

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University

Gordon Ovenshine Interview

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TD: Today is January 30, 2009. I am Teresa Debacco for the Rock Voices Oral History Program, and I am here today with Gordon Ovenshine. How are you today?

GO: I'm fine, Teresa, thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this. I'm excited.

TD: Fantastic. Well we're going to talk a little bit about you today. I want to learn a little more about you and our Rock Voices people would like to know what you're all about. So we're going to start with a little bit of biographical information. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born, where you're from . . . ?

GO: Okay. I'm originally from California: the state of California as opposed to the college town. I grew up in Palo Alto which is near Stanford University, about thirty-five miles south of San Francisco. Lived there until 1980—all the way through high school. So I guess you could say I'm a California native, although it's been a long time now and I'm pretty much adapted to Slippery Rock. But in 1980 my father, who's a geologist, got transferred to northern Virginia and worked for the federal government: for the Geologic Society. And I came to Slippery Rock initially in the fall of 1981 because I thought I wanted to be a school teacher. At that time Slippery Rock was very, very renowned as an educators' college [pause], and so I started in 1981 and had a couple different stints, but we can go through some of that if you'd like.

TD: Can you talk about your affiliation with SRU?

GO: Well initially I came here as a student, just a student like any other kid who would be searching for a university. I wanted to be a school teacher—I thought I wanted to be an elementary school teacher [pause] and at that time, you know almost thirty years ago, male elementary school teachers were very sought after. So I thought, "Well if I'm going to do this, I'm going to write my own ticket."

But then when I got up here, I didn't really like the curriculum. There was so much . . . so much of it was sort of rudimentary cutting out of shapes and lessons and I just thought, "Well I don't think this is going to satisfy me intellectually," and so I switched to English professional writing, and ended up getting in a journalism track. [I] was involved with the campus newspaper for a number of years and ended up being the news editor for *The Rocket*.

Which is still out there—*The Rocket's* still out there, [but] it was quite a bit different. In our day it was a tabloid format as opposed to what they call a regular broadsheet newspaper. So it was like the size of the *National Enquirer*, one of those, and it was about four or five pages.

And we did everything in those days, what they call “cut and paste method.” Nowadays everything’s done automatically on a computer, but in those days we actually had to lay everything out and cut things out: cut out cut lines and put them in place and so forth. So it was a good way to learn. I don’t know if I’d recommend it nowadays because students are so attuned to the computers, but for that era it was a good way to learn the process of journalism.

TD: Let’s talk a little bit about the Slippery Rock eras that you were here: the teacher's college, the state college, the university

GO: When I came here in ‘81 it was still Slippery Rock State College—yeah that was right—it was Slippery Rock State College. [Pause] I think it converted to university in ‘87 or ‘88

TD: ‘83.

GO: Oh was it that early?

TD: That’s what my paper says, but that may not be right.

GO: Okay, ‘83. Well here’s my story: I started in ‘81, went for four semesters and then like a lot of [pause] a lot of students I wasn’t all that focused academically. So I dropped out for a couple years, I mean I sort of fell into the partying kind of scene and that’s pretty common here and I think at all universities. So I didn’t do—I mean I wasn’t a terrible student, but I didn’t really feel that I was focused enough and I was unsure of what I wanted to study and what sort of career I wanted to get into. So I thought, “Well, I’m gonna drop for a couple of years and work and maybe have some fun.”

So I ended up moving to Washington D.C. and I worked for Brooks Brothers. I was in a retail store: Brooks Brothers, in Maryland, and lived in D.C. and sort of sowed some oats and did that kind of stuff. When you’re in your early twenties or late teens, early twenties I had my fun, and then finally grew up enough to sort of take it seriously. I came back in fall of, I guess it would have been ‘85, and moved into Sentinel. Are you familiar with Sentinel? It’s a little [pause] dumpy apartment complex, sort of behind East Gym

TD: Oh, yeah I’m not sure what the name of it is now but I do know what you’re talking about.

GO: Well I think it’s Summit and Sentinel and I moved there and I guess it was fall of 1985, and switched majors to English at that point and thought, “Well this is really what I like best.” I wanted to be a writer or a newspaper reporter, and at that time I don’t think Slippery Rock had a journalism program per se, so I got into English which was the next best thing, found my way to *The Rocket* and you know, ended up being a reporter, then the news editor for my senior year.

And so I’ve always been grateful to Slippery Rock because I feel that it helped me find my career path. [Pause] I was sort of, I don’t want to say, I was real aimless, but I was sort of

unfocused as a young man, and I don't know that I ever really was certain what I wanted to do with my life until I sort of found some of the opportunities here on this campus. I also met my wife here, so of course that breeds a little bit of loyalty, I would think for most people who meet their spouse. Which is pretty common, by the way, Teresa, a lot of people meet their spouse here, have you met someone yet here? It's very common and we've often talked about why people meet. So many people meet their wife or their husband at Slippery Rock or at college in general and I've often wondered about that but that's a side note.

So anyhow, I graduated in 1988 [pause] and then I became a newspaper reporter first in northern Virginia and then here for the *North Hills News Record* in suburban Pittsburgh and then for the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, which is still out there. So I did that, I was a reporter, a full time reporter covering news. And I covered the plane crash in 1994. Do you remember that? You probably. . .

TD: I was young, but I remember.

GO: Yeah [pause] I was at the scene of the plane crash the night the plane went down, so I covered that. That was probably the biggest story I ever covered in my newspaper career. Then I came back to Slippery Rock. I always had an interest in working for the university because I had so much fun here as a student and it was such a good time for me. I met my wife and all that and I thought, "Well, boy if there's ever an opportunity for me to work here I'd love to take that." And so I finally got on in the PR, Public Relations office, in 2001. I guess it was September of 2001, right after 9/11, and I've been here ever since and frankly I plan to stay indefinitely. I'm real pleased with how things are going.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about what you do for the Public Relations department?

GO: I'm a senior writer, which means I write the bulk of [the] press releases. I do the—almost all of the alumni magazine, which we send out three times a year to our alumni. So I write a bunch of magazine stories. I also do photography and I do newspaper stories. I write for newspapers. I'll do a story that I'll conceive and come up with an idea; then write it and send it in with a photograph, and they often run it verbatim you know, "by Gordon Ovenshine for the *Butler Eagle*," say. I've had a couple of those get in.

Public Relations is really sort of the arm and the mouthpiece of the university; we're the ones who get out there and try to convey the impression that exciting things are happening here on campus. [Pause] You know the new residential suites, the recreation center or some of the cutting-edge developments technology-wise, it's our job to go out there and essentially sell these items and to make the public interested and hopefully get news coverage. The fundamental goal is to make the university look good so that more top-notch students want to come here.

TD: Can you tell us a little bit about your first impressions of the college when you came here?

GO: My father and I drove up here, I guess it would have been probably the spring of 1980 or '81. No it would've been '81, and we had toured a bunch of colleges in Virginia and Maryland and we rolled in and I thought, "Well this is out in the middle of nowhere." Everyone who rolls into Slippery Rock thinks "Where am I? This is Nowheresville." And I recognized that. But then we rolled in and I saw that upper part of campus, the historic part of campus, and I thought, "Man, this is just a typical idyllic sort of college campus, you know, it looks pretty appealing." Then we drove back around, down along Kiester Road and saw the ball fields, and the ARC [Aebersold Recreation Center] wasn't there at that time but the stadium was back there and all the fields: the ball fields at the back end of campus, we drove through that. And I thought, "Well this is a good mix of historic yet contemporary and there's plenty of room here," and I just . . . we both sort of liked it. And we both looked at each other and said, "Well, this is the nicest of colleges we've seen so far," and I ended up applying and got in and the rest is history.

Interestingly though, Teresa, when I came up here for a visit that one spring, I managed to meet someone I knew from Palo Alto High School in California. It was a girl I knew who came here to play water polo. Which was—what are the chances, right? So I'm walking down the street in Slippery Rock thinking this is the middle of nowhere, and here's a girl I remembered from high school and I thought, "What in the world is she doing here?" So of course I went up and talked to her and asked her about that. I happened to be a water polo player myself, so I came here and actually played water polo as a student, when I was an undergraduate.

TD: You talked about playing water polo and also working for *The Rocket*, did you have any other activities that you participated in?

GO: Well, I was on the student society for [pause] student journalists. I forget the name of it; it was an honorary, like a Greek honorary for student journalists. I never joined a fraternity—that wasn't real big in my—I mean they were out there, but I always sort of thought that was just like buying your friends. I mean it seemed to me that there was an element of phoniness to all of that, and I was just—I wasn't really into that, so I opted out of that. I did live in the dorms; I lived in Dodds Hall the first year. Which was interesting; it was quite different. You never lived on campus?

TD: No.

GO: You know nowadays with the suites . . . they're a lot more grandiose and sort of bigger and nicer than they used to be in my day. I mean we were all—it was just sort of room/room/room: thirty guys on one floor, sharing a bathroom. So you can imagine that it could be a little bit chaotic at times. But it was also—it was also fun; there was a lot of camaraderie. We used to gather out in the hallways and they used to let us paint things on the walls. Can you imagine that now? Imagine anyone painting—so while I think it was not as fancy and not as nice, in that sense it was sort of more of an open era. I mean I don't think things were quite as uptight if that's the right word. Nowadays there are so many rules and regulations and sort of restrictions on students, that you almost feel, "I'm fettered in here all the time. I can't do anything." You can't

smoke, you can't do this, you can't do that, and we didn't smoke in the dorm rooms, but certainly you didn't get the impression that everyone was watching you or that you couldn't do anything like you do nowadays. I remember the—we called them resident advisors—what are they now CAs?

TD: Yes.

GO: We called them RAs. They used to encourage us to just basically paint whatever we wanted to on the walls. Which I thought was pretty cool, and a lot of students took advantage of that and actually came up with some very creative murals, and Grateful Dead symbols and this and that, signs of those times—football players and whatnot. So I think it encouraged . . . maybe an artistic streak, or at least a willingness to be open about things. We'd have meetings out there in the hallways.

TD: What would you consider to be some of your accomplishments here?

GO: I think the primary thing for me, the biggest thing and the thing that was most helpful for me was becoming a part of *The Rocket* staff. Because I remember, there was a professor I had, his name was Joe Norman. He's retired now, but he was in Communication. He said "Gordon what are you gonna do?" I said, "Well I'm gonna be a reporter or a writer." He said, "Well how are you gonna do that?" And I said, "Well I'm gonna graduate and I'm gonna get a job somewhere." You know that's how you think when you're a college student and he said, "Well that's a good goal, but I would really encourage you—you gotta get experience while you're on campus to get yourself credentials to get employed, because everyone comes out with a college degree. You have to sort of distinguish yourself a little bit somehow and you do that by becoming a part of the campus paper and then doing an internship."

So I thought well that sounds like pretty good advice, so I walked in and sort of got involved with *The Rocket*, first as a reporter. Actually I was a reporter then I was the—I think I did feature stories for a semester. Then I became the news editor my senior year; you know when you're involved with the newspaper you sort of find your niche—what you think you're good at. I felt that I was good at crime and sort of harder hitting type stories. And so it was fun and then when I graduated, you know frankly, Teresa, that's what made the difference for me, because they said, "Oh, you worked for *The Rocket*; you were the news editor." It sounds maybe a little bit more impressive than it was but it was still a significant credential, it was enough of a credential to get me a full time job on a weekly newspaper in Virginia, and that led to a full time job on a twice weekly, and then a daily newspaper and then a big-time metropolitan newspaper. So if you really look back, you could sort of convincingly argue that my experience here at Slippery Rock is what sort of spring-boarded me to my career.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about some people who influenced you, either in your undergraduate or graduate or even as you're here working . . .

GO: Well, Joe Norman was a professor. There was a guy here named Elwood Carland who was a very, very good journalism professor. He was an old-style sort of guy, I mean he was—I had him in say '85, '86 [and] at that point he was still wearing a crew cut. He was a very '50s sort of guy, and sort of a hard ass in some ways but he was a very good journalist and he had a lot of good advice for all of us and just was a real stickler for details and accuracy. He would sometimes—students would be reduced to tears with him—women students probably more, because he could be sort of nasty in terms of, “You misspelled this guy’s name, and no newspaper’s ever gonna hire you if you can’t spell a name right” and this and that. But I mean it was sort of tough love in a sense and no one likes it at the time, but to some extent, sometimes you need to hear those things and everyone needs a kick in the ass occasionally, just to sort of keep you honest. And so I always thought he was real good at that.

The newspaper experience was probably the main thing and I was pretty active socially; I had a lot of friends from different cross sections and I was dating my wife by then. We weren’t married I mean, but we were dating the final two years we were students here and so that was probably a big part of things for me as well, naturally. [That] made me who I am.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about the events or activities that happened while you were here? Something academic, cultural; maybe a building project or a blizzard . . . ?

GO: Well I do remember, the biggest story I ever broke for the newspaper . . . if you drive around—are you familiar with the surrounding area at all? There are several housing plans now and one of them over here is called Arrowhead; are you familiar with that one? It’s off, is that Route 8 heading towards Butler? You would know that if you’re from West Sunbury.

TD: Yes . . .

GO: If you’re heading out of town the high school is on the left and it’s the housing plan on the right hand side.

TD: On 173?

GO: Yes. Well I was the reporter—I started seeing some bulldozers digging around out there and I thought, “Well what’s going on?” and I sort of dug around. I finally found out that it was Gary McKnight; he’s a pretty prominent developer now. He was starting work on this eighty house housing plan and it turns out that this was the first planned residential housing plan built in Slippery Rock. The joke used to be that there was nothing up here, no housing plans. And we used to say, “Well the last thing I wanna do is end up living here because there’s nothing here.” And people probably still say that, I assume. But at that time there was really nothing and so I was the one who broke the story that this guy was going to build this big housing plan right here in Slippery Rock. And of course everyone sort of hoo-hah’d it and said, “Well that’s never gonna work and no one wants to live here.” But he was right. I mean if you look around now, Arrowhead is there and then [pause] or no is that Apple Butter? I think it is Apple Butter.

TD: That's Apple Butter.

GO: Yeah it's Apple Butter; Arrowhead is on the other side. But there are two or three or four different housing plans and a lot of student apartments now, on and off campus that I think to some extent all sort of spring-boarded from that initial development that he started in probably '87 or '88. You know, so that was one thing. What was—can you give me the question again?

TD: What were some major events or activities while you were here?

GO: Oh yeah, well in those days things were different in the sense that there were—I mean I'm not going to say that there's no partying now, because I know better. I'm not naïve; I'm sure there is. But in those days there was a lot of partying going on, because remember, this was before the computer era. Really if you think back to what it was like as a typical student back then, you had a dorm room, you had one telephone per dormitory hall, hardly anyone had room TVs in those days and there was a TV downstairs in the basement. So you didn't have the constant flurry of activity that you have now with computers. So I think to some extent, students, particularly those who lived off campus, did a lot of partying to sort of make up for that. And there was this constant thing going on, where the parties would go on at Kiester Apartments. Which I think is now—what's that Pine Glenn now or Pine Grove? Whatever it is. And every weekend the paddy wagons would come in and arrest fifteen students for excessive drinking or noise or this or that or disorderly and I don't think you see that anymore, and I think it's a testament, number one, to the kids. The students are smarter about those issues now.

I won't say they don't do it at all, because I think some do, but I don't think it's as prominent as it was. I think that was—I came up sort of still at the tail-end of the '60s mentality of “Do what you want; party.” And there was a different sort of philosophy in those days.

TD: What, if anything, do you miss about SRU?

GO: Well I still work here so . . . you mean my student days?

TD: Yes.

GO: What I miss, and what I really liked was the constant barrage of camaraderie with all the students, all the friends. I mean just in and out of the rooms, in and out of the dormitory rooms, in and out of classrooms. We used to walk to Bob's Sub in the middle of wintertime. We used to go to Moraine [State Park] occasionally and go ice-fishing. And in those days you didn't have to text anyone or [use] cell phone; we just would walk. I lived in Dodds, but I very commonly would just sort of get up and walk over to Bard and bang on someone's door and just basically walk in. I mean half the time the doors were open to begin with, so there was not such a sense of “Leave me alone.” I think nowadays a lot of students just don't want to be bothered with anyone or anything . . . but in those days, it was a more open sort of friendly, “Let's just go over here

and chew the fat.” And we’d play backgammon and [pause] play guitars or whatever; I mean it was never anything that focused. And we’d have study groups in the residence halls. That’s what I remember. I remember watching a few famous Penguins games and Steelers games and this and that. And there was some rowdiness, like there always is with college students. But it was never out of control; I never felt that things were out of control. I thought it was sort of organized chaos. It was fun.

TD: Do you have any words of wisdom, or other things you would like to leave for current or future Rock community members?

GO: I think the big thing about being a student is: you got to go beyond sort of the “classes only” mentality. I think too many students think, “Well, it’s all gonna fall into place for me if I come here and major in communication or business or PR.” And it may. Some of them are so talented that they can do well. But what employers really want to see is a student who distinguishes himself or herself through extra activities. And it’s not only academic but I think social. You know, the kids who are involved with AmeriCorps, who go on the spring breaks, who give a hoot about something. There’s so much apathy nowadays. People say, “Well the kids don’t care about anything,” or “They’re selfish.” I don’t agree with that, but I think there is sort of a sense that they assume that everything falls into place for them. “I’m Teresa and I’m from West Sunbury and I have a nice family and I’m this and that and it all just sort of happens for me,” but it doesn’t necessarily, unless you plan for it and work towards it. You need to set a goal and pursue that goal, whether it’s PR or journalism or whatever. Find a specific niche and then pursue it through activities, in friends and everything; make it sort of your driving ambition forward.

TD: Anything else you’d like to add before we wrap up?

GO: Even though I was raised in California (I was raised in Palo Alto, California I lived there till I was eighteen), I’ve always retained the most affection for this place out of anyplace else. I think it’s because I had such a good experience as a student, number one. I met my wife here, number two. That obviously brings loyalty. But it’s just a fine university. You can come here and it’s a good, typical college experience. But if you make the effort you can really befriend your professors, you can really get a lot of one-on-one interaction [pause] and that’s what made the difference for me. Particularly by the time you get to be a junior or senior, you’ll find that there are two or three or four professors that will take you under their wing, because they see your potential and, “This guy’s a pretty good journalist, he’s got potential.” I remember Joe Norman saying, “Well Gordon, you’re really pretty good at this; you should consider this as a career.”

I do that now with students whether its photography or music because . . . I’m in a position now where I’m old enough and experienced enough to spot talent. And kids I think nowadays are always somewhat a little bit unsure or sort of confused as to what they want to do and often I say something like, “Well, you know Rita, you’re really a good photographer, you should pursue this as more than a hobby; go after it. Maybe there’s a professional opportunity for you in this field,” that sort of thing. So I would, if I could get a message out to today’s students, I would just say to

work hard and get involved, and to go well beyond the run of the mill type stuff. Try to distinguish yourself.

TD: Fantastic. Well I want to thank you for being here today.

GO: You're welcome Teresa.

TD: Rock Voices really appreciates your help with this project.