society is called. It came in and it went to a city editor and he got me to write the story. So, that's how I got that story.

Rabkin: I read that story and ended up wondering whatever happened to those things? I guess one thing that happened was they invented the transparent braces, so that the ones on the front of the teeth were no longer as conspicuous.

Wilkes: Right.

Rabkin: But I wonder, what happened to the braces on the back of the teeth? Maybe they were uncomfortable or made it hard to eat.

Wilkes: Well, they must have been kind of messy—

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: Get your food stuck and everything else. Anyway, that was an interesting story.

And the photographers—I used to go with photographers, and watching them get photo ideas, you know—how do you take a picture of invisible braces so that people can see them? And Gary Fong—I’ll never forget—he was one of the best photographers at the *Chronicle*—there was this model, she was the assistant, the orthodontist’s assistant. She was beautiful and she had her braces on the backs of her teeth. Gary Font said, “Come over here. Tilt your head back. Open your mouth.” (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: (makes sound of someone talking through a stretched open mouth) “Wider.” He put the camera right up to her (snap) got it, okay. (laughs) That was funny. So that’s the kind of thing I could tell stories about to my students—this is what happens when you are science writer for a newspaper. You get to do this. And other things.

Rabkin: Were there any other memorable surprises or experiences in that internship that helped you later on as a teacher?

Wilkes: Oh, goodness. Well, as a teacher, apart from supplying plenty of war stories.

Rabkin: I guess that’s what I’m thinking of.

Wilkes: I mean, one of the things that science writers at newspapers—and on this I've compared notes with other people who—Dave himself—anybody who actually works as a science writer at a big newspaper gets a lot of crazy email, snail mail, telephone calls, from people who have stories to report. They've seen a flying saucer; they were visited, they were spirited away last night and ended up on some planet and managed to get back somehow and they want you to hear about it. (laughs) It's true. They go to the science writers at the newspaper because science writers will understand and believe them. It's fascinating. There is a whole subset of people in this country who are very bright, usually self taught. You can tell. They have huge gaps in their knowledge of what high school students usually know, good ones anyway. But they're bright and they can write. And they're so convinced of this crazy stuff. They can't hear anything else. They're out there.

Rabkin: How did that experience at the *Chronicle* influence the way you taught newswriting?

Wilkes: Well, I'll tell you, it made me—I already knew from writing for magazines that you had to write a good lead and you had to get your reader into the story pretty quickly. But newspapers it's even quicker. I mean, the first sentence is the one that gets you or doesn't. So I had to rethink everything, because my leads were what in the newspaper business they call delayed leads, where you sort of sidle into your story. That was my kind of lead. You could have more fun with those. You had to just tell the story in one sentence in the newspaper business. Even if it was a long feature, you had to have that kind of

lead, at least when I was writing there. So it made me aware of that, that that was a skill that I had to teach. I had to make sure every student could do that one-sentence lead.

Rabkin: Yeah.

You have talked about the kinds of applicants who you thought had the aptitude to do this kind of work, and who were really primed and ready to translate scientific information for the public. Could you also talk a little bit about inaugurating the program from the other side of it—that is, why you had a sense that this was a needed field, why there was a market for newly trained science writers?

Wilkes: I wasn't ever sure that there was a need for more of the kind of science writer that was already out there. What I thought was needed, and I still think is needed, is people who are trained in science who understand the process of science and why it's done the way it's done, and when a story is a story, and when it's not yet ripe and may never be ripe. Those are all things that I think you really are better prepared for deciding if you have had science training.¹¹

And the people who were like me—I mean, I used to tell my students, “I could have never gotten into this program myself. I didn't design this program for people like me.” (laughs) I meant that. I was just as big a sucker for a good-sounding story as anybody else, without enough demonstration that there's

¹¹ John Wilkes' April 1978 article “Teaching Scientific Writing” was published as the cover story in *The English Journal*.

something to it. I could have fallen for those stories, if I had been a newspaper science writer; sure I could. So, I was very proud that my students were much more skeptical and willing to look further before they decided whether something was promising or not. So that was what my program was supposed to be for.

And those students, when they went out into the world and started going to national meetings in the AAAS, they ended up helping the students who were from the other journalism programs who didn't have science backgrounds, helping them decide what were truly promising stories and what were not, what were not ready to be reported yet. "No other lab has confirmed this result"—blah-blah-blah. The process of science is so complex, and if they haven't checked all the boxes, the story wasn't quite ready yet. Don't go with it because you'll make a fool of yourself and make a fool of your publication, too, by doing it. Because your editor is not going to know. He's going to depend on you to be right about that. And if you're not, you've got egg on your face and so does he or she.

So that's what my program was for. It was to provide a cadre of people who could go to meetings and help steer the other reporters to the real stories and away from the bad ones—the ones that were premature, at least.

Rabkin: Tell me about the internships that your first cohort of graduate students ended up in.

Wilkes: Most of them were public information internships, more than news, first of all. I did have trouble the first few years getting my graduates into newspaper internships. Because they didn't have part-time internships at that point yet, so they didn't have any news clips. They hadn't been in a newsroom before.

Rabkin: I see. So they hadn't been doing internships over the course of the nine months of the academic year.

Wilkes: No, that came later. I started adding internships to the program as time went on. I couldn't get anybody to take them. That was the problem. I could get the campus news office to take them right away. They were happy to have them. But I couldn't get enough for everybody. So the students actually took other classes of interest to them, across all of UCSC, often undergraduate classes in their area of interest. I said, "Okay, that's fine. One course a quarter as long as we do the core courses and you do get an internship at the end of the term, or at least at the end of the year, you'll be okay." Because they were such good writers and so smart that they could do it. I knew that. So I was confident and it did work out that way.

But the newspapers were very hard to crack. I could not get my students into the newspapers right away. It took years. The [Santa Cruz] *Sentinel*—actually what helped me do it, as much as anything else, was the fact that the newspaper industry started to crack and crumble and they couldn't hire new reporters. So they needed people.

Rabkin: So that was starting to happen even back in the early eighties.

Wilkes: Yes. That's right. So that was the one thing that really tipped the balance in our favor. They were willing to try our students. And once they did, oh, boy. That's all they needed to see. Then it was easy. Then there were newspaper internships for everybody from the first quarter on. I mean, I actually started placing people in newspaper internships the day they started the program. They were going to the *Sentinel* every other day; they were going to the *Monterey Herald*; they were going to the *Salinas Californian*; they were going to the *San Jose Mercury News* (that was later because the *Mercury News* held out the longest). But they started taking them and then, boy, they liked them too.

Rabkin: The Watsonville paper, too?

Wilkes: No. The Watsonville paper—the *Sentinel* had a Watsonville bureau and they used to take some of other students. But the Watsonville paper was on its way down. It was not very good. The Watsonville bureau was run by a really crackerjack editor from the *Sentinel*, so that was a good match.

Rabkin: Gradually, you began developing internships in other kinds of placements, magazines, *Science News*, for example.

Wilkes: Right.

Rabkin: Tell me about how you cultivated those internship opportunities for your students.

Wilkes: *Science News* was one of the early ones, and it was a real coup for us because it was considered one of the best, if not the best internship in the

country, because they took their interns right in and treated them like staff writers, bang.

Rabkin: Wow. Say something about the nature of *Science News* as a publication.

Wilkes: Well, *Science News* is aimed at what they call the science-interested—people who have an interest in science but are not trained in the field they are reading in. Because *Science News* covers the whole spectrum of science. It's a twelve-page paper publication. Now it's online, so I don't know how to describe it anymore. But the idea is still the same. That publication has been around since the 1920s. It started out as a stapled handful of news releases and it would be mailed to you, snail mailed every week. That was the way it started, and then it actually became a magazine. It was all very structured. It only took one intern a term, and their terms were four months, so three interns a year. Everybody wanted that internship, because once you had interned at *Science News* you could go almost anywhere. You could go to *Science*; you could go to *Nature*; you could go to a newspaper. You could go anywhere.

Rabkin: Yeah. And there were some aspects of *Science News* that were quite distinctive: high literary standards, the zippy writing, and the fact that their full-time staff writers all had beats and stayed in them for decades sometimes, so that they really came to know the communities of scientists they were using as sources and the kinds of stories that would be important.

Wilkes: That's right. In a sense, it was like the *New York Times* Science section, but a magazine.

When the interns came in they were allowed to write about any field of science they wanted to. But they had to be careful with the other writers. They had to ask the other writers if it was okay. They had to pitch the story to the other writers first, and if it was okay with the other writers at *Science News*, then they would do it. So that was interesting too, because they had to be careful not to crowd the writers who had these beats and take some of their turf away. Which was good, because it taught them something about the profession. It was a fabulous experience for every one of those interns. And once they had a couple of our interns they started taking most of their interns from us. There were times when another program would get an intern in there ahead of all of ours, which was unusual. It did happen, but not often.

I was acutely aware when I started the program that people were going to come to me (and these are other faculty, mainly)—faculty in other departments would come to me and want—because I’m interested in translating complicated academic research results into language available to the public—now this is an idea that appeals to a lot of people. So I was afraid that I would be overrun by people in all sorts of fields wanting me to show them how to do it, so they could do it themselves. And would I edit their papers for them, and rewrite them, and this kind of thing. And people did ask me for that. I would have been overrun if I hadn’t learned how to say no. I had to really be firm and say, “I don’t have time for that. I’ve got my hands full trying to train people who have no sense whatsoever of journalism when they come in, and make them into journalists who are employable by any media outlet in the country in nine months. This is a tall order and I just don’t have time to do anything else.”

Some people were a little huffy about that. They didn't want to believe that. They seemed to have a lot more time on their hands than I did. I was just—my hair was on fire for the whole year. (laughs) I was running around like a madman and nobody else was, it seems. I interviewed a couple of faculty members—I won't name them here—for stories. And I went over to see them and one of them was putting a new roof on a house down the street from his, and it turned out he owned it. It was a rental and he was re-roofing it himself. I said, "Really? How do you have time for that?" And the other one said, "Well"—I noticed he was reading magazines and just enjoying himself in a very, very leisurely way. And he said, "Yeah, I save a couple of days a week for living, just being at home with my wife and not doing anything having to do with the university, a couple of days a week." I said, "Oh, really. Okay." I can't do that. I didn't say that but I couldn't do that. I couldn't think of doing that. Never. Even the day I retired I was still—my hair was still on fire; what there is left of it was still on fire in those days. I mean, I never slowed down. I never had a sabbatical. Nothing. No time off.

Rabkin: Your position bore almost no resemblance to that of a tenure-track professor, or especially a tenured professor.

Wilkes: That's right. That's right. And I didn't really want it to, but I guess I paid a price for that. I never could relax into my job and just sort of be one of the people who has really done his work and now he's just kind of an authority. I never got there. I was always working.

Rabkin: Yeah, it was a very demanding position.

Wilkes: Yeah. But I loved it. It was what I wanted to do. Every minute I spent at that job, at that work, was spent on something I really felt good about doing. I felt that I could make a contribution here. I liked it. I liked being able to make a contribution because I wasn't sure I was going to do that as a literary scholar, because the fields I was interested in were so well mined already. What was I going to contribute? That was a big problem for me and I didn't want to have to make something up that was not really true to be interesting. I didn't have to do that where I was. Everything was real and worthwhile and, I think, of some value to someone. I never lost that feeling and I'm delighted with that.

Rabkin: Was mentoring your graduate students a big part of the work you were doing?

Wilkes: Yeah, it was. I probably mentored them more than they wanted. (laughs) But they asked for it, usually. Sometimes I said, "Let me talk to you about that. There are some things you need to know before you go into that." And I would tell them and they would nod their head. So I guess it was welcome.

Rabkin: How did you see your role as a mentor?

Wilkes: Well, it was important to me. It was really more important to be a mentor than to be a classroom teacher. I wanted people to succeed. I wanted people to get out there and make a living. I was very concerned about that. I didn't want anybody to not find a way to make a living. And as far as I know, all of my students have done it. And that's a great joy to me, knowing that. Because I had to work my way through my whole life and I know what working is about.

I like the idea of being able to do something you love. What better way of making a living can you have? I mean, it's the best. It's the only, if you can do that. Most of our students are doing that. They may not be the richest people in the world but they're happy. They keep doing it, and they could do other things.

Rabkin: Can you talk about some particular triumphs and/or challenges in mentoring students?

Wilkes: Well, one of the challenges—it was really an ethical challenge for me too—was getting them to work for free when the internship had that requirement. Because I do believe that people who use student help—as long as they're publishing the stories they're getting from the students—they're getting benefit from them and they should pay for it. How much they should pay for it, I don't know. That's up to them and the student. But I think they should pay them something. And there were publications that simply would not pay anything. And they would use a fair amount of the students' writing. I would leave it to the student. I would say, "You know, this is up to you. Not everybody can afford to do that." But, of course, during the school year they were getting credit for it. So that was different. But the summer internships that were unpaid, I gradually phased them out.

Rabkin: Phased out the unpaid ones.

Wilkes: Yeah. I mean the students phased them out because the students—what I always did is I tried to scare up more internships than there were students, like half again as many, or twice as many. So the students had a choice. They could

apply to several internships. And there would be some uneasiness at the end of the year—am I going to get the one what I want? But they all got good ones. The way I made sure they did was by just scaring up some good ones, enough good ones that everybody would have one. And the ones that didn't pay, nobody wanted them. They didn't have to take one that didn't pay after a while. So it became a non-issue for us.

But it's an issue that doesn't go away. I just saw a story in the *New York Times* about that. More companies are doing it. Even companies that can afford to pay are doing it, because they have the opportunity. They have people who want those internships. And they do help. Such internships give them access to people who can hire them later. They become known quantities, so it's worth it. But they come from wealthy families or families that have enough money to send their son or daughter through a year's worth of internships after college. How many people can do that?

Rabkin: Right. So college gets more and more expensive. And now, more and more, you're expected to extend your college education, essentially, with an unpaid internship.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: That's tricky.

What were some of the ways that the program changed or evolved, through and after those initial years?

Wilkes: Well, it was constantly evolving in the direction of more and more—

Rabkin: Curriculum?

Wilkes: Curriculum. Yeah, I guess you'd have to call it that, even though the curriculum was partly internship all through the year. We started with a part-time internship for a few people in the last quarter. That was the first year. Or maybe there was no internship during the school year, the first year, I don't know. Do you remember your year if you had—

Rabkin: There was no formal expectation about an internship during any of the three quarters of the academic year. I was in the third cohort. There may have been some students who enterprised internships of their own, but if so, it was relatively few. There wasn't a formal arrangement with the *Sentinel*. Some of us would take independent studies and do freelance writing to constitute the work for the independent study. But I don't remember any kind of formality around internships during the school year.

Wilkes: That's right. That's the main change that took place over my whole term as director. We started with one at the end and then we had one in the middle. And then we had one in the fall. And that was a big change, because people were coming in completely cold from science and suddenly they were in newsrooms. I mean, they were shocked. They were shocked. And so were the newsroom people who were teaching them. They were shocked at how little [these interns] knew, because they were used to getting interns from journalism programs, people who were more or less prepared for what they would be doing.

Rabkin: So these people were jumping in, completely cold, in, say, October, perhaps never having reported or written a news story before, and expected to do that.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: How did that work out?

Wilkes: Well (laughs) it usually worked out. Now, I should also say that when I was interviewing applicants, I would spend a lot of time talking to applicants on the phone. I'd put all of them through a test.

I don't know when I started this, but the last few years, certainly, maybe the last ten years, I was actually requiring them to go to their local newspaper, if they were in a small town, especially, and if they weren't it had to be a small paper. And pitching a story to the editor and successfully getting an assignment and then doing it. And getting it into that paper and sending it to me. That was all part of the application.

This was all aimed at getting them ready for the *Sentinel* or the *Salinas Californian* the first quarter. I actually lost some applicants over this requirement of mine. They got partway through it and they just threw up their hands and said, I don't like this. And I said, "Well, it's a good thing you learn now, because this is what it's like on the job." They went away happy that they had learned without having to commit themselves to the program. And the ones who got through it and said, "Hey, I really kind of enjoyed that. It was tough. It was different from anything that I've ever done before, but I'm really glad. I'm happy with the

result and I liked the experience. I liked every step of the way.” That’s what I wanted to hear. When I heard that on the telephone before they came, that’s when I knew I had one I really wanted.

Rabkin: Tell me more about the process of screening applicants. I imagine, as the program gained national attention, you must have had quite a large pool and quite a large ratio of applicants to places.

Wilkes: Well, the actual number of applicants—because they went through several stages before they became applicants—one of them was talking to me on the phone, sometimes several times before I decided on them.

Rabkin: So you talked to everybody in person to get an initial impression and give them the information they were looking for?

Wilkes: Yeah, I did. We would have hour-long conversations. I mean, my voice was gone at the end of every day. But it was essential to them and to me to get some understandings about the program and about the career field and about the personalities who tended to do well in that field, and the ones who didn’t do quite so well, although there was always a wide range that did well, a very wide range that did well. There are lots of niches you can fit yourself into, as you know. And I made sure they knew that. But if they wanted to keep one foot in science—this was another thing that came up often—if they wanted to keep doing research *and* doing science writing, I told them it was not a good mix, really. It was not really possible to do that.

Rabkin: Why is that?

Wilkes: Well, because to be a successful science writer, to get into the markets that will allow you to reach the most people—and that's what people want to do—you have to be very active. You have to be doing it full time, pretty much. Your name has to be out there regularly. If you're doing research, then that kind of popular writing is going to have to take a back seat to your research, if your research is going to be getting anywhere.

Rabkin: Hmm.

Wilkes: So it's just too much work, I think. I mean, I've never known anybody—except the British are good at this—some of them are professors, they are science faculty, and they write popular articles from time to time. They get them into *New Scientist*, or they get them into the news pages of *Nature*—well, that's not so hard to understand. But they even write for newspapers. In this country they write for the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* from time to time, but not often. They don't do that more than once a year or something. And they can do it without training. The ones who do it tend to just have a good ear for that kind of writing and they do it without any training at all.

Rabkin: Were there particular qualities in applicants that told you right away that this would be a good student for the program?

Wilkes: Well, yeah. If they laughed at my jokes—

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: I mean, if they were sort of loose that way, if they didn't take themselves too seriously and were open to having to start over and all these kinds of things. Those were the people I was looking for.

There were people who called me who were very good: they had been excellent students all of their lives, and they were at a top research institution. And what they wanted to do was—they wanted to bring light into darkness. (laughs) They wanted to speak from the chair. They wanted to illuminate people. They knew what people needed to know and to do and they knew they knew. Total confidence, big egos. And I said, "Well, no, it's not like that, really. There's a kind of humility that all writers for the public have. Everything they write shows that in one way or another. They don't assume anything, and you're assuming that your knowledge and the fact that you're a graduate student at Yale is enough to earn you a place, earn you a chair to speak to the public from. It's not. In fact, it can move you in the opposite direction of that. I think I can tell the difference. So that's why we have this complicated application process. But it does help both you and me, because it doesn't help me to get people who are a bad fit for the program or for the career field. It's very hard on the other students. And it has happened. So we don't want that. And you don't want that either," I would say. And they would hear it. They would hear that.

Rabkin: Can you tell me a little bit about the people you brought in to teach courses for the program, and the people you brought in as short-term visitors to enrich the curriculum?

Wilkes: Well, yeah. For one thing, I valued very much having them come in. Even if they might not turn out to be a great classroom teacher—this is guest speakers, not teaching a whole course, a quarter-long course.

Rabkin: Right. I should probably clarify that I'm asking two questions at once, really. We're talking about two categories of people. You had professionals in the field hired as part-time lecturers to come in and teach a ten-week, quarter-long course at a time. And in addition to that, you also had people who were guest speakers who would come for a period of some number of days, do a little bit of classroom talking, and have potlucks with the students and sort of hobnob, so that students would have exposure to editors and other professionals in the field. So, I guess, we should maybe take those one at a time.

Wilkes: Okay. Well, let me take the quarter-long course, the ten-week course first. Hiring someone to teach one of those courses was a much, much harder job than bringing in guest speakers. And I only started with the guest speakers who were the most popular. If I brought in a guest speaker who would have been a candidate, by virtue of living nearby and having it be possible to drive to Santa Cruz, or even come to Santa Cruz for a quarter to live, which we did a couple of times.

But basically I wanted people who had an automatic, almost instantaneous rapport with the students. And you could see it happen and you could see it not happen pretty quickly. So the people who didn't get that rapport, they were valuable for a different reason, partly because they didn't get it. So these were people you'd be working for. "This guy could be your boss in two years. Some of

them are like that.” I would say that after they left. So it was good for the students to see that. Some editors are very hard-headed about what they like and what they don’t like—in fact, most of them are, in some way or another. So you need to know that.

So out of that larger group of people who visited and talked and then went on their way again, I hired a few who taught courses.

Rabkin: What subjects did you hire people to teach?

Wilkes: Usually newswriting.

Rabkin: Did you have a feature writing course that you’d hire people for as well?

Wilkes: I did. Actually, the feature-writing course was trickier to hire someone to teach. News reporters could not really teach that course the way I wanted it taught, because I wanted to prepare people for writing for national monthly magazines, in addition to other markets. And the newspaper reporters, very few of them can write in that style. They’re so used to writing one-sentence paragraphs and bullet points and all that. They don’t develop things. They don’t use stylistic devices at all. They’re just pared down. And they can be very good at that kind of writing, but when they’ve done it for a few years they can’t really do much else, it seems to me, and they don’t like to. (laughs) One of them called feature writing “thumb sucking.”

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: A feature article was a thumb-sucker. This was a newspaper guy. (laughs) Yeah. So, if you had that attitude towards it, you're not going to be very good at teaching it, right?

Anyway, what I had to worry about was when guest speakers who came in and had a rapport with the students, often that turned out to be a bad thing because they got that rapport through telling war stories, very interesting ones. But they spent the whole quarter telling war stories.

Rabkin: Once you hired them to teach a ten-week course, that ended up being the substance of the course.

Wilkes: That's right. And they did not hand-write comments in the margins of the papers. They sometimes didn't even turn them back to the students. I had to talk to them about that and I tried to prepare them for what their job would be, as I saw it. They would nod their heads and then they wouldn't do it. They wouldn't actually edit students. And when they did, they would do things like break a news story with two or three-sentence paragraphs into single-sentence paragraphs. They would just put the paragraph mark after each sentence. That was their edit. I couldn't change them. I couldn't teach them how to teach the course the way I wanted it taught, so I just had to fire them. And then they got very sulky about that, because I didn't ask them back. That was a problem for me, but I guess you have to do that.

Rabkin: Were there some particularly good teachers who you hired?

Wilkes: Paul Rogers at the *Mercury News*; Glenda Chui.¹² All of them had their—they had such demanding jobs. To try to edit a set of student papers on top of your demanding job is asking a lot of them. So I was lenient with them about that. They didn't always get their stories back to the students as quickly as the students needed them to do a rewrite. That's just impossible to fix, because they were working reporters. But the students loved them anyway. They did. I managed to get a good teaching staff part time. Peter Radetsky—he taught in the program for a while.

Rabkin: He taught a feature-writing class, didn't he?

Wilkes: Yeah, he did. He taught a feature-writing class for the first year and he was very good at that. He was good at *doing* it, too. It helps to be good at doing it. You kind of have to be. But there were other people who were so—I won't name any names—but they were great writers but they couldn't communicate how they did it. They couldn't give any real, usable tips for writing to people. They were one-off people who just did it. They had never taken writing courses; they had just *done it*. And when I had people like that, they were sometimes less able to teach technique than the ones who had taken courses, because what they were teaching was what they had learned in class: how did so-and-so teach it? So that was interesting.

¹² <http://honors.agu.org/winners/glenda-chui/> Both Rogers and Chui shared a Pulitzer Prize for sport news reporting on the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.

But the fact is, I have to say, before we leave this subject, that I made it up as I went along. Every year was a brand-new year with lots of mistakes made in the previous year and high hopes for fixing them. (laughs) And I just bounced along, bounced off the walls, and off the ceiling, and down the carpet, and eventually got to the other end and wiped my brow and got ready for the next year.

Rabkin: (laughs) So when we had the recorder turned off during our break earlier, I had raised the question of the changes and the evolution of the program. This is sort of what we've been addressing, as you learned from your mistakes and learned what worked, and as the program grew and changed. I think one aspect of that evolution that we need to talk about, at least briefly, is the incursion of the digital world.

Wilkes: Oh, right. Okay, let's talk about that. Because that was something—I saw the Internet—well, we had a student in the program when the first browser that ordinary people could use, what was called the Mosaic browser, came out. Ken Chang was in the program. Ken Chang is now one of the science writers for the *New York Times*, and very successful, a Princeton graduate, went to the University of Illinois and got halfway through his physics PhD thesis, having passed the orals already. And that's when he came to the program. He never quite finished his PhD, I guess, unless he has since then. But anyway, he said his PhD was on chaos theory and it became chaotic for him. (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: Anyhow, Ken was already way, way ahead of everybody else on computers in the program, so he told me, he said, “Look, this is powerful stuff. And with this browser—and this browser is going to be improved—this is going to make it possible to publish newspapers online. It’s going to make it possible to publish magazines online. You’re going to have to get into this, or the program is going to have to get into this.”

Rabkin: Can you remember when it was that he was reading this writing on the wall, roughly?

Wilkes: Gee, 1996, something like that. And I said, “Oh, my goodness. Okay, Ken, thanks for telling me.” (laughs) I thought, okay, I’ve got to fish or cut bait, as they say. So I decided to fish. So I took it on myself to go up to San Francisco, south of Market, where *Wired* was. And *Wired* was in a loft, way up south of Market in this kind of funky area. And I went to *Wired*, which was a magazine, I guess, and a website at the same time.

I walked into that place and it was astounding. I mean, it was full of the biggest Macintosh computers. They liked Macs. And every one of them had Ethernet cables running—they were all hanging from the ceiling. They were all pink. It was just this great tangle of pink cables. And about forty people were actually writing. I don’t know what they were doing. Some were editing, I guess, and some were writing. Who knew what they were doing, but they were (makes motor noise) in this great big room, in the middle of the room, two rows. And the computers faced each other. Along the walls there were computer boxes that had

been discarded, from new computers being installed. That's how fast things were moving.

And there was some guy sitting waiting to talk to the editor of *Wired*. There was only one couch, so I sat down on the same couch as this guy. He was wearing all black—you know, black sneakers and black pants and a black sweatshirt and some kind of beanie. It turned out he was a hacker who had caught another hacker interfering with *Wired's* transmissions somehow. I didn't know it at the time, but this guy was a legend already in this community because he had done this. Nobody could figure out who was doing this bad thing, and this guy figured it out and actually found the guy. He had a radio that helped him find this guy's room. I mean, that's what he did. Anyway, it was a real story back then. It didn't get beyond the community, of course, because nobody would understand it.

So I thought, this is the right place to start. I was trying to get ahead of this curve, you know.

Rabkin: How did you even know to go to *Wired*?

Wilkes: I asked around. I said, "What should I be looking at online, now that I know how to go online?" They said, "*Wired*. *Wired* is the hot spot and it's in San Francisco, so you can—" So I actually brought one of their writers down for a visit. He was brilliant and talked a mile a minute. He was an English major, too, but he was very smart and was really up to date on the technology end of it. All he wanted to talk about was where things were going as far as [what] a writer's

career was going to be like. You were going to have to know how to do blah-blah-blah. And that was very valuable, although nobody had any context for it at that point. So it just made everybody scared, including me. (laughs)

Rabkin: “There’s this big tsunami coming. We can’t exactly see what it looks like yet, or what it’s going to do to us, but we’d better be ready for it.”

Wilkes: That’s right. So the first issue of *Science Notes* that went online, Ken Chang did it. He put it online. And he actually came back for a couple of years and did it again and again, because I didn’t have anybody else who could do it, and he graciously did that.

I realized that for me to really get ahead of this curve and still do everything else I was doing by that time—because I was fifteen years into the program or so, by that time; I was really busy and I didn’t have time to master this new technology. I just didn’t. Let alone teach it. So I thought, okay. I’m going to have to start thinking about finding other people to do this for me, and getting internships that would allow our students to do it. But I can’t teach it. I’m not ever going to be able to teach it. So I’ve got to get used to that. It made me feel bad, because there was nothing in the trade I couldn’t do before. Now there was.

Rabkin: And only because you didn’t have enough time to devote to cultivating this new realm of knowledge.

Wilkes: That’s right. See, if I had been in a normal department and a normal faculty member, I could have taken a sabbatical and gone into it full blast, and not had any other responsibilities. But I didn’t have that. I didn’t want that. I

wanted to have the program the size it was. The main reason it was not a master's program was that the University of California requires two faculty to be in charge of a program that offers a master's degree, not one.

Rabkin: Full time.

Wilkes: Full time. Or you could have three who have half—that's the way they usually do it.

Rabkin: You need two FTE's.

Wilkes: Yeah, two FTE, right. So they juggle it around and they make it work that way. And I didn't want that because I wanted specialists. I wanted working professionals teaching the students. I didn't want any UCSC faculty who were sort of doing it on the side, or something. I wanted the real thing. So I sacrificed myself to that, in a way.

Rabkin: Sacrificed the opportunity to be able to offer a master's degree, and also sacrificed your time. You became the sole runner of the program and the sole faculty member responsible for it.

Wilkes: Yeah. The thing was, I couldn't let anything go once I got it going. I just had to add to what I already had going. And pretty soon I had so much going I couldn't see straight. And then I retired. (laughs) That's the way it went. It was just additive, every year.

Rabkin: Yeah. So did you find somebody appropriate to teach the digital media element of the program?

Wilkes: Well, the students were coming in computer savvy. I told them all: “We’re up against this limitation. I don’t understand computers very well. And all the people I’m bringing in as experts in science writing are older than the people who know the most about the computer world. So you better learn as much about computers as you can while you’re around them and before you’re in the program, because you’re going to have to know as much about going online—” They didn’t have to know much about publishing online. That came later. Some of them had to learn that. When they went to their internships, they learned how to create web pages and pour copy into them and all that stuff.

Rabkin: Or “content,” as it became called.

Wilkes: Yeah, content. “More content here.” (sighs) Oh, my goodness. Well, anyway, I didn’t get there myself. I warned people earlier and earlier in the application process about this. And meanwhile, some of the people, like current program director Rob Irion, he took to it like the proverbial duck takes to water and he knew a lot about— But even he hires people to lay out his publications. He doesn’t lay out *Science Notes* himself. He has a person do it.

So we got it handled, more or less. People are now very computer literate, and the people coming into the program are, and they don’t need any special attention in that particular area. So it’s fine. I made it clear to people that I was more and more finding myself outdated technologically. And I realized that I was just going to get more so, so I tried to compensate by bringing other experts in. But I made it clear: “I’m not going to learn this stuff. You’re going to get it

from other people. And I'm going to be retiring soon. The next director will have a better sense of these things than I do." And Rob does, very much so.

And other media. I mean, radio, digital media, make it possible to put anything online. I wasn't up to that. I like listening to the radio but I don't know anything about production. So my hands were more and more tied in terms of new media. And the students who wanted to get that, I said, "The internships are the way to find out something about it. If you're interested in radio, we have KUSP. All three quarters you can go down there and intern all you want." So some people did that. And a few went into radio, but not too many, not too many.

Rabkin: One of the big areas we haven't yet really touched on is the illustration track of the program. And I wonder if you'd like to dive into that now, or save it for our final interview?

Science Illustration Program

Wilkes: One of the reasons I came back to Santa Cruz and didn't try to get tenure at M.I.T.—which the dean told me I had a fighting chance for, as far as he could see—was that M.I.T. was not interested in allowing me to have an illustration track or any kind of illustration. It was strictly writing that they wanted me for. And when I was a kid, I was the class artist. I was the one they came to. As I advanced through elementary school, the prior teachers would come and get me out of those classes and bring me back. I liked to draw. I used to love to draw. I left it along the way, but I did love that. I loved Leonardo's notebooks. He wrote in one of his margins, "Draw it first and then write about it." He said, "Draw a

picture of what you have invented or what you have in mind. And then write an explanation of it. But start with the picture." I thought, wow, that's brilliant. That's exactly right.

Rabkin: Why?

Wilkes: Because people like pictures, especially if they can look at the picture and get some sense right away. It's like a good lead: this is what it's about.

Rabkin: Worth a thousand words and all that.

Wilkes: All that, right. So I got the idea that we were going to have an illustration track that was going to be doing what people now call information graphics. Well, it didn't work out that way. We had what was basically a natural history illustration program, where some of the people do information graphics. Rob is now asking all the illustration students to do it for *Science Notes*. So he's getting infographics into *Science Notes* twenty years after I tried to get that notion going.

But I got Ann [Caudle] and Jenny [Keller]. Jenny was actually in the first illustration class we offered. This is something that they allowed me to get away with at Santa Cruz without really asking. I wrote a course description for Science Illustration, and I sent it through the senate approval process. They approved it with my name on it. Nobody asked if I could draw. They didn't ask anything. They just approved it.

So I took some money in my budget—because I had money—this was early; this was '83 or something. I had some money and I hired Pieter Folkens to teach the class. I found him through one of the students who wanted to be sponsored in an independent certificate in science illustration, Chris Carothers, I don't know if you ever met him.

Rabkin: (nods) And his brother, John.

Wilkes: And his brother, John, right.

Chris took a seminar with Pieter. It was just something that Peter did on his own, through the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators. Anyway, he met Peter, Chris did. He told me about Pieter and he said, "You should get him to come and talk to the students." I said, sure. Chris helped me and we got Pieter to come. And Pieter and I hit it off.

So I ended up creating this course for him to teach. That was after I met him and knew I could get him for a certain amount of money, which was about what a lecturer made for one course in those days. I said, I'm going to take a flyer on this and see what happens. I just hired him as a specialist, through some strange personnel qualification process, you know. I got him through it. He had never taught before in a university setting.

So we got it all going. We had a classroom that had desks that were all connected, like an amphitheater, a small one. And we had seventy-five people turn out for the class. We had said it was going to be limited to twenty. Seventy-three people I think it was. They filled the room. I said, well, Pieter, before we go

in (I'm getting ahead of myself because we hadn't gone into the classroom yet). I said, "Before we go in, we have to have a way of selecting students if we have a big turnout—we may have because there may be a pent-up demand for this kind of thing among the art majors and whatnot. Because I know they don't care about accurate drawing in the art department here. (That was true. It's even more true now.) So there might be a pent-up demand for people who really want to draw things the way they look. So let's have a way of deciding who gets in and who doesn't. Because writing about why you want this class is not enough in and of itself, although we'll have them do that too, if there's time."

So Pieter said, "Yeah, let's have them draw something." I said, "Well, what are you going to have them draw? You've got to have them draw something that all of them have seen more than once. I mean, they have to have a good memory of this object. They're not going to be able to look at it. It's going to have to be from memory." That was one of the things he wanted. *He* wanted that—a good drawing from memory. He landed on a mouse. "Everybody has seen a mouse. Everybody has seen plenty of mice. Let's do a mouse." I said, "Sure, fine. Good."

So seventy-three people trooped into the room. They were ready to draw, most of them. And there was paper for anybody who didn't have it, and pencils. Okay. Peter took it over from there. I decided, since he's going to be picking these people, I won't make them write. It's going to be a drawing class.

So he said, "I want you to draw a mouse. That's all I'm going to tell you. Draw a mouse from memory." And they all drew mice, one mouse per person. Maybe the third try they stuck with and developed. I think we gave them an hour. At

the end of that hour, or before that hour ended, people were putting their mice in a pile over here.

And Jenny Wardrip [Keller] was in there, at the age of eighteen, a freshman. This must have been winter quarter. Anyway, I didn't spot her. There were a lot of young women in the class and I didn't know which one she was then. But I sure saw the mouse she drew. I went through them with Pieter. I went through them with Pieter. We sat down side by side and he looked at them and handed them to me. One of these mice looked like it had been drawn by Albrecht Dürer. I mean, I'm not kidding you. It was staggering, it was so good. It was fabulous. It really was in a class by itself. There wasn't anybody close, not close. There were a lot of interesting mice, well drawn in their way, but nothing that really looked like a mouse like this one did. I said, "I wonder who this is?" So I made sure I got to know her, because I knew from that mouse that I was going to have her in the program somehow or other.

And I managed to do that. I found Ann later, a year or two later. But I made sure Jenny got an individual major in natural science illustration, with Todd Newberry, also. He was the other sponsor. I mean, what am I doing sponsoring somebody in illustration? But I took it on and made sure all the paperwork was in order. And she did it. And she graduated with that major. Then she got a job in the Division of Natural Sciences' graphics department. I think it was for science papers that were being illustrated and designed. Anyway, she had gainful employment as an illustrator from the start.

I kept in touch with her. And then Ann came along and I said, “Why don’t you guys find a place on campus that could be turned into a permanent classroom for this?” Because it was hard to get a classroom for the class. And by the time I had met Ann—Jenny and Ann liked each other from the get-go.

They found the Blacksmith Shop. I looked into it. I said, “Who controls this space?” It turned out it was the art department. And the art department didn’t like the idea that it was going to go to the Natural Sciences Division, because that was going to be the umbrella over the illustration program. So that was a little political scuffle that we had to go through.

Rabkin: Was the art department using the Blacksmith Shop at the time?

Wilkes: They used it occasionally, just enough. They didn’t want to let it go. You know, real estate is very important to departments. So, one thing led to another and we got it. Then I made sure that enough tables were made, and Ann and Jenny told the science division shop how to make the tables, how they should be designed and all that. They made custom tables, which they still have over at CSU Monterey Bay, the same tables.

Rabkin: Those tables moved from the Blacksmith Shop on campus to the illustration program’s other digs on the UCSC campus, up on Science Hill, and then from there to UC Santa Cruz Extension, when the program moved off campus (which we’ll talk about), and then from there to CSU Monterey Bay?
(laughs)

Wilkes: (laughs) That’s right.

Rabkin: Storied tables.

Wilkes: Yeah, and they got drawing lamps, special lamps with magnifying lenses. And all that I paid for out of my budget and they accumulated everything, got it all at good prices. Flat files secondhand. Everything was secondhand.

Rabkin: The dissecting microscopes?

Wilkes: Those were special order. Those were not used. They were new and we had to cough up the money for that. But we did.

Rabkin: Specimens?

Wilkes: Ann and Jenny figured all that out. They did all the hard stuff. So the thing just grew. Pieter made a graceful exit and turned everything over to Ann and Jenny, the teaching part. And I got them on as lecturers, at first for Summer Session, and then for the full year. I can't remember what years they graduated from one step to the next, but it was all gradual. And it was all under the radar.

Rabkin: In what sense?

Wilkes: Getting them hired. I think I had them act as TA's for Peter or something, and then I could say they had taught that way. And the Summer Session teaching they did: I got them those jobs. They taught classes independent of each other. And then once they had that experience, then they were good to go, as far as our personnel department was concerned. All this stuff has to be finessed.

Rabkin: There was a lot of finessing going on.

Wilkes: Yeah, there was. But the thing that kept me going was I really wanted this to happen. And I realized fairly early that Ann and Jenny were not so enthusiastic about doing what amounted to information graphics, as they were about doing classical natural science illustration. That's what they loved to do themselves and that's what they wanted to teach. "Okay, fine," I said, "Do it. Don't worry about the other stuff at all. I'm not going to force anything on you." So they became pretty independent at that point.

Rabkin: You brought Ann Caudle both to teach in the program with Jenny and also to be the director of the program.

Wilkes: That's right. Jenny was really first in line for the directorship, because she was the first one to teach and all of that. I offered to her first. But she said, "I don't want to be director," so that's the way it fell out. And it's been that way ever since. They are fast friends and are very happy with the arrangement. So it's been great for everybody.

Rabkin: Do you remember how you met Ann, how she came on board?

Wilkes: I think Jenny introduced her to me. I think that's how it worked. I don't know. I can't remember.

Rabkin: So it was some years into the existence of the writing track, of the graduate program, that the illustration program got up and running, and actually bringing in graduate students and conferring a certificate.

Wilkes: That's right. I don't know how many years it was. It wasn't too many years. It was probably rolling along by the late eighties, certainly.

Rabkin: Maybe even earlier than that. Because I came in 1983—

Wilkes: And it was a possibility for you, wasn't it?

Rabkin: Yes. We were talking about it as a possibility for me in 1984-85.

Wilkes: Okay, then that might have been the first class.

Rabkin: Well, I will be interviewing Jenny, so she'll be able to tell us.¹³

Wilkes: Okay.

Rabkin: So that program, as you've alluded to, is no longer at UCSC. In fact, it's made a couple of moves, first out of the Natural Sciences Division and then under the aegis of UC Santa Cruz Extension. And then eventually, when Extension moved to Silicon Valley, the Science Illustration Program moved to CSU Monterey Bay. Can you talk about what happened, why the program ended up leaving campus and then leaving UCSC all together?

Wilkes: Well, that's an interesting question because most of the deans I had, and I had at least ten deans in my—

Rabkin: Really?

¹³ The course *Natural Science Illustration* first appears in the 1983 UCSC *General Catalog*.

Wilkes: There were two deans a year for a while. I mean, it was a job that people discovered they didn't want.

Rabkin: Dean of natural sciences, or physical and biological sciences, as it was eventually called.

Wilkes: Right. It was one of those jobs that had a lot of responsibility and very little power. That's the way the deans described it to me and they didn't like it, after they got a taste of it. So then it fell to Dave Kliger, and he held that job for a long time, at least eight or nine years.¹⁴ And he was unlike—all the deans were different from each other. But none of them paid as much attention to my program as he did, from the start. He wanted to know what I was spending money on and why I needed to, and this and that. I guess the budget was getting tighter and tighter all the time. I know it was. There's no doubt about that.

The most generous dean I had was Frank Drake. He seemed to have a huge budget. He gave me more money than any other dean did. He gave me a full-time assistant, and my full-time assistant spent half her time reading novels. There wasn't anything for her to do but I didn't want to lose her. And then her job was cut down to half time. That was the first cut. I don't know who imposed that, but somebody did.

¹⁴ See Irene Reti, Interviewer and Editor, *Campus Provost/ Executive Vice Chancellor David Kliger* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2011). Available in full text at <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/ucsc/campus-provostexecutive-vice-chancellor-david-kliger>

Anyway, Dave Klinger was not all that keen on the illustration program, from the start. He didn't say so at first, but I could see whenever I talked about it very proudly, he looked skeptical, and frowned. I could tell it wasn't going over as well as the writing track was. But I didn't admit weakness. I just noticed that it was not a good subject to bring up anymore. But it got reviewed along with the writing track every time we were reviewed. He looked at the review and the reviews were always positive. The illustration students were very happy with what they were getting. As far as they were concerned, it was always a huge success, huge, easily earning as high a happiness rate as the writing track had.

Rabkin: What about in terms of placing graduates in professional jobs?

Wilkes: Well, illustration is a freelance profession, much more so than writing. So there weren't that many staff jobs, and Ann and Jenny were always quick to point that out. But they brought in freelancers and the freelancers talked about the business end of it. The lack of staff jobs didn't deter anyone, that's for sure. But I couldn't show jobs. I couldn't show that many internships at first. But Ann and Jenny managed to put together a lot of internships themselves, and eventually I could show that to the deans, and that seemed to satisfy them.

But the budget kept shrinking and shrinking, and my budget kept shrinking. I used to have a big budget to bring in guest speakers. I could fly people from the East Coast and put them up. I couldn't do that anymore. I had to wait until they were in San Francisco, and even LA was kind of a stretch. So I had to trim sails quite a bit.

But Dave said, “You know, the illustration program is not so easy for me to justify as the writing track. And I’m wondering how you would feel about sending it to the art department, to let them run it.” And I said, “Well, the art department doesn’t value that kind of thing, and you should know that. Art departments and illustration departments are like cats and dogs. They don’t get along. I don’t think that’s a good home for them. I would rather not send them away to the art department, but if that’s the only way they can survive— We can talk about it, but it’s not a pleasant place for them; it wouldn’t be.” And so he talked to the art department and came back to me and said, “They don’t want it, anyway. So that’s not an option.”

So I thought that was the end of the problem. But no, the next thing I knew he announced that he was sending it to Extension. And I said, “Oh, really. That’s unfortunate. Are you sure we can’t find a way to keep it?” “I’m sure. I’ve thought about this a lot and that’s where it has to go.” And that’s where it went. I couldn’t stop it. It was a very sad time for me and for Ann and Jenny too. It was a shock to everybody.

But Ann and Jenny made it happen. They made it work. Thank god. They got students. They were the only unit in UCSC Extension that made a profit, the only one, up until the end. And then they had to leave again, because UCSC Extension moved entirely to the Silicon Valley. They didn’t have a space for them in Santa Cruz anymore. So I said, “Well, that leaves Cabrillo and Cal State Monterey Bay, and maybe Monterey Peninsula College. Cal State Monterey Bay would be a good place to lobby, because they’re just getting underway and they’re trying to

make a name for themselves, and they need something visible. And you guys are nothing if you're not visible. So why don't you talk to them?"

One thing led to another. They got into Cal State Monterey Bay. And they got a better physical space than they ever had at UCSC. They're well—I don't know if you've ever visited them over there but they have a nice setup. They have a building to themselves, and it was all redone to their specs. It looks like it's permanent. CSUMB is very proud of that outfit. One of the university's publications, the alumni magazine, devoted a cover illustration and story to them.

Rabkin: You provided me with a copy of that in the box of materials you loaned me. Yeah, it's a beautiful piece.

There was a point in the history of the program's tenure on the UCSC campus when I think Jenny developed a History of Natural Science Illustration course. It was a big course, an undergraduate course.

Wilkes: Yeah.

Rabkin: How does that fit into this history of the program?

Wilkes: I paid her to teach that course.

Rabkin: It was a big lecture course, a departure from what they had been doing.

Wilkes: Right. I did that partly because—I think Klinger was already my dean at that point—and the reason why I wanted her to teach it was that I thought it would be something that was more academically acceptable to Klinger than the

hands-on training that was going on already. And it was not enough for him. Nothing was enough for him. I don't know. He didn't tell me that he was getting flak from his faculty from the natural sciences. He didn't say that. But there was something about the whole science illustration enterprise that did not sit well with him. And that's all I can say. I could not persuade him that it was a worthwhile thing to do. I just couldn't. But their move to CSUMB is a happy ending because things would have kept getting worse at UCSC. Their budget would have been cut, cut, cut. The illustration program just would have gotten yanked out at some point anyway, probably.

Whereas now, they got into Cal State Monterey Bay at the right time, and got well established. They're able to control everything themselves. They can decide how much tuition to charge. They don't have to get approvals for anything, because they're in adult education. They just hand the package to the administrators and say, "This is what we're doing and this is what we're charging. This is what you're going to get, and this is what we get." Everything is fine. Everything is hunky-dory. So it's a better deal. They're making more money. I mean, the commute is no fun, that's for sure. But that's the only downside that I can see.

Rabkin: Well, John, I think we're coming up on another two hours already. There are some things I would still like to ask you about. Would you be amenable to coming back for one more interview on Thursday? Because I don't want to push us too far today. But I think there's enough to talk about that it might be useful.

Wilkes: Yeah, Thursday is fine.

Rabkin: Great. I don't think it will be two hours this time but it would be nice to have a final [session] and give you a chance to mull over what's left that we haven't talked about, that you would like to include. So thank you very much. Another wonderful interview. And I will stop it here.

More on Freelance Writing

Rabkin: Okay, welcome back, John. Today is November 13, 2014. This is Sarah Rabkin. I am in my kitchen with John Wilkes for our fourth and final oral history interview. At the end of our last interview, we were talking about the Science Illustration Program. I think we covered that pretty well. Unless there's anything else you'd like to say about that, I'd like to open today by asking you, John, about your own writing. In particular, I know you did a lot of freelance book reviewing over the course of your teaching and administrative career. Is there anything you'd like to say about that?

Wilkes: Sure. I thought I would have more time to write than I ended up having. That was one of my gradual surprises. But I didn't mind it. That was, frankly, the main reason I wanted to be appointed—I was offered the opportunity of being appointed an assistant professor or a lecturer—whichever I wanted, but both with tenure. So I said I would rather be a lecturer, because I would not have to be held to publication as tightly as I would as a professor, or at all as a lecturer, is what I understood at the time.

So I didn't want to have to dump my students for my own publications. That was what I did not want to end up doing.

Rabkin: So even if you had opted to be hired on as a professor with tenure, you still would have been expected to publish a certain amount?

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. To get promoted. Yeah.

I thought I could do it, but that was one of the things that made the job more attractive than M.I.T.'s offer, which was not really an offer beyond the first three-year contract I got. They would have required a book from me for a tenured appointment and I would have had three more years to do a book. And then it would have been all or nothing.

I thought I could have done a book. They are very good about giving you time to do those things, at M.I.T., so that was not going to be a problem. But even there I had the same concern about the students. I didn't want to ditch them in favor of my career, which I saw too many people doing, frankly. I just didn't want to do that. I wasn't going to do that.

So I asked for a lecturer appointment and got it, and in fact was advanced reasonably well on the basis of everything else I was doing. See, they don't count journalism as publication, even if you're teaching journalism. They want you to publish in *journals* of journalism. There are such things, academic journals about journalism, where they count the number of sources in a story and say, "This story is weak because it only has five sources and not all of them are real experts." That's the kind of article you have to write to get into a journalism

journal. I didn't want to do that. I just wasn't going to do that. It was a waste of time, as far as I was concerned. So I said, "Sure, a lecturer. Make me a lecturer. I like being a lecturer. I was an enlisted man in the Air Force. I'm going to be a lecturer in the university." (laughs)

Rabkin: Interesting parallel.

Wilkes: Yeah. And by and large, my promotions were as good as they would have been, I'm sure, if I had been appointed a professor. I ended up between step six and step seven, which is not bad. A lot of professors don't get to step six, because they're supposed to publish a second or third book by that time. And if they haven't, then they just stay there at step five and a half, or something. So I did all right.

Rabkin: So your appointment as a lecturer with security of employment entailed a series of steps that are analogous to those that tenure-track faculty go through.

Wilkes: That's right. So I wasn't penalized monetarily for being a lecturer, at all. I was a little concerned about that, but not too concerned, because I was more interested in the work itself and what I'd be doing.

Rabkin: The teaching and administration of the program.

Wilkes: Right. And doing some journalistic writing, which I knew would not count toward anything.

So the book reviewing I was doing was just a way of making myself keep reading interesting books. And that allowed me to do that. But what happened—

and the reason I didn't do more of it—is that my wife and I had a couple of kids, and she wanted some help with them. I had to give something up, so I gave up most of my writing at that point. And then as they got older, I just kept working with them on various things, because she was working full time on her writing. So I just thought, okay, I'll just keep working with the kids and that's the way it goes. So I hadn't done much writing by the end of my career. I mean, I had done some at the beginning, but not as much as I had hoped, toward the end. But it worked out all right, and I'm happy.

And you're probably wondering if I'm doing any now, and the answer to that is Letters to the Editor, Op-ed pieces to the *Sentinel*. Very local. And not much else. A lot of email. A lot of snail mail letters. But that's it. I've lost my desire to write the Great American Novel, somehow. (laughs) I don't feel too much of a pang, either.

Rabkin: Did you have fiction-writing ambitions at one point?

Wilkes: I always had that. Yeah, that was what I wanted to do. That's what I thought I would do. I didn't even think I'd become a professor in any way. I wanted to be a writer. And one thing led to another, and I didn't go that way. I'm not sorry. I had a good life and I'm having a good life still, not doing that. (laughs)

Digital Media and Other Changes in Science Journalism

Rabkin: We talked last time about the advent of digital media and what a profound change that represented in the field of science journalism—and

required of you, in terms of making changes in the program. And I wonder if there are any other changes in the profession of science communication that you witnessed over the course of your career, that are significant enough for us to talk about?

Wilkes: There's one, absolutely, that is happening right now in a very intense way. And that is the desire on the part of the media to have more pictures. They find that people want more pictures—more video, more still photographs.

Rabkin: Illustrations?

Wilkes: Well, nobody asks for those, as far as I know. They do ask for more video, especially video. In fact there's now—you know about the *Best American Short Stories*, *Best American Science Writing*, *Best American Nature Writing*—*Best American* this and that. Now there's a *Best American Infographics*. And that's interesting to me because it's something that I saw coming a long time ago and thought that it was necessary a long time ago.

The problem with it was it was cumbersome to do. They couldn't do it fast. Newspapers have to have things quickly. You had to have an art department at a newspaper that knew how to present it, and all the rest of it. It was just expensive and slow. So they didn't do much of it; at most newspapers, they didn't do really any. The *Mercury News* when it was at its most flush financially did some fine infographics—beautiful ones, whole-page layouts, spreads, everything, because they had artists who could work fast, and who could work well with the designers of the pages. So they could really get it out there with

news stories. But that's unusual. And it would have never been scalable. It could never happen for all newspapers because you need really good artists, really fast artists, and designers of pages who are equally good to make it work right.

Rabkin: And you need a budget for that.

Wilkes: You need a budget for that. Photographs are much easier to deal with, far easier. But photographs are—now that we have a lot of real estate to fill on the Web—photographs are now much more in demand than they used to be. And they now want reporters to do their own photographs because they don't want to send two people out for a story, when they can send one, if the one can photograph and make video. So this is really expanding the job of the reporter quite a bit, because there's an aesthetic component to that and not everybody has it. In fact, most people don't have it. They stand too far away from what they're shooting, and simple things like that. That's going to become more and more important, I think, because readers, viewers want it. They really want it. They want it more than ever. And now that the technology is there to give it them, they're going to demand it, and get it somehow.

When *Life* magazine was created—see, *Time* magazine was the first magazine in that group of magazines. But *Life* was the second one. And it was partly because they couldn't get enough photographs into *Time*. There was not enough room, the format was small. So they created this great big magazine. That was ideal for showing photographs, and then it became the place that the best photographers in the world wanted to be published and were published. And it became a

picture magazine. That's what it was. There were some longer stories in it, but mostly it was pictures with captions.

And the captions were fabulous captions. I mean, those are the best captions you'd ever see anywhere. A good caption is very hard to write. Somehow it has to explain everything in the picture. It's not easy. *National Geographic*—I don't know if they still do this—but when they hire somebody for a staff writer position, the first six months or a year they do nothing but write captions, because they want them to have that tight, all-encompassing style, that they can somehow translate into feature articles later, but it will have that same texture. Anyhow, so, pictures. Pictures are important and they're now important again, because you don't have to have a large-format magazine to publish them. You have the Web to publish them. That's changing everything. And it's going to continue to.

So that's the one challenge, I think, to the program as it's now constituted, as a nine-month-long intensive writing program, mainly. Learning how to shoot video and still photography is going to be very important. And people are going to have to be able to do it and the ones who can do it are going to get the best jobs, there's no doubt about that.

Rabkin: Do you think the written word is going to be proportionally less important in journalism?

Wilkes: (sighs) Well, I mean, something has to give. People are going to have to write shorter pieces. I think that's pretty clear. We're not going to be able to go on and on, the way we like to do.

Rabkin: How do you feel about that as a literary person?

Wilkes: I don't like it. (laughs) I hated to have to cut my articles. And I did. When I wrote something for *Psychology Today*, it would always come down to, "Well, we want to get one more photograph into that story and that means you have to take out ten lines, or fifteen lines," or whatever it was. And that would be after I had it toned, hewed to the last punctuation mark. Now I had to take out more words, yikes! But I did it, grudgingly. I wanted the story in the magazine, and I knew what they wanted. And there, and in most magazines, the person who has the last word is the art director, not the editor of the text. They say, "We want this picture in," and the editor has to make room for it. So that's interesting. I didn't know that when I started writing for magazines.

So our program is going to have to somehow teach people the rudiments [of photography and video]. And Rob Irion is already doing that. I mean, he has two people who learned all that on the job, after graduating from the program: Mary Miller and Lisa Strong-Aufhauser. Lisa was already a still photographer when she started the program, but now she does video too.

So that's the big change that I see coming. And we have to handle it somehow. The program is already quite full with material to learn, so I don't know exactly how that's going to happen, but it'll have to happen. And it will happen.

Rabkin: Something else we didn't talk about head-on last time was: what happened with undergraduate instruction in the Science Communication Program once you launched the graduate program? Could you talk about that?

Wilkes: Yeah, I can. Well, Peter Radetsky was teaching the undergraduate courses. And until he decided he wanted to spend full time writing and resigned, he was doing it. He was filling in. He basically was doing what I was doing before I took on the graduate program. But when he resigned, I couldn't find anybody who was good enough, in my view, to take over those courses. And we were getting budget cuts and I thought, well, it's a piece to sacrifice to keep the rest of the program going, you know, to have visitors coming in and keep the quality high in the graduate program. So I didn't try too hard to find a replacement for Peter, because we had money problems.

Rabkin: Were you continuing to see undergraduate demand?

Wilkes: Well, it wasn't manifesting itself to me directly. I knew that it was there because it's always there.

Rabkin: And when the courses were offered, students enrolled in them.

Wilkes: Oh, yeah. We never had any trouble filling the courses. And I think as the campus has grown, that would only be more true now. People are really interested in doing that kind of writing, and the science division has always wanted some undergraduate courses, or at least one. In fact that was kind of a bone of contention between Dave Klinger and me. He wanted me to teach that course and I said, "I don't have time. I just don't have time to do it." And he said,

“Well, you’re going to have to do it.” I kept putting it off and he let me put it off for a few years. But then he finally said, “Next year you’re going to teach that course.” And I said, “I’m going to retire, Dave.” (laughs) That’s when I retired. I did not want to put myself in that position, of having to shortchange the [graduate] students, or kill myself, one of the two. Because that was the way I saw it.

Rabkin: Was that demand part of what propelled you into retiring when you did?

Wilkes: Yes, it was. And Rob knew that the same demand would be made of him. And he accepted it. He did it. But he didn’t have kids. That was the difference, I thought. When I went home, I went home to my kids.

Rabkin: Yeah, and even so Rob has said that that demand is very challenging, to add that undergraduate course to what he’s already doing.

Wilkes: I know it is.. It is a lot of work, as you know.

Rabkin: Well, since we’re talking about Rob Irion, would you like to say something about the choice of Rob as your successor, and the transition from your directorship to his?

Wilkes: Sure. I think I was rightly becoming known as kind of a curmudgeon when it came to New Media.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: And Rob was not. Rob was eager to embrace it and to try to work it out and make it part of the program. And I was just saying, “Look, this is a writing program. Our students are very bright. They can pick this kind of thing up in no time. They don’t need classroom instruction in it.” That was my position.

The students, I noticed, started disagreeing with me on that. They thought, “People want us to be able to do certain things when we start an internship and if we can’t do them we’re in trouble, or we don’t get the internship.” So I started telling people that I was accepting into the program that they’d better start learning how to take photographs well. And when it became possible with Smartphones to shoot video, do that too.

And then they would come to the program and they wouldn’t have done it, because they were already busy themselves. They were usually graduate students at places like M.I.T. and Princeton and they were busy. So it became an issue. It did become an issue. I mean, it wasn’t a serious one, because our students, by that time, were getting such good internships. They were always the top picks for all the publications that wanted interns, even without that training. But I could see it coming, and that was another reason I retired early, a little early, a year early. And Rob took the job happily and dove into creating courses that would allow people to learn the skills that he knew they needed to have.

So that all has worked out, although it’s very tight, I must say. Something has to give when you’re squeezing that much material into a one-year program. And yet, the one year—and this is something I want to say—the one year is important to the students, too. It’s very important to them. They always emphasized, in all

the program reviews, they did not want a longer program, because they would always be asked that question. No, nine months and then a full-time internship is just right for them. So I don't know what's going to happen, with editors wanting more video and more photography. It's not going to be easy, let's put it that way.

Rabkin: As you're reflecting on the program itself, it occurs to me that we might talk about the community of alumni that has emerged from the program. It's quite a robust and interconnected group of graduates. There's the email network; job announcements go out from Rob's office, and I think that began before Rob came on the scene; and alumni meet up with each other at AAAS meetings and other venues. I wonder what you'd like to say about the nature of that community?

Wilkes: Well, it's a very friendly one, and I am delighted with the way it's worked out. They really want to meet each other and help each other out in any way they can. They're very generous with each other. Science writers tend to be pretty generous with each other, anyway, I think. But our graduates are even more so, because they have the program in common. And Rob has facilitated that in ways, too. He goes to all the meetings; he goes to more meetings than I did. And that's good because he's always there to introduce people. And he does it. That's important. All you have to do is bring two people together and introduce them, and they go from there. Rob does that very well. So it's helped a lot.

Rabkin: I've noticed that, increasingly, over the years, as I've received those emails from Rob about freelance or full-time job possibilities around the world in

the science communication field, that it seems, more and more, the people doing the hiring are alumni of the program.

Wilkes: (laughs) Yeah. That's right. And that really helps. That's a stage that had just begun to happen when I was leaving. And now it's in full force, I think.

UC Santa Cruz as a Home for the Science Communication Graduate Program

Rabkin: Interesting.

I'm wondering what you'd like to say about UC Santa Cruz, in particular, as the home for the Science Communication Graduate Program. In what ways do you see it as having been a well-suited home institution? Were there problems that might not have existed had you been at another institution? What are your thoughts about that?

Wilkes: Well, I think UCSC offers a very strong plus in the fact that it's a liberal arts campus, even though now that it's growing to—what is it, 16,500 or something, now, in that neighborhood—we have a very active and successful engineering program. It's taking on the coloration of a major research university in more ways than were the case when I started the program, that's for sure. But despite that, I think it still has the feel of a liberal arts college, in many ways. And I think that's good for the students. Because they're coming from intense research institutions, all of them are. They come from M.I.T. and Harvard, and places where research is way ahead of everything else. I think they relax when they get here.

And that's what you have to do, to start thinking outside the box. Sorry about the cliché. But it happens easily at UCSC because of this sort of freewheeling liberal arts atmosphere we have, and I'm delighted with. I flourished in it myself. I loved it. That's what got me even more interested than I already was in reading science, high-level popular science, such as you find in *Scientific American*, say. I loved doing that. I felt liberated by UCSC because the science faculty were in the college. You had lunch with them and they were fun. You could ask them questions and not feel like an idiot. (laughs) You know, it was just wonderful. So that's good. That's the good side of UCSC. And it's still that way and I hope it will always be that way.

Rabkin: Can you offer any examples of seeing your graduate students relax and expand beyond a strictly scientific-research-institution mindset?

Wilkes: I'll give you one example. I won't name the woman involved. It was before we had internships starting with the fall quarter. There was more leeway in the curriculum and I let people take one course of their own choosing, the first two quarters. And then it was the first one quarter. But when she had that option, she chose a course on human sexuality and decided to come out as a lesbian as a result of that course. And she is now, has always been since then, out. And not only that, but she's one of the highest-paid graduates we have. So she's been very successful in her career.

Rabkin: In a journalism field.

Wilkes: Well, she's a public information version of that. But at the national level, very national, and has always been, since a year out of the program. She really flowered.

Narrative Evaluations

Rabkin: Great, thank you. Another aspect of UCSC academic tradition, of course, that used to set it apart from other institutions was the use of narrative evaluations in lieu of letter grades. And, of course, you experienced that from the student end, when you were an undergrad and a graduate student. I wonder if you'd like to share any thoughts about being a writer of narrative evaluations and what that was like for you?

Wilkes: Well, it was a lot of work, first of all. But I enjoyed it because it was a way of summing up what I'd been telling each student, because I wrote editorial comments on their papers and their stories, and usually a long head note or end note to try to sum up. So at the end of the quarter or the end of the course, I would take the opportunity to write a summation of summations. As I say, it was a lot of work, but I took it as an opportunity more than a burden. I tried to. And I always felt that way. Because I like writing letters to people and that was what I saw it to be.

Interestingly enough, maybe to me anyway, when I came to UCSC—a lot of people don't know this—the campus did not open with narrative evaluations.

That was an innovation that Page Smith sort of foisted on the faculty.¹⁵ In a meeting, he just came in and said, “We’re going to have narrative evaluations now,” and everybody sat up—I heard this; I didn’t see it—but everybody said, “What?”

Rabkin: Did this happen during the first year?

Wilkes: The first quarter. The first two or three weeks. And the first way they decided to run the narrative evaluations was that the faculty would write them but you wouldn’t get to read them until you graduated. It was sort of like what Reed College does with their grades. And that went on for a couple of months. We’re still in the first quarter in the first year. People [students] were really upset by this. They wanted to read them. They wanted to see what faculty thought of them: “How can you write something and not let me see it?”

So one of the students, one of the freshmen, whose father was a lawyer, he told his father about this. And his father said, “Well, we’ll see about that.” (laughs) So he wrote a letter on his letterhead to McHenry, I guess. McHenry was never that keen on narrative evaluations anyway. You know, he and Page Smith disagreed on things more than we realized at the time. And so he looked into it and he said, “Well, this is a little stiff.” So what they ended up compromising on was that the faculty would write them at the end of the quarter and the students would see them at the end of the quarter. And that was the way it stood for a long time.

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Calciano, Interviewer and Editor, *Page Smith: Founding Cowell College and UCSC, 1964-1973*. (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 1996). Available in full text and audio at <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/smith>

Rabkin: So it sounds as if Page Smith was not, at least initially, envisioning narrative evaluations as a pedagogical tool.

Wilkes: Well, the thing was, he wanted to run it by the faculty and have a unanimous decision, or close to it. So he just—he said this is the way it's going to be. That's the way he ran things sometimes decisively. He didn't like to discuss too much.

Rabkin: But he wasn't seeing the evaluations as part of the instructional process—that is, that students could learn, shortly after having completed a course, how they were being assessed by their professors and perhaps change tactics or deepen their learning strategies. If they were only going to see these things after they graduated, then they became purely an assessment and kind of a recommendation tool, but not a pedagogical tool.

Wilkes: Exactly. And I don't know where Page Smith stood on that particular aspect of the issue. I do know that he did not like grades. He hated grades. He had that in common with most of the faculty, so that's why they accepted this. But as far as the pedagogical tool, I don't know how the faculty felt about that. They did accept the original version, which was not until you graduate. And a lot of people talked about Reed at that point, Reed College, because at Reed then you didn't see your grades until you graduated. I don't know if it's still that way, but it was that way then, in '65. And everybody sort of liked being like Reed at UCSC. (laughs)

But they didn't seem to fight it too much when the time came. The change was made before the first quarter was over, I'm pretty sure. However, I have to put a personal note in at this point. I liked the idea of not reading my evaluations until I graduated. So I didn't. In fact, I didn't read them until years after I graduated. (laughs)

Rabkin: Why?

Wilkes: I don't know. UCSC gave me such a sense of freedom, I wanted to extend that to my evaluations. I was getting comments on my papers, certainly, plenty of them, and I could see where I needed to go from those. But interestingly, one of the faculty members who did not write much in the way of comments and didn't even turn papers back sometimes, when I finally read his evaluations they said—well, I remember one of them: "Wilkes and [another student] were the best students in the class. And so-and-so was okay." Naming people like this.

Rabkin: He got away with that?

Wilkes: Yeah! So I thought, I didn't miss much with him. But he didn't like to write responses to things anyway, to papers, to anything. I don't know, he had some sort of block against that. But he was a very good lecturer.

So in brief, the early evaluations—nobody knew what to do with this new form. They didn't know whether the evaluations were for the external world, or for the students themselves, or both. They couldn't sort that out for a long time; in fact they were still struggling with it at the end.

Rabkin: Yeah. What did you end up deciding about that as an instructor?

Wilkes: [That evaluations were more] for the student. Classes were so small, we got to know the students, so we could write letters of recommendation relatively easily about people.

Rabkin: Yeah—and you were sending these graduate students, at the completion of the program, off into jobs where their prospective employers weren't necessarily going to be reading narrative evaluations.

Wilkes: That's right.

Rabkin: So that it really was for them more than it was for any future assessor of their abilities.

Wilkes: That's right. I mean, if somebody was truly outstanding, I would always make sure that got into the evaluation, but they'd have to be truly outstanding to get that. Most of them are really good, but the level of our graduate students is very high. They're all neck and neck, practically, in some classes. I mean, it's really interesting how that has worked out.

Rabkin: You alluded to Page Smith's dislike of letter grades. How did you feel about them?

Wilkes: Hated them. But I was obsessed with them at the same time, because I knew how important they were. And I knew—there was a phrase that you heard a lot, "grade-sharking": doing what you needed for a grade, as opposed to what you needed to develop your own work. I saw that as a real division that I hated.

And yet I played the game and I got the grades I needed to get. I felt bad about it sometimes.

Rabkin: And as a giver of letter grades, did you see that grade-sharking phenomenon among your students?

Wilkes: No, I didn't, because I told them if they did everything I asked them to do, I'd give them an A. (laughs) I was a really irresponsible grade-giver at UCSC, I guess you'd say. Because if they didn't do everything I asked, I gave them a B. They knew what that meant, but nobody else did, really.

Rabkin: So you continued to dislike the letter-grade system.

Wilkes: That's right. I never changed about that. I do recognize that it's just efficient. That's a sad thing about UCSC's growth. The classes have grown, too, and some of them are really pretty big, and narrative evaluations are just too time-consuming for those classes—even for the TA's to do—because the TA's have fifty students now. In my day, TA's had *fifteen* students. I don't think I ever had more than sixteen or seventeen in a class, ever. That was a good size for a discussion.

Rabkin: So you saw grades, in some ways, as a necessary evil.

Wilkes: Well, I—I never quite got to the point where I acknowledged that, I guess, even though I do see it that way, just as a bureaucratic convenience. Because there are different levels of accomplishment in a class. Some students really do deserve a high mark, and others don't. You have to somehow deal with

that. But in the graduate program, everybody was top-notch and they worked hard. There were no exceptions, or very few. Very few.

UCSC's Geographic Isolation

Rabkin: So we've been exploring these questions in the larger context of the question of what made UCSC both an appropriate and in some ways perhaps a challenging institution in which to run this program. Did you want to say more about that?

Wilkes: Well, the only downside to UCSC as a site for the program is its geographic location. It's very hard to get people to drop in and talk to a class. They have to spend a whole day driving from San Francisco or Berkeley or Palo Alto, even, to UCSC to speak to a class, and go to a meal together (which we liked to do), and then go back. I mean, that's a whole day out of their lives. If the campus had been sited in the area of Los Gatos—that was the other choice and they decided it on the basis of a hot day in Los Gatos—(laughs) the Regents said, "Heck, no. Let's site it in Santa Cruz. It's more beautiful and the temperature is reasonable there. It's just a nicer place to have a campus." That was when Silicon Valley was still all orchards.

Rabkin: It was still the Santa Clara Valley.

Wilkes: It was the Santa Clara Valley and that was an agricultural site. And that's why UCSC got to be the Silicon Valley head campus, because it was an agricultural center, and we were going to have landscape architecture and different things that involved agriculture. It was just the luck of the draw, and

we got a beautiful campus that's out of the way, and hard to reach, relatively, for busy people who can offer a lot to a program in a single sitting, in one two-hour class and then lunch together. I really felt it, asking people to come down, knowing that it was hard for them. But they would always do it. So, we got them. It's just that it's harder for them now. You can't get somebody to teach a class. A lot of them refuse to drive down there two days a week and teach a class, because of the worsening traffic and the extra time it takes.

Rabkin: Did you find the converse also to be true—that is, because of UCSC's location, was it more difficult than it might have been for students to drop into various kinds of internships during the course of the academic year?

Wilkes: Yeah, it was. It was even harder for the students, because many of them had crummy cars that broke down a lot.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Wilkes: But there were usually enough students with good cars to take the more distant internships. They just toughed it out. They did it knowing that they were having to learn to do things like that that were not expected of graduate students in science. Reporters have to travel a lot, and so that was one way to learn to do that.

Allies and Mentors

Rabkin: You've talked in the course of our interviews about some of the people who have been really instrumental in helping the program blossom, people you

worked with who had significant relationships of one kind or another to the program—chancellors, deans, colleagues. I wonder if there are any we haven't touched on, who you'd like to talk about?

Wilkes: Hmm. Gee. Chancellors and faculty colleagues did not play much of a role in this. You see, the thing is, faculty members—people forget this, but faculty members have been star students all of their lives—they know a whole lot about universities and they know very little about the outside world, especially popular publications. They don't know anything about what my students need to know about. So I didn't—I mean our students came into the program with plenty of science knowledge, more than they needed, really, in some ways. So they didn't need science faculty talking to them about anything, really, unless they were doing a story, and then they would just talk to that person about the story. So, no, our faculty did not play any role, really, in preparing them for the professional worlds they were going to enter.

The people who helped them were mainly the editors that they interned with and ended up working for sometimes. Those people, some of them. But even they—they're so busy that they don't have time to be mentors to people beyond having them actually under their wing as interns or employees. That's when they get the mentoring. After that, individual students can call them on the telephone and ask them for advice on whether to take this or that job, and that sort of thing. They can do that, and they do do that. That's how they use their former bosses. And their former mentors are happy to be used in that way, because they like to

help the young ones come up in a way that benefits the profession and the world. So everybody gains from that.

But as far as individuals who are particularly helpful—they're all as helpful as you want to ask them to be. You just have to ask and they do it. That's the great thing.

Rabkin: Were there deans or other administrators who saw—maybe more than others saw the value of what your program was doing and championed it when budget cuts were threatening it? Or any allies of the program?

Wilkes: Well, the allies of the program who were faculty members were few, Bruce Rosenblum being the main one. Frank Drake was the most helpful dean I had. He knew more about the media. He'd been interviewed so many times, on television, radio, print. He knew as much as most science writers about how those things were done and how to make sure that they got done right. So he was very sympathetic and very helpful and generous with money to the program.

It kind of went down from there, I'm sorry to say. Because most science faculty—I think they would love to be interviewed by the *New York Times* but they don't like to be interviewed by the *Sentinel*, or by smaller papers. And those were the main people who tried to talk to them. They get annoyed because the reporters know so little, and need to have everything explained, and then get it wrong in the story anyway. They hate that. They hate it so much. They just don't want to talk to journalists. And some—I don't know about UCSC faculty, but I know

some faculty elsewhere refuse to talk to journalists. They just won't do it because of that.

So my program was not a pet. It's one of the reasons I kept it so small, because we were basically in the noise that surrounded the Natural Science Division. The budget was \$20 million a year for the Natural Science Division and we were costing \$180,000, or something like that, for everything—salaries, xeroxing, telephones, travel, everything.

Rabkin: Did that include the illustration track?

Wilkes: Yes. I mean, we were cheap and I wanted to keep it cheap, so they wouldn't bother with us. Whether they gave us a full budget or not, didn't save them much money if they cut us. But they started cutting us anyway, and that really hurt. That's when the illustration program ended up having to go. But I guess they really did have to do that. The way I saw it, of course, because I knew how hard we were working to keep things cheap—I thought to myself, you know, the chemistry department pours \$180,000 worth of chemicals down the drain every week. What are they doing, cutting us? (laughs) But I didn't say that to the dean, who happened to be a chemist.

An Unconventional Academic Career

Rabkin: (laughs) Well, I think a theme that has arisen numerous times throughout our interviews is the unconventional nature of your professional trajectory. Your career in academia doesn't fit any stereotypical notions of what such a career might look like. I wonder if you want to talk about that at all:

whether you think there are implications for others who might be contemplating a life in academia and don't see themselves as fitting the mold.

Wilkes: Yeah. My advice to such people is, don't even think about going into academia if you can't fit the mold, because the only place in the world that will give you a shot is Santa Cruz (laughs), as far as I'm concerned. M.I.T. was not very open to anything offbeat at all. I mean, they were not. And they were more liberal than a lot of people realize. I mean, they liked artistic types. But they wanted those artistic types to do certain things that I found not so much fun, and could not have imagined doing all my working life.

So I think, if people have trouble imagining themselves as traditional academics, then they probably shouldn't become academics at all. That's my take. Even Santa Cruz is not as loose as it was, I don't think. They don't have many lecturers with security of employment, for instance, and they don't want very many. They only have a few and they don't want any more. They have very strong feelings about that. They see lecturers as people who come and go. They can offer a lot for a while but they don't need to have careers here. That's the attitude. And they probably had that attitude toward me, too, but I was hired with security. I knew they had that attitude. That's why I demanded that. I said, "I'm not coming without it. I'm not going to have to worry about that."

Rabkin: So you managed to carve out for yourself an idiosyncratic, even perhaps unique role within an academic institution, doing something that few, if any other people have done within academia.

Wilkes: Yeah, I did. And I knew from the start that, given the amount of work it was to teach properly the kind of thing that I was trying to teach, I was never going to be able to write very much. I knew that, so I was going to have to depend on something else for my promotion and tenure. And so what I decided would be the right thing to depend on would be the accomplishments of my students. And that's what the reviews always pointed out, how well the students did once they got out of the program. And it worked. People could see that I was doing something right and the students were benefitting from it in ways that very few other graduate programs on the campus can show, frankly. I mean, in the graduate program I went through, literature, the best students got academic jobs and kept them, but I'd say most of them sort of fell away and did something else. I mean, one of them ended up working at Salz Tannery tanning hides, when it was still a tannery.

Rabkin: With a PhD in literature?

Wilkes: No, he didn't finish the program. He got about halfway through it and realized that the job market was very, very tough. That's something they don't tell you. And you find out for yourself, as I did, how tough it was. I said, "Why didn't you tell me about this?" They said, "Oh, you're good enough to get a job. Don't worry about it."

And I did get offers. After I got my PhD, I went to one more Modern Language Association convention. That's the slave market for graduate students in literature. I had a couple of offers and I didn't want to take them. They weren't good enough. One of them was actually in Brazil. That would have been

interesting. But I checked it out and it turned out that faculty members at the university—this was in a city called Florianópolis, which is in a state called Santa Catarina, which is south in Brazil. The temperature is cooler there. It's a coastal city. It's actually an island connected to the mainland by a suspension bridge. It's an eighteenth-century city, a beautiful place. But you're expected to support a staff. If you're a faculty member at the university, you have to have servants, they said. You just do. I said, "I don't know. I'm not made for that." So I dropped it.

Rabkin: You also talked about your aversion to lecturing and certain other requirements of the professor track.

Wilkes: That's right. I started applying for jobs before I finished my PhD, just to see how marketable I was, to test the water. That Brazil job offer came after I taught Tom Vogler's courses [and discovered I didn't like lecturing], but I still wanted to try it. I thought if I was speaking to people who didn't speak English as a native language it would be easier somehow. But whatever, I didn't take the job.

The Accomplishments of UCSC's Graduates in Science Communication

Rabkin: So, the accomplishments and successes of your graduate students as they've gone out into the profession, it sounds like, have been among your proudest accomplishments as the founding administrator of this program, and as a teacher in it. When you think about that, are there particular stories that come to mind?

Wilkes: My goodness, so many stories come to mind. And it's not one of the most important accomplishments; it's *the* most important, as far as I'm concerned, by far. We have at *Science* magazine alone—all science writers look up to the people who do journalism at *Science* magazine—we have five people there. I mean, the majority of people on the staff are from our program. One of them is the bureau chief for all of Asia. Another one is the bureau chief for all of Europe. Both of them came out of our program. And then we have several who are in Washington, D.C., doing reporting from there, or editing. One of them is the deputy editor of the whole news section of *Science*, Robert Koontz. Gosh, they're everywhere. They're at *Nature*, the news editor and two reporters. I've been out of touch, so people have moved on and changed jobs and I'm not quite so sure where they are anymore. But when Laura Helmuth, for example, took the job at *Smithsonian*, the editor of the magazine mentioned her in his prefatory essay, his column, as being a real find from UC Santa Cruz. And that kind of thing. She didn't take too long to get there either. She got there pretty fast. And now she's at *Slate*. She's an editor there and writer.

Rabkin: You've also got people at National Public Radio and in high-level government agencies, National Institutes of Health.

Wilkes: Right, several there. And others write for *Science News*, *Scientific American*, *National Geographic*, *New Scientist*, for *Discover*. When *Discover* was founded, Shannon Brownlee went there almost immediately after a AAAS Media Scholarship placed her at the Providence (R.I.) journal. She got a master's degree at UCSC in marine science, but she'd been an undergraduate student of mine.

And so was NPR science correspondent Richard Harris an undergraduate student of mine. They both did well and went straight into top-level internships and proved themselves. Joanne Silberner went to a staff medical reporting job at NPR, too. So it's the students. They come into the program well qualified. They're natural writers, very bright, very hard working. But they have more than that. They have this UC Santa Cruz sense of the breadth of knowledge, of the world. Somehow that sense gets into everything they do. It's not too narrow, too specialized. It's the opposite. It's spacious and it's wonderful.

Rabkin: Thank you. John, I know you've given some thought to whether there's anything else that we haven't talked about in the interviews yet, that you'd like to address. Does anything come to mind?

Wilkes: Oh, not really, just that I am as delighted as I could possibly be to have had this chance to found this program, and to run it at UCSC, my favorite place in the world. It's just too good to be true. I thank everybody who was involved in letting me do it. That's all I have to say.

Rabkin: Thank you so much.

About the Interviewer and Editor:

Sarah Rabkin taught in the UC Santa Cruz writing program and environmental studies department for over twenty-five years. She holds a BA in biology from Harvard University and a graduate certificate in Science Communication from UCSC. Her book of essays, *What I Learned at Bug Camp*, was published in 2011.