



Interview of Thomas J. Wurtenberger

Conducted by: Charles D. Muzyczek on March 7 and April 2, 2013

Abstract

Session one of the interview with Mr. Thomas Wurtenberger took place on March 7, 2013 at the Golden Pheasant Golf Course at 3:00 PM.

0:00 Thomas J. Wurtenberger (Tom) was born in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia in 1935. His parents however lived in Feltonville (Lower Olney). Tom tells how his mother and father were married shortly after the death of her father in 1928. Her mother had passed away earlier that decade. Since they were already engaged and she now had nowhere to go they decided to marry. They had one other son, Bob, born in 1930. Tom tells of his father being diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1935 and he was unable to work the remaining years of his life. He died in 1944 when Tom was nine years old. His mother had a ninth grade education and was left to raise two boys. She was able to manage with the aid of public assistance, which she made Tom promise would be paid back in full upon her death.

Tom recalls having a “super” relationship with his mother. He describes her as a gentle, loving woman. She taught him values and responsibility through example which he said his (Tom’s) father taught her by his example. He illustrates this by recalling his father walking roughly one mile to church every Sunday while suffering with tuberculosis. His mother did not set many rules and Tom admits to being a good kid while his brother was a “rip”. He remembers one occasion when she used a strap on them because his brother took a piece out of a door with his new scout knife. That was the only severe punishment he remembers receiving from her.

Tom’s relationship with his brother was also very good. He refers to him as very lucky, having won two lotteries in his life and someone that everyone loved. They remained close into their adult years as well.

06:15 Tom goes on to describe his neighborhood. He clarifies that he was born at St. Mary’s Hospital in Fishtown, but grew up in Lower Olney on Palethorp Street. He described how people would sit on their porches in the evening and talk to him as he walked down the street. It was very difficult to get away with anything in his neighborhood since the people living there were very close to one another. Tom’s extended family was in Fishtown, he takes the time to explain the geography of Philadelphia and the boundaries of some of the neighborhoods. Fishtown was two trolley cars away from Lower Olney.

Tom’s family had little money so they did not enjoy many family trips or activities. However, his mother would come to any of his baseball games that were within walking distance and once a year they would take a trip to Margate, NJ. As he remembers family outings, Tom recalls his father being in an experimental antibiotic program in Germantown Hospital. He was not allowed in to see his father so he would wait by the window and when his mother came out they would have a picnic

dinner together.

10:17 We reiterate the fact that his mother converted from the Lutheran faith to Catholicism, where Tom recalls having to go to church every Sunday. Even before her conversion this was the case. He tells how he went to Catholic School taught by German nuns, emphasizing they were from Germany. He was an altar boy and learned Latin as a boy. He still uses this skill today to do genealogical research.

11:55 Discussing the old neighborhood again, Tom reveals that he does not go back anymore. After the death of his mother he drove through a few times, but no longer visits because there is no longer anyone there he knows.

12:25 Next we discuss Tom's academic career starting in high school. He attended North Catholic High School where he took business courses because they got out earlier than other classes. His brother also attended North Catholic, Tom does point out that his brother was kicked out of the school and Olney High School as well.

Tom describes himself as a poor student because he did not do the work. He did not consider himself to be a good student until he attended graduate school at the University of Texas. His mother gave him a lot of leeway in his studies, but when he received a warning letter she made sure he got his act together.

Very few teachers inspired him by their academics. He was more inspired by other characteristics. He remembers one incident in particular where a priest he refers to as "Black John" took off his wristwatch and threw it at a student who was not paying attention. He hit the student, breaking the watch and never lost the flow of what he was saying. While in high school Tom had aspirations of playing professional baseball. He remembers a scout from the New York Giants coming around a few times and on one occasion he received a baseball signed by the team as a token of the scout's appreciation. His thoughts of a baseball career ended when he decided to attend college, although he did play in college and was a part of a semi-pro team for a time.

18:08 Tom describes the situation surrounding his decision to go to college and why he chose La Salle. His boss in the mailroom of the Budd Company, Mr. Mathis, recommended he go in order to better himself. He chose La Salle because it was cheap, close to home, and he could get there. He originally wanted to be a physical education major, but La Salle did not have the major. He chose German because of growing up in a German neighborhood and church therefore he was already immersed in the culture. He added history as his minor and took the minimum requirements in education as well. He was a full time student and worked the night shift alone at Acme Market.

21:42 Tom does not remember much about his first few days at La Salle. He does recall having a lot of responsibility being a college student and missing a few classes because he was in the cafeteria discussing politics. He tells of how Korean War vets

that were at La Salle on the GI Bill created an air of seriousness on campus. Although he remembers how the vets would tease the members of the R.O.T.C. when they would come out and march in their full uniforms. He says it was in fun and he understood then and he understands now why they did. Overall he recalls a friendly atmosphere on campus. He was involved in sports and clubs and did enough work to get by.

When asked about a visit to La Salle by then senator John F. Kennedy in February 1958, he could not recall the event. He attributed it to the possibility that he was working because he is sure he would remember something like that had he been in attendance.

25:49 When asked how La Salle strengthened his values instilled in him by his mother Tom recalls attending chapel and on more than one occasion he considered becoming a priest. The most important lesson Tom took with him from La Salle was the importance of paying his bills. He owed over three hundred dollars just prior to graduation and was at a loss for how to come up with the money. His parish priest loaned him the amount needed. Tom promised to pay him back in full which he did, ten dollars every Sunday until his debt was cleared.

While at La Salle Tom envisioned himself to be a German teacher, however his student teaching was done in history. That experience made him decide to never become a teacher. After serving in the Army then taking a job as a sales rep trainee (which did not go well) he was asked to come to Bishop Neumann High School to teach biology. He figured that with his one year of biology he could apply for the job. He did, and was hired.

Tom continues to describe how the launching of Sputnik in 1957 enabled him to further his education in science. The formation of the National Science Foundation encouraged teachers to become better educators in the fields of math and science. Tom took advantage of this opportunity by attending ten universities on grants from the Science Foundation and accumulating a total of 270 semester hours including his time at La Salle. He spent one academic year at the University of Texas where he received a Master's Degree in Botany and one year at Temple University where he worked on his Doctorate in Education.

When asked if there was anything he wished could be different about his education he answered very bluntly. He would change his attitude. He did not place the same value on education that he does now. As for La Salle, he would like to have seen a better example from the head of the education program. He was disappointed in the attitude of the professor towards preparation for the teacher's examination. His experience in the German Department was much different. The department was more organized and had more attention to detail.

Other memories include an English professor whose name escaped Tom that insisted on making students analyze what the author meant in their writing. He prefers to read

for pleasure and not search for subliminal messages.

Tom does not remember the last time he visited La Salle. He remembers how tough parking was when he attended and would hate to drive to the campus and not have a place to park. He goes on to say he was there (Germantown) enough when his dad was in Germantown Hospital. He knows the area and knows it has changed from when he was a student. He remembers a nice neighborhood with large stone houses. The houses were nicely kept, but not anymore.

37:46 The transition from high school to college for Tom was not a difficult one. He had many responsibilities since the death of his father. His mother worked, but did not make much money so he gave her a portion of his paycheck. Then he clarifies and said in fact, he gave it all to her. Nobody helped him with his responsibilities. He tells of how his mother did not push him in any direction, but if he tried to stay in bed by saying he did not feel well she would tell him to get up, he would feel better in a little while. He never resented the responsibilities. It was “part of the job”. He never felt he “had” to do anything. He credits his work ethic to his parents. As a small child he remembers his father’s positive attitude in the face of illness. He praises his father’s strength and how it influenced his mother who in turn passed in along to him.

40:46 The interview moves forward to Tom’s time at the University of Texas and how he became interested in botany. Prior to arriving in Texas, Tom had taken a variety of courses in the field of biology at places like Millersville University, Glassboro State College (now Rowan University), Villanova, and the University of Pennsylvania. All of the courses were taken as a result of the Nation Science Foundation. He liked botany and the University of Texas was willing to set up a program for him to receive his master’s degree. The only pitfall was he had to take the GRE exam, twice. He scored in the seventeenth percentile after the first attempt. With the help of a study guide he was able to improve to the seventy-eighth percentile and was accepted at the University of Texas in 1963.

Tom was married in 1960; he and his wife had twins in 1961. Now he is taking his wife and twin two-year olds to Texas so he may go back to school. During the move to Texas his wife has an asthma attack in Nashville, TN. Tom is able to find a doctor’s office where his wife is diagnosed and given a prescription. When he asks what he owes for the office visit, the doctor asks Tom to tell him where he is going and why. When Tom explains his story, the doctor tells him the visit is free and the pharmacy charged a minimal amount for her prescription. Unfortunately, his wife ends up in the hospital for three days once they arrive in Texas.

His mother was glad Tom had taken the opportunity to go to Texas. She still had his brother and his five children to keep her busy. Tom also points out he is the first person in his family to go to college.

Despite being a poor student previously, Tom saw this as a great opportunity to make

a better life for himself and his family. He appreciated the fact he was getting a free education that would make him a better teacher and person. He does express disappointment and anger towards others in the program that he felt wasted or took advantage of the situation. There were some who did not value the education they were being given at no cost.

Tom was working at Holy Cross High School when this opportunity came about. He had full support from the school to take off for one year since they would be receiving a better teacher as a result. The senior priest of Holy Cross even paid for his health insurance while Tom was on leave. When Tom attends Temple he is now working at Rancocas Valley High School (RV) and they grant him permission to take a leave of absence and are willing to pay half his salary and hospitalization insurance.

49:03 Tom describes his reason for leaving Holy Cross and pursuing an opening at RV. The short answer is money. Public schools typically pay more than private. He also tells of how he was the baseball coach, but that job was given to someone else while he was on leave and he never got it back.

When asked about the differences between the two schools, Tom credits Holy Cross as being much better with discipline than RV. There was no talking in hallways between classes, students walked single file, and dress code for girl's uniform skirts. According to Tom's memory the two schools were comparable in size, but his classes in Holy Cross were larger.

When looking back, Tom believes most of his students thought what he gave them as a teacher was worthwhile. He remembers one student who now plays golf at the same course where Tom is a member called him out of the blue to just see how he was doing. That made a lasting impression on Tom and shows what type of impact he had on this man's life. He feels he got along with his students most of the time.

After a long pause, Tom recalls three incidents that he describes as defining moments during his teaching career. There was a cute, female student who would always talk to Tom when she was in his class. One day while she was at his desk, another student in the back of the room yelled "Mr. Wurtenberger is hitting on Kelly". Tom remembers hoping that was not really what people were thinking. That woke him up so he would be aware of what he was doing.

The second was a series of debates he would have with the "brightest" students he had. He enjoyed discussing answers to test questions and other science issues. He felt the disputes were always good natured and never spiteful. It was just a good exchange of ideas.

Finally he mentions another student from his AP class that was going on to college to study molecular biology. Rightfully, there is a sense of pride in Tom's words as he recounts this moment.

Tom admits to having a couple bad experiences with parents. He tells of a student who took his parking place so Tom parked directly behind him blocking his car in. At the end of the day Tom's car was moved and the student's car was gone. He later learned that another teacher, a friend of Tom's, helped the student jack Tom's car up and roll it out of the way. Tom reported the student to the office which brought the student's father in. Other than some angry words exchanged, nothing came of the incident.

57:31 We go back in Tom's life to learn more about how he became a science teacher with little science background. The science teacher at South Catholic High School in Philadelphia was very stressed by the position and Tom was the emergency teacher called in to replace him.

He describes the culture of the school as the student sits there quietly and does their work. His one example of disciplining a student who gave him attitude was when he smacked a football player across the face. This was not normal, but the student took it without saying a word because he knew he was in the wrong. This triggers a memory of when Tom was hit by a teacher he refers to as "Three Finger Pete". She hit Tom because she believed he was cheating. He insists he was not, but would never tell the Sister or his mother that.

Tom recognized the change in culture when he corrected a student for running down stairwell pushing people. Later he discovers the student was indicted on murder charges. He does also recall an incident of a student at South Catholic who was caught carrying a gun; he did this for protection to get to school through rough neighborhoods.

Tom describes how he fought with administration on how they failed to deal with situations as they arose. He served as a supervisor and argued against policies that encouraged teachers to not fail students in order to avoid explaining to the superintendent why it happened, especially non-tenured students.

In order to fight lessening attention spans in the classroom Tom used wit and occasionally the shock factor in order to get the student's attention. He had no secrets for reaching the tuned out student. He had a variety of methods to encourage participation. If he had it to do over again, Tom is not sure if he would go into teaching at the high school level with the way the culture has changed. His ideal situation would be to teach at a small college with football on the weekend. In order to change the culture he would look for strong superintendent with a sense of discipline for the teachers as well as the students.

END OF AUDIO FILE 1

Session two with Mr. Wurtenberger was conducted on April 2, 2013. We once again met at the Golden Pheasant Golf Course at 3:00 PM.

00:00 Tom begins the session discussing how the culture of the classroom was fun for the students as well as for Tom when he began his career as a teacher. There were very few tensions and in the midst of the fun, learning was happening. He attributes the change in culture to the not guilty verdict in the OJ Simpson trial. He recalls having some discussions on race and taking time from biology to listen to the students' views on race. As the culture changed Tom noticed a lack of respect towards authority which he admits was warranted in some cases, but should never had been shown. Tom shares the story again of the young man who he had a minor altercation with for pushing other students in a stairwell being indicted for murder a couple of years later. Tom goes on to describe how it was after about twenty years of teaching that he realized that all of the antagonism and protestations of the students was not personally directed at him.

While Tom believes making the classroom fun was important, he does not know how much of a direct effect it had on their learning. He remembers students whom he considered bright that never did any work and thinking to himself that one day he will end up supporting them on some social program such as welfare. Tom contrasts the attitude of some students in his general classes with the competition for grades in his AP class. He gave an A to a girl who was "close enough" which upset another student because of how this would affect the final percentages for valedictorian. Overall he thinks kids learned in his classroom.

07:08 The most difficult change for Tom to make in the classroom was his personality. He liked to call students names in a playful manner if they gave a goofy answer. He said everyone, including the student he was addressing, laugh because it was all in good fun. Later on he needed to be very careful not to offend or be mindful of someone who might try and take advantage of the situation. He reiterates that for the most part he really enjoyed teaching, especially the last five years when he was no longer a supervisor and was able to just be in the classroom.

His one piece of advice for new teachers is that they do not mistake antagonism as a personal attack. It is something deeper. Let it roll off your back and get to the root of the problem later.

09:50 If he could go back and start over as a teacher he is not sure if he would teach science again. He originally wanted to teach German, but was not astute and fell into science as he previously mentioned. Tom did say if he were teaching today he would do things differently. If he were to teach history he would like to give a passage to read and let the students "argue" about it and allow more to come from the students than from him.

11:24 Tom has a keen interest in Pre-Revolutionary War America. He frequently attends lectures at the David Library of the American Revolution. Some of his ancestors, who were Quakers, served in the Pennsylvania Legislature in the 1740s, 50s, and 60s. This is the area Tom would most like to focus in if he were to teach history.

One of his ancestors built the Anchor Inn in 1724 in Bucks County. It was a well-known, established restaurant and inn. The Quakers were told by their meeting that they were forbidden to support the French and Indian War so they could not serve, nor could they pay somebody to take their place in the war. They could not vote funds for the war so Tom's ancestor resigned from the legislature.

Personal history is very important to Tom. He feels those who do not know history lose an appreciation for what they have. If people could view themselves in the situations our ancestors went through they would have a deeper understanding and appreciation for all we have. This lack of appreciation fosters an attitude of "I don't owe anybody anything." He feels this is the problem with society today. He cleverly relates the situation surrounding foreign officers being given higher rank and pay over American's during the Revolutionary War to a basketball player with lesser skills starting ahead of the better player. He puts it in terms kids would understand and piques their interest.

Tom has traced his own name back to 1746 in Germany and knows the circumstances surrounding his family arriving in America. He thinks his children appreciate the family history, even if they don't have the same level of interest that Tom does. Tom attributes this desire to study his history to the death of his father early in Tom's life and not knowing his grandparents on either side of his family. Finding his grandfather's name, Casper Wurtenberger, written down from late 1800s is what stirred him.

19:26 We move to the more recent past where Tom tells the story of how he and his wife met at a La Salle graduation dance at a friend's house. He describes her as very smart, petite girl (not skinny, but small), and an only child. Her family was very active in the German Clubs around Philadelphia. She spent a lot of time with her grandparents, especially with her great-grandmother who did not speak English and developed diabetes which led to the loss of her leg. Tom's wife spent a great deal of time with her helping her get around. One thing that stands out to Tom about his wife is that she can let out a string of obscenities in German and Hungarian as a result of the time spent with her great-grandmother that he remembers to this day. Tom had a great relationship with her grandmother and grandfather. Her grandfather is from the Alsace region of France. He is one of twenty-eight children who came to America because he did not feel France was going to win the first World War. Tom's relationship with his mother-in-law and father-in-law was good until about ten years ago when it started to deteriorate.

Tom says his wife got along well with his family, but then quickly tells a story of his brother being married at eighteen years of age. His mother warned him that he would not be able to keep his wife in shoes so when he died there was a large display of shoes around his ashes as payback to his mother. In the end he says, again, her relationship with his family was good.

Tom and his wife had five children, four daughters and one son. They had twin

daughters ten months after their wedding. Shortly after their birth Tom moved to Texas to study at the University of Texas from 1963 to 1964. In 1964 his daughter, Donna, was born. She passed away in March of 2012 and Tom requested that we not discuss this matter as it was a very difficult topic. He fourth daughter has one son who is seven. Tom's youngest child is his only son who also has a son (Thomas) who will continue to carry the Wurtenberger name.

26:37 We backtrack for a moment to discuss two topics that are important in Tom's life to see his wife's point of view. First, he discusses the decision to pack up two small children to move to Texas. She was completely behind him because she knew this would lead to bettering their financial situation. Second, I asked him to discuss the history lectures he enjoys. She does not have the same strong draw to personal history, but does enjoy lectures. She also enjoys being able to go out with friends and "dine finely".

27:44 Tom reveals he has five grandchildren; Shane (22 or 23 years old), Carlina, Brant, Trevor, Thomas (11 months). All of his grandchildren live locally. He spends a lot of time with two of his grandchildren. Trevor and his mother (Donna who recently passed away) lived with Tom for two and a half years and he has remained close to him. The other one he sees often is the youngest, Thomas, because his mother requests they spend a lot of time together. Tom does admit to spoiling his grandchildren because that is what he here for. Tom sees a lot of his mother in how he raised his children and how he deals with his grandchildren.

32:06 Tom held his children and his students to very similar standards; he assumed they would do the work they were required to do. He does not know if being a teacher influenced his parental style because he has no other experience from which to draw. When his children got into hot water he was disappointed but he got them out. He thinks his wife was stricter, but was not sure. She did not work until the children were in school so she had more opportunity to enforce rules. As far as he remembers they generally worked together in disciplining. The most important piece of information he ever gave his daughters was to not wait for a knight in shining armor to come along. They need to be able to make their own way in the world, not rely on someone else to carry them. He does not remember giving his son any particular piece of advice. His son had to make it on his own, and he did.

34:13 Follow-up on Tom's teaching career where he discusses spending time teaching on the college level at St. Joseph's University and Burlington County College. Tom received the job at St. Joseph's as a result of a letter of recommendation from Harold Bold who was well known in the science community for his work in botany. Tom never pursued teaching at the college level because the money was better at the high school, he had tenure, and because he never wrote his dissertation to receive his doctorate in education. That was all he needed to complete his degree at Temple University. He never entertained thoughts of going back to finish due to union business and a lack of time.

39:01 Tom discusses his decision to retire at age 61. He had a senior homeroom and had five good years of not fighting with the administration. He did say that some students were upset with his decision to retire. Looking back he felt his relationship with the students was the best part of his career. Being liked by students was very important to him; he feels that most people would agree that they want to be liked. It felt good when students would talk with him or laugh at his jokes. On the other side he disliked the difficulty of accepting the view of certain administrators. He felt they were maintaining the status quo in order to get a budget passed by the superintendent. When the school was getting a bad reputation from realtors in the area Tom offered to go to any meeting to discuss the quality of education at RV because he was convinced a student coming to RV would get an excellent education, he would do that. He was never taken up on the offer.

He speculates that the number of black students coming from The Gardens, a low income, high crime section of Mt. Holly, was the true cause of the reputation decline. The public perception is that The Gardens made RV less desirable than other schools in more affluent neighborhoods. Shawnee and Cherokee are located in Medford and Marlton respectively and have a much better reputation for quality of students and educators.

Tom has remained in contact with some people from RV since his retirement. The image of Rancocas Valley today does not come up.

44:26 Tom describes the move from working to retirement as an easy transition. He occupies his time by reading, doing genealogical study, belongs to the Pennsylvania Historical Society, attends lectures, golfing, and spending time with his grandchildren. He enjoys genealogy the most, although golf is very high on the list depending on his partner. Bob Schiffhauer is a long-time member of the Golden Pheasant Golf Course. He is a former club champion who holds the course record with eleven hole-in-ones. He was always known for being a difficult person to get along with and over the years he has gotten more so. Tom recalls how they first got together and as the years passed two members of their foursome were no longer able to play. Tom did not want to go into the details of Bob's character, but did say he finally got fed up with his attitude that he found another group to play with. His retirement caused some tension with his wife. She was still working and he notified her last minute about a trip to Germany that he was taking without her. Since that time she has been on six trips to Germany with him. He does desire to return again to continue tracing his family's heritage. He has a friend in Germany helping him and has discovered new information regarding the Wurtenberger family in the Black Forest.

Tom and his wife both enjoy golfing; however they do not golf together. He plays with men who are in his "league" and she plays with ladies in her "league". Even when vacationing they do not golf together. It is a mutual interest they share, just not

together.

50:56 Tom looks back at his life and describes it as missed opportunities. He admits to being bright and an excellent athlete, but did not take advantage opportunities. He has no real explanation. He speculates that it could be because his mother only went to school to the ninth grade, or possibly because his father died when Tom was young. He describes his father as “a brain” and an excellent man.

*This recording ends here because of an interruption from a visitor.

END OF AUDIO FILE 2

00:00 Tom continues his thought that those two factors were very important in his development. He allowed his children make their own mistakes. He did not force what he learned from his missed opportunities on his children. He tried to guide more than coerce his children. He feels his greatest accomplishment, aside from his family, is having a couple of degrees since no one prior to him in his family had accomplished that. The main regret Tom mentions is passing up the opportunity to stay in the army and serve in Germany for two years. He instead got out in six months and served in the reserves to finish out his time.

Looking ahead, one thing Tom would like to accomplish more than anything is to get his first hole-in-one. He would also like to go back further than 1746 in his family line as well as organize all of his family tree.

END OF INTERVIEW