

## Transcript of Interview with Steve Sternberg

January 14, 2009

Interview by Desiree Shayer

*Note: The recording of this interview was very quiet, and it was difficult to hear some words.*

DS: We are recording this, so I need to make sure that that's okay with you.

SS: Absolutely.

DS: Alright, well I was hoping maybe you could start by telling me why you chose to come to Colby.

SS: Absolutely. In 1937 when I applied, it was difficult for Jewish students to get into medical school, especially in New York City, there was a big demand. My brother-in-law was a physician, and suggested I go to Colby College and then apply for medical school. I never heard of Colby College, and I never really went out of New York City until I got to Colby, which was a thoroughly enjoyable time for me. And I had applied to about a dozen medical schools and was turned down by all of them. And I asked NYU to go into them to do graduate work in biology. But in the August of the year that I was accepted at NYU, I got a phone call from the Secretary of the Dean, she said there'd been a dropout and she'd like to accept me at the medical school. And I got there so fast she couldn't believe it. Because I lived out in Queens and they were in Manhattan. (3:08) And I did that until I started at Colby. Now, when I got to Colby, the first year, freshmen year, this was all on the old campus, I heard a lot of the students talking about the Hebrew Academy for a long time, and then I realized that something's wrong their can't be that many Jewish students here, and I found out they were talking about the Hebron Academy, which at that time was a well known private academy. And then the other thing I found out at Colby was that my name was "Stoinboig" [pronounces Sternberg with a strong New York accent] because I arrived there with a good New York accent, what at that time they called a Brooklyn accent although I was from Queens. And I cleaned up my accent (4:00) there and I no longer said "library" and "resevoi" ... And then in my first week there I went to the dance and I was dancing with a young lady who was a very nice dancer and after a couple of dances she said to me, "Are you a baseball player?" and I said, "No, why do you ask?" and she said, "You've been chewing gum in my ear all evening." So the interesting thing is I went to one alumni meeting at Colby, many years ago and many years after I graduated, and I met her there and I remembered that and I recalled that to her and she had no recognition of it, it meant nothing to her, but to me, I haven't chewed gum since. (4:47) And then, well I did the La Conga contest and won first prize, with a girl I'd picked up in the town, that was in my first year. Later things, I have little notes on things, like ex-president Hoover gave a talk, I think when Roosevelt or somebody was President, and the President of Colby introduced him as the late Herbert Hoover, and that was rather embarrassing. He wasn't quite dead yet. And the other thing I remember was that Dean Runnals, the female girls' top Dean, spoke about what was going on between the girls' dormitory, and across the street a Greek fraternity house. You see they were talking to each other across the street, sitting on their porches or something (5:53) and she sent them a note indicating that she asked if they'd refrain from having intercourse with one another. Of course ... explanation of that word came by, rather interestingly. And

that's about it. There was no religious problems about my being Jewish or anyone else I knew there. I belonged to a Jewish fraternity, Tau Delta Phi. And that went well. And the fraternity took on two Jewish German refugee students who got out of the Nazi ... And it was good, I had an enjoyable time meeting them and learning about them. And I think that's about all I can think about. Do you have any questions?

DS: Yeah, I have a few. During your time at Colby, with classes and everything, what would a typical day have been like, like an average day, what would you have done.

SS: I would've gone to class, come back to the fraternity and ran down and had a hamburger down the street, and talk in the fraternity and do some homework and that would be it. (7:32) I'm trying to think of some other things we did. I used to go to all the dances because I liked to. My sister taught me how to dance before I left high school, and she did well with that. We had parties at the fraternity house. And one of the parties I got the formula for making a liquor from a farmer and I ended up with all the glassware I had from a chemistry course. It was made, the whole thing was ridiculous. Anyhow I made it and we tasted it and it tasted pretty good. And the thing that happened to me was I didn't realize how much alcohol I made and I got loaded. It was the only time in my life I felt I was drunk, and that was that party. And fortunately I don't remember the recipe for the liquor.

DS: So did the fraternity as a Jewish organization... How did being part of the fraternity affect your Jewish life at Colby, or how did that work?

SS: How the Jewish fraternity went?

DS: Yeah, did you celebrate the holidays, or...?

SS: There was nothing special I recall about that, you know.

DS: It was pretty... so would you say it was similar to other fraternities?

SS: Well, I think we were reasonably well known, I think, with the other fraternities. I don't recall any problems with the other fraternities. Not when there were more and more rich people in them and some poorer people you know. And that's all. There was nothing, we had no problems that I can recall.

DS: Could you maybe tell me a bit about sort of Jewish activities you did do at Colby?

SS: What kind of activities?

DS: Jewish activities.

SS: (10:09) No, I don't recall any. I don't recall a rabbi anywhere, I may be wrong about that but I'm near 90, I'm not that sharp. Let's see, I was written up a few times in the alumni magazine, and you might want to look at that about me. I got some awards, and they published them. And I was never bar mitzvahed. I had a brother that was bar mitzvahed. But the reason I was not bar mitzvahed was my brother was seven years older than me, he lived in another place before I was born where he was bar mitzvahed but I went to Hebrew school in Queens which was all Germans, the largest German

neighborhood in New York. (11:16) And there were a handful of Jews there, and they didn't have much with getting a rabbi or ... And the rabbi I went to learn Hebrew from was terrible, and I was there for a few weeks and I just quit. What he would do, we would read a Hebrew sentence and he would translate it without going through the verbs and all the nouns and anything. None of the basic parts ... So I was not bar mitzvahed but I'm still Jewish.

DS: So after Colby, where did you go next?

SS: I went to NYU medical school, and I did well there and I had an internship in Queensland. And when we were in medical school at that time the war started and then the army took us all and fortunately paid for the tuition. So I was in the army and after I had my internship I was sent to an Air Force department. I became a flight surgeon out of nowhere, and one of the reasons was I was stationed in St. Louis. The Air Force wanted a volunteer to go to the School of Aviation Medicine and I immediately put my name in; all my medical friends told me I was stupid for doing that because I would be sent overseas. But what happened was while I was at school (it was just a three-month school) they sent all my colleagues overseas. (13:26) So the war ended by the time I finished school. I ended up spending two years in Okinawa which I enjoyed very much, as a doctor and being in a nice country. And then I came back and went to Tulane and I became a pathologist. And then I went to Memorial Sloane-Kettering Cancer Center where I was doing pathology for 51 years and I retired in 2001. And that's my life. (14:03)

DS: Well, if we can go back to the beginning, what type of jobs did your parents have in New York?

SS: Oh, interesting I forgot to mention that. My mother was a housewife, a very good one, and my father was a good physician, a general practitioner. And he had been for many years and he was a doctor for all the patients from Germany. And when the war, when the whole Nazi thing, he kept most of his elderly patients and the younger ones, he didn't see young ones very often because they were brought up in the Nazi way. And on top of that, there was some of those young ones they had uniforms for them which the same kind, khaki uniforms they have in Germany with the swastikas on the sleeves and so on. (15:07) And they would have parades, now one of those parades, I think I was thirteen or fourteen my colleagues, my friends, nobody was Jewish except me, but we felt that these were not nice people and we weren't sure about all the things that were going on. And during one of the parades we got some newspapers and soaked them in some street water and made wet balls and threw them at these guys as they were marching by. They didn't respond but they called us Communists which didn't mean that much to me either then. So that was my Jewish experience in ... But most of the adult ... people were mostly American, truly American. And let me see if there's anything else.

DS: Well I know I'm kind of jumping around a little bit...

SS: No problem, no problem.

DS: So when you were at Colby, did you have any connections with the Waterville community, or how closely was the school sort of connected to the city?

SS: No I really didn't, I met a few girls from the town but nothing special. Just trying to think if there was anybody else... Well, one of the Jewish people in the fraternity were from Waterville (16:49) and one of them was Sterns', the department store, is that still there?

DS: I'm not sure if that one's still there anymore, I don't think so.

SS: Well anyhow, he was the son. And there was nothing, he was fine so far as I knew, we got along no problems, Jewish ... He might have been in the army, I kept in touch with the alumni, and I can't think now, oh I think in the Waterville news, the Waterville Sentinel is it? That my name was in there, they wrote up that I won that La Conga dance contest I don't think they play the La Conga anymore. Anyhow, it was interesting, but then about 40 years later I made it back to the Waterville Sentinel, this time because I was in a group of physicians that went to Waterville, the hospital, and we were invited to give talks and I gave one of the talks and that was in the newspaper. So I told myself I did pretty well with the Waterville Sentinel.

DS: Did you play any sports? (18:36)

SS: I can ski or ice skate but it's ridiculous that I didn't do either at Colby. I was doing sports there, I played basketball. As a matter of fact I was the manager of the basketball team. Oh yes, I can now give something on that. I travelled with the teams and one of the games, the coach, I think his name is McCoy, we were having dinner or lunch after a previous game and McCoy made some nasty remarks about one of the players who wasn't doing well who happened to be Jewish. He implied that the Jew bastard, or something like that, was failing him in the game. And the next day, the coach gave me tickets to a hockey game, a professional hockey game, and one of the other players, basketball players, told me that they told the coach that I was Jewish and that he made a bad remark. And he gave me the tickets to the hockey game. That's my experience with sports. And I think I won a game for them. It was a little bit dishonest but I couldn't do anything about it. During the game one of our good players had received foul mark-ups, and if he got one more he'd be put out of the game. And I kept score with the other team's manager also and he didn't notice how many times that guy got a foul and he was fouled the last time when he should have been put out, and I decided I wouldn't tell him. (20:48) So I didn't tell anyone about this, nobody on the team or the coach. And it was sort of dishonest. I've never done anything like that again. Let's see... nope, unless you can remind me of something else you want to know...

DS: So what were your classes like?

SS: The classes? Oh, I thought some of them were excellent, and some of them were terrible. The religious course that I happened to take one semester, I took because I was told not much studying and you get a good mark, and there were a few things about religion I thought I would learn, and I took that, they had a English instructor, he just got his degree... and I did a lot of literature courses, English literature courses although I was supposed to concentrate on chemistry to get into medical school, but I took the basic studies that I needed. And then, but I took a course with a new instructor, and he was really excellent, and there were only three or four of us in the class, I think it was eighteenth-century English literature, and I took a couple more with him. (22:35) ... And let's see, what else.

DS: You said you went to a lot of the dances.

SS: I went to the dances, yes. (23:32)

DS: Were those dates, did you take someone to the dance, or did you just meet people there...

SS: I met them there, and I think I took some sometimes to the dance. Nothing special. Usual college frivolity.

DS: And you were at Colby from what 1930...

SS: 1937-1941.

DS: I was wondering if there's anything else you remember as something that stood out from Colby (24:20) in terms of just memories you have of being there...

SS: There wasn't any one thing, a lot of little things. There was a guy in the fraternity who was talking about television and I thought he was ridiculous, and it turns out he was right, of course. And let me see, two of the fraternity people were killed in the war. Fred Blumenthal was from a very rich family in Manhattan. After he graduated he joined the army, and one of the younger ones, a drummer, a great drummer, taught me a little bit, and he got killed. And by the time '41 came around I think there were only two senior people. I was president of the fraternity my senior year, which didn't mean anything but it's the way it happened.

DS: The fraternity had already been established when you got there, right?

SS: Oh yes.

DS: So you lived in the fraternity house.

SS: Yes, I lived in the fraternity house.

DS: I was wondering if you could tell me a bit more about life in the fraternity, how that worked.

SS: Well, we were all quite friendly, and my first roommate was a senior. I ended up living with him for one year, Louis, Louie Sacks. He was from one of the small towns near Boston, and the thing I remember about him was his father owned a delicatessen and he told me he used to work there to help his father, and he said sometimes a person would come in there and ask for a *halb-fertl* of lox, which meant a half of... in Yiddish it was a half of a quarter pound. And the way things are now you can't ever order anything less than a quarter of a pound. But the person wanted to order less than a quarter of a pound. That's the way the people were there, the people weren't doing too well. A *halb-fertl*, a half of a quarter. And that was my recollection of Louie Sacks, who struggled with money and so on. And Stan Gruber and Mel something, both football players, and Frucht, Manny Frucht, was historian, good in history, and (28:21) Dave Brodie, Dave Brodie and Saul Millstein both knew each other and both from Manhattan, from a very wealthy two families. Millstein disappeared. Brody I saw a few times years later. He died a couple of years ago. They were nice, friendly people. Why do I remember those

names? Half the people I met this week I can't remember. Just remember that when you get older. You'll remember a lot of things, and then there's a lot of things you can't remember, and it's very annoying.

DS: You mentioned a few other people who came from Boston and New York. Were a lot of the people you knew from further away from Colby or closer in Maine?

SS: No, I think most of them were New Englanders. I don't remember anybody... there were one or two other New Yorkers. The two German students were the only ones really from far away. But if I looked through the graduation catalogue with all the pictures I may remember more but I... nothing comes across.

DS: Alright, well...

SS: Oh... go ahead [we both spoke at the same time]

DS: No, no, no, you go.

SS: Why don't you see if you can find out a few things about me from the alumni magazine.

DS: I will definitely look that up and read that. I just had one other question going back to something you said at the beginning. You said your brother-in-law suggested that you come to Colby?

SS: That's right. He was a physician.

DS: How did he know about Colby?

SS: I have no idea. But he made my life. It turned out, he married my sister and he turned out not to be too nice of a man. And the family, even my sister I think, she would never admit it. But he changed my life. If I hadn't done biology, research biology I would never have gotten in to medical school. But I had enough, I'd written a lot of articles, medical articles, that worked out well for me. I was the editor, I edited a lot of books, journals, pathology journals, and my name, you ask anyone who is a pathologist, give them my name and they'll know my name from the books I was involved with.

DS: So what when you were younger made you want to be a doctor?

SS: No, because my whole family were doctors: my father, my brother, and my father's brother, my uncle, and my brother-in-law, and my uncle's two sons were doctors. So that's how that all started. I didn't think about anything else. It was really never mentioned to me I should be a doctor, but when the time came to apply to medical school, I just began to apply because that's what I was supposed to do. (32:25) But no one ever directly said to me. So that's how it worked out in my family.

DS: So where did your father get his medical training?

SS: In Manhattan at... I don't know what it's called now, New York... it had another name, it was in Manhattan, and I applied there and they turned me down. Irony. And that's about it.

DS: Well is there anything else you'd like to add about your time at Colby or life at Colby?

SS: I'll let you know.

Follow-up email correspondence with David Freidenreich

DF: I wonder if you can say more about the local Jewish community in Waterville. What recollections do you have of Jewish "townies"? In what ways did you or other Colby students interact with members of the local Jewish community? Did you ever attend the synagogue and, if not, why not?

SS: My only connection I had with a townie was with Herbert Stern, who was the son of the Stern department store owner. I don't know if the store still exists, or even Herbert. I have no recollection of anything Jewish going on about the town while I was there. I am sorry.