## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>p. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>p. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>p. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Transcript</td>
<td>p. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>p. 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>p. 45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This oral history was conducted by the Stanford Historical Society Oral History Program in collaboration with the Stanford University Archives. The program is under the direction of the Oral History Committee of the Stanford Historical Society.

The Stanford Historical Society Oral History Program furthers the Society’s mission “to foster and support the documentation, study, publication, dissemination, and preservation of the history of the Leland Stanford Junior University.” The program explores the institutional history of the University, with an emphasis on the transformative post-WWII period, through interviews with leading faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, and others. The interview recordings and transcripts provide valuable additions to the existing collection of written and photographic materials in the Stanford University Archives.

Oral history is not a final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a unique, reflective, spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it may be deeply personal. Each oral history is a reflection of the past as the interviewee remembers and recounts it. But memory and meaning vary from person to person; others may recall events differently. Used as primary source material, any one oral history will be compared with and evaluated in light of other evidence, such as contemporary texts and other oral histories, in arriving at an interpretation of the past. Although the interviewees have a past or current connection with Stanford University, they are not speaking as representatives of the University.

Each transcript is edited by program staff and by the interviewee for grammar, syntax, and occasional inaccuracies and to aid in overall clarity and readability, while maintaining the substantive content of the interview as well as the interviewee’s voice. As a result of this editing process, the transcript does not match the recording verbatim. In the rare case that a substantive deletion has been made, this is indicated at the relevant place on the transcript. Any substantive additions are noted in brackets or by footnote.
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Abstract

In this oral history, Robert H. Dreisbach, Stanford alumnus (AB Chemistry 1937) and Professor of Pharmacology, Emeritus, discusses growing up in Baker, Oregon. He touches on his father’s work on the farm, at a creamery, and as a grocer and his mother’s beekeeping, and he describes Boy Scout meetings and hiking trips with his troop. He discusses his undergraduate days at Stanford from 1933 to 1937, recalling attending dances, the El Capitan Eating Club, and serving as the manager of the Stanford baseball team. He recalls his chemistry and physics professors and describes how a talk at Stanford given by a researcher from the Department of Agriculture awakened his interest in pharmacology and helped to convince him to pursue the subject while in medical school at the University of Chicago.

Dreisbach briefly recounts his experiences during World War II, which included working as an instructor at the Stanford Medical School and military service as a ward officer at Lovell General Hospital in Fort Devens, Massachusetts and at a hospital in the Panama Canal Zone. He describes the Stanford Medical School when it was located in San Francisco and provides his recollections of the rationale behind its move to campus, including Windsor Cutting’s involvement. He recounts the origins and evolution of his work, The Handbook of Poisoning and the way that poison control centers embraced the book.

Dreisbach describes the expansion of the Pharmacology Department after Avram Goldstein arrived from Harvard University to assume its chairmanship and its move to the Stanford campus. He remembers Goldstein as a “go-getter” and relates how he secured space in the basement of the Stanford Museum for a laboratory. Dreisbach explains how concern about smog and air pollution led him to pursue research and writing on environmental issues. An avid hiker, he closes the interview, which was conducted on the eve of his 100th birthday, by offering advice for longevity--keep climbing summits.
Robert H. Dreisbach

Biography

Robert Hastings Dreisbach, a Stanford alumnus and a well-known toxicologist, served on the faculty of the Stanford School of Medicine’s Department of Pharmacology for nearly three decades. Dreisbach was born in 1916 on a farm in Baker, Oregon and attended the public schools there. He entered Stanford in 1933 and graduated with a degree in chemistry in 1937. He attended medical school at the University of Chicago, obtaining his MD degree and a PhD in pharmacology in 1942.

Dreisbach entered the U.S. Army in 1944. He worked as a ward officer at Lovell General Hospital in Fort Devens, Massachusetts where he had responsibility for several wards, including one housing German prisoners of war. He also served as a ward officer at Margarita Hospital in the Panama Canal Zone. Before entering the military, Dreisbach worked as an instructor in the Department of Pharmacology at Stanford University’s Medical School, then located in San Francisco. In 1946 he returned there as an assistant professor. In 1949 he became an associate professor, and in 1955 he achieved the rank of full professor.

In addition to authoring scores of articles, Dreisbach transformed a series of lectures on toxicology into a popular handbook for medical students and general reference. The thirteenth edition of Dreisbach’s The Handbook of Poison was published in 2001. His research and writing also have focused on the problem of environmental contamination. Professor Dreisbach retired from Stanford in 1973. He then worked as a clinical professor in the Department of Environmental Health at the University of Washington’s School of Public Health and Community Medicine.

Dreisbach has two children, Liz Dreisbach and Carl Dreisbach. Both are Stanford graduates. Their mother was Mary Steffek Dreisbach, whom he met in Chicago as a medical student at the University of Chicago. Carl was born in 1945, just before Bob was stationed as an army doctor in the Panama Canal Zone. Liz was born in 1950, after he joined the Department of Pharmacology at the Stanford Medical School. For over forty years, Bob was with his
partner, Virginia Reid, now deceased. They had many adventures together, hiking, dancing, and hosteling in Europe. Throughout his life, he continued to pursue his avid interest in climbing summits. He celebrated his 100th birthday in March 2016.
Marine-Street: This is Natalie Marine-Street with the Stanford Historical Society’s Oral History Program. Today is March 28th, 2016 and I’m here with Stanford University’s Robert H. Dreisbach, Professor of Pharmacology Emeritus. We’re conducting this interview via phone. I’m here at Stanford and the professor is at his home in... Washington State.

Dreisbach: [00:00:29] Seattle, Washington, yes.

Marine-Street: All right, Professor. I’d like to begin by asking you to tell us when you were born and something about the place where you grew up.

Dreisbach: [00:00:42] I was born in Baker, Oregon on a little farm a mile--I think it was north of the town and on a ten-acre farm, in essentially a one-room building that had no running water or inside toilet. I think we had a telephone, a hand crank telephone on the wall. Some of my earliest memories are of riding the steam threshing machine out to where they were threshing and spending the day with the people doing the harvesting. I started school in a brick schoolhouse in Baker, which was a mile walk from where I lived. I walked there most of the time with my sister who was three years older.

We then moved to Pocatello--when I was, I think, in the third or fourth grade--where we lived about a year and then came back and after that,
lived in the town of Baker itself, where I went through grammar school, grade school, and high school. When my sister was in college, she suggested that I shouldn’t go to Oregon State where she went, but that I should go to Stanford. I applied to Stanford and was accepted and started at Stanford in 1933.

**Marine-Street:** I’d like to ask you before we get to Stanford and the undergraduate days a little bit about your family. It sounds like your father was farming perhaps for a while, but did he do some other kind of work as well?

**Dreisbach:** [00:03:28] He worked for the Mutual Creamery in the town but also ran a farm and had several cows which he milked and delivered the milk to customers before he went to do his job at the Mutual Creamery in Baker. His job, at least part of the time, required him to pick up the milk from the farmers. One incident that he used to recall was that he was taking out milk in the area of Sumpter, Oregon where there was a gold dredge. One time the gold dredge--their transportation for the gold was not available and they asked him to take the gold bar from their production into Baker to the bank. They put the gold bar into one of the milk churns, and he drove it to Baker where it arrived safely at the bank.

**Marine-Street:** That’s a whole different conception of an armored car I guess.

**Dreisbach:** [00:05:11] Yes. My mother kept bees during much of this time and I think she continued to keep bees, even when we moved into Baker. She produced about a ton of honey a year from fifty or a hundred hives of bees. When I was in high school, I helped with this process by running the extracting
machine, which was a centrifugal machine that spun the honey out of the combs.

**Marine-Street:** Were either of your parents--did they have much education?

**Dreisbach:** [00:06:06] My mother finished high school and I have a picture of her graduating class in Haines, Oregon where her father was the town physician. My father, as far as I know, never finished high school. He wanted to be a cowboy, and he became a cowboy. He was born in Kansas and was a cowboy over the West in Wyoming at least and then in Oregon.

**Marine-Street:** What kind of expectations did they have for you?

**Dreisbach:** [00:06:57] What was that again?

**Marine-Street:** I was wondering what kind of expectations they had for you? Did they expect you would take over the farm?

**Dreisbach:** [00:07:06] No, no. No, by the time I went to high school, my father owned a grocery store in Baker, and I certainly didn’t want to be a grocer. I knew that. They were perfectly willing to support my education at Stanford. Also since my grandfather had been a physician, my parents pushed me in that direction. I wasn’t convinced about this when I went to college. I was more interested in chemistry.

**Marine-Street:** Were there any moments in your early life that you can think of that might have led to that interest in chemistry?

**Dreisbach:** [00:08:03] I read a bunch of books on chemistry when I was in high school. The whole idea fascinated me even though the chemical industry was, compared to now, fairly primitive. This may be too early, but when I was a chem major at Stanford, the PhD graduates in chemistry were getting jobs at
DuPont or Hercules making gunpowder. That didn’t really appeal to me. My parents’ interest in having me go to medical school resurfaced and I decided that I’d go to medical school when I was a senior at Stanford.

**Marine-Street:** You went to Stanford in 1933, you said, and what kind of a reputation did Stanford have in those days?

**Dreisbach:** [00:09:34] I thought it was fantastic. I was, of course, taking a lot of chemistry courses and physics courses. I think in one of the physics courses, I was the only student. [laughter]

**Marine-Street:** Were there any professors that you particularly recall from those undergraduate days?

**Dreisbach:** [00:10:11] My chemistry professor at the time was Professor Bergstrom [Francis William Bergstrom]. I was really impressed by him and also some of the professors in the Physics Department. Oh, the course that I took that I was the only student in was Professor Kirkpatrick [Paul H. Kirkpatrick].

**Marine-Street:** I guess you had to keep up with the reading in that course if you were the only student.

**Dreisbach:** [00:10:51] Yes.

**Marine-Street:** What was the campus like then? Do you have any memories of where you lived or places that you liked to hang out, anything like that?

**Dreisbach:** [00:11:03] I started in Encina as all freshman men did. I didn’t join a fraternity. I lived in Branner Hall for a year and then I moved to Toyon and lived in Toyon and ate one meal a day at El Capitan Eating Club and sort of scratched for the other meals. Probably almost every day, I went into Palo
Alto and had a sandwich at the Peninsula Creamery, which I think is still there as far as I know.

Marine-Street: I think it is too. No kidding.

Dreisbach: [00:12:10] My breakfast was a sweet roll and a cup of coffee. My nutrition was terrible at the time.

Marine-Street: This would have been the years of the Great Depression. Did you feel that at all as a student?

Dreisbach: [00:12:31] Not particularly. My father had a grocery store, and I worked in the grocery store in the summers when I was home from college. I think as a family we didn’t feel the depression as much as some people did.

Marine-Street: What kind of things did students do for fun at Stanford in the 1930s?

Dreisbach: [00:13:06] [laughing]

Marine-Street: Or did you just study physics and chemistry all the time?

Dreisbach: [00:13:15] Baker is a small town in the hills in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. My main recreation was going hiking. I belonged to a scout troop and the scoutmaster never came to our meetings. We met once a week and most of our meeting was devoted to deciding where we were going to hike on the weekend. [laughing] Many years later, I met one of the people that had been in the scout troop with me, and we had quite a laugh recalling our meetings and subsequent hikes because we—in contrast to the big city or even Palo Alto—we could plan our hike and carry it out without any help from the parents. We just hiked right out of town for an overnight hike. Our packs consisted of a blanket which our food was rolled up in, and we hung it over our shoulder in contrast to the modern day packs that people use.
Marine-Street: Right. You have to be all outfitted properly nowadays I suppose.

Dreisbach: [00:15:11] Yes. At first our scout troop met in the recreation hall of a church. At the end of the meeting, we always had a game of hide-and-seek in the basement, sort of a crawl space of the recreation hall, which was full of lumber and old furniture and stuff—in the dark. Then we moved our scout troop to the City Hall. At the end of the meeting, we finished the meeting with a climb up into the bell tower to hear the bells ring. This involved going into the restroom and climbing over the wall of the restroom to the stairway that went up into the bell tower. The police department was right next to the restroom, and we could hear the policemen talking while we climbed up into the bell tower. I don’t think they ever knew that we did that. [laughter]

Marine-Street: Oh, it sounds like a vivid memory.

Dreisbach: [00:16:49] Yes.

Marine-Street: When you came to Stanford, did you continue your hiking or did you find other things to do for recreation?

Dreisbach: [00:17:00] What I did for recreation is I went to the gym. I did a lot of swimming and we, of course, had dances about once a month at Stanford mostly at the girls’ gym. About all I can remember of it, we had live music. One of my best buddies had a band, and he performed on the campus quite often.

Marine-Street: Neat. And everyone got all dressed up for the dances?

Dreisbach: [00:17:52] I think we probably wore—I can’t remember exactly but I bet we wore ties and jackets.
Marine-Street: Were you involved in any sort of sports like baseball or anything, football or anything like that?

Dreisbach: [00:18:06] Oh yes. I belonged to the El Capitan Eating Club and one of the members was the baseball manager, and he talked me into being a baseball manager. For a couple of years, I helped manage the baseball team. When we had spring vacation, they hired me as the manager. I don’t think I got paid, but I ate with the baseball team at Encina. There were a bunch of dining rooms at the back of Encina Hall. I can’t remember whether they’re still there or not.

Marine-Street: I’m not sure. I’ll have to check. You were a good student at Stanford. It looks like you were Phi Beta Kappa, is that right?

Dreisbach: [00:19:33] That’s right.

Marine-Street: So you spent a lot of time studying?

Dreisbach: [00:19:39] Oh yes. I lived at the dorm and knew most of the people in the dorm.

Marine-Street: Then you graduated from Stanford in 1937 and you had, by that time, decided you wanted to pursue graduate education. Is that right?

Dreisbach: [00:20:00] Yes.

Marine-Street: Where did you go?

Dreisbach: [00:20:03] In my last year at Stanford--I can still remember his name which is unusual--a fellow by the name of DeEds [Floyd DeEds] gave a talk in the chemistry department about pharmacology. He was not in the Pharmacology Department. He worked for the Department of Agriculture, which had a research lab in the Department of Pharmacology. They were doing
pharmacological research on food-related items. When he gave his talk, it sort of opened my eyes to the possibility of doing pharmacology rather than chemistry. I visited the Pharmacology Department, which, at the time, was in San Francisco.

The head of the department [Paul J. Hanzlik] was enough interested in me that he had me to dinner at his home a couple of times before I went off to graduate school. I knew pretty well when I went to med school that I was going to go be a graduate student in pharmacology. Part of the reason for this was that my cousin had gone to the University of Chicago and got a PhD in pharmacology. He was advising me along the way that the University of Chicago was the best place to go to get a pharmacology degree. One of the reasons for this was that they had a program that would allow a student to get a PhD in six extra quarters beyond the medical degree. By going to school for the summer quarter, it only took one extra year to get a PhD and MD more or less at the same time.

**Marine-Street:** Oh that sounds wonderful. Very efficient. Did you study with anybody in particular in graduate school? Was there a special advisor that you worked with?

**Dreisbach:** [00:23:24] There was an advisor program, but I don’t remember that I did it. I was pretty heavily into chemistry and into organic chemistry at that time. Professor Bergstrom was the professor of organic chemistry. After taking the organic lab, I started doing organic chemistry research under Professor Bergstrom. I probably started this in my junior year. I would take three to
five units of what was called “research.” I worked under Professor Bergstrom for those two years.

Marine-Street: Bergstrom’s at Stanford, so you’re starting on your own research agenda before you even are in graduate school?

Dreisbach: [00:24:49] That’s right. That’s right.

Marine-Street: So when you got to Chicago then, was there a pharmacologist who helped supervise your dissertation?

Dreisbach: [00:25:07] Yes. I took the first two years of med school and in the second year, the pharmacology course was in the spring quarter, I believe. At that point, I decided that I wanted to go into pharmacology. I can’t remember.

Marine-Street: That’s okay. I looked up your dissertation title. Is this you--"The Effect on the Fetus of Phenobarbital Sodium and Pentothal Sodium?"

Dreisbach: [00:25:56] That’s right.

Marine-Street: That’s an interesting subject. Those are barbiturates. Is that correct? Those substances….

Dreisbach: [00:26:08] That’s right. Barbiturates.

Marine-Street: Yes, and you were concerned about what would happen if pregnant women took those?

Dreisbach: [00:26:20] Yes. [laughter] This was a project that was supervised by a professor that was in the obstetrics department. My first graduate student preceptor, was Carl Pfeiffer. He left after I was there about a year. We wrote a paper about caffeine withdrawal headache. I presented this at the Federation meetings in New Orleans and it was kind of interesting. Here is this graduate student--what was I, twenty years old--and the title had been
published in their bulletin. The reporters from *Time* magazine and *Newsweek* were both apparently interested in doing an interview with me, but they never could get in touch with me. I think *Time* magazine didn’t follow it up, but *Newsweek* did. There was an article in *Newsweek* about my article about caffeine withdrawal headache.

**Marine-Street:** An early brush with fame.

**Dreisbach:** [00:28:15] Yes. [laughter] It was kind of interesting.

**Marine-Street:** Yes, I’ll say. Around this time, we’re talking about the World War II time period, and I was wondering if that had any impact on the course of your career?

**Dreisbach:** [00:28:35] Well, of course, as soon as the draft started all of the medical students had to—in order to not be drafted—they had to join the army. We were given commissions as second lieutenants, not in the medical corps but in— it’s funny, I can’t remember that.

**Marine-Street:** Oh, I know. Sometimes the details of all the names are hard to retain. You signed up for the army as a medical student. What did you have to do in that capacity?

**Dreisbach:** [00:29:36] Oh, it was the Sanitary Corps. I finally remembered, the Sanitary Corps. My classmates knew that I was dropping out of medical school to do my PhD, and they kept warning me that I would get drafted if I wasn’t actually in medical school. My draft board was in Baker, Oregon. I think at the time, my father was on the draft board so he would’ve known if there was any action to draft me. I managed to finish my work for the PhD
without getting drafted. Then, of course, after I graduated at the end of my internship, I expected to get my orders to be in the military.

While I was an intern at St. Mary’s Hospital in San Francisco, I kept in touch with the pharmacology department and actually helped out in their pharmacology course, in the spring quarter while I was an intern at St. Mary’s Hospital. Then I actually got orders to go into the military, and Professor Hanzlik [Paul J. Hanzlik] managed to get me deferred for a year because they were so shorthanded in the Pharmacology Department that they needed my help as an instructor. I worked as an instructor for a year before I went into the military.

Marine-Street: This would be 1943, 1944, somewhere around there probably?

Dreisbach: [00:32:02] Let’s see. I graduated in 1942. I interned until 1943. I worked as an instructor from 1943 to 1944 and then went into the military in 1944.

Marine-Street: Did they send you anywhere or were you able to stay in San Francisco?

Dreisbach: [00:32:22] No, the first thing I did was to go to the field service school in [Carlisle] Pennsylvania…for six weeks. Then with twenty other people that had been at the field service school, we went to a replacement depot at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where Lovell General was the hospital. We were supposed to get our orders within four to six weeks to go be with some unit. For some reason, I don’t think I ever knew quite why, instead of going to a military unit, the head of the medical department managed to get me appointed to stay at Lovell General. His name was Colonel Julian Benjamin. He was the head of medicine at some med school I believe in Ohio. He was the head of the medical department at Lovell General, and he kept me there...
at Lovell General for more than a year until my wife had my first child and then he had to let me go.

He kept me at Lovell General because he was an academic, and he knew that I was an academic. Actually we published a paper together while I was [laughter] at Lovell General. He could no longer hold on to me. Finally, after the war ended in Europe, I got orders and instead of going to Europe, I went to Panama to work for the Panama Canal Zone administration in one of their hospitals.

Marine-Street: That must have been interesting.

Dreisbach: [00:35:27] Yes, it was. Yes, because my family came down and we lived together in Panama for several months, until I got discharged.

Marine-Street: Were you doing administrative work or were you doing things related to pharmacology when you were in Panama?

Dreisbach: [00:35:47] No, I was a ward officer in the hospital. I was treating patients.

Marine-Street: Were you dealing with a lot of mosquito-borne illnesses when you were down there? Was that still a concern?

Dreisbach: [00:36:01] Yes. We had malaria. We had a case of typhoid fever, which I failed to diagnose, and various intestinal parasites, lots of intestinal parasites. The medical system at the PC Zone administration was sharply divided between the gold roll of employees and the silver roll of employees. The silver roll of employees were paid about one-tenth of what the gold roll received and their hospital was in Colón. My hospital was in Margarita, which was a little village on the edge of Colón and entirely in the Canal Zone.
Marine-Street: It looks like you end up back at Stanford then not too long after that. How did that happen?

Dreisbach: [00:37:29] Actually, Professor Hanzlik got me released from the military before I would otherwise have been released. I had a job in Pharmacology as soon as I got out of the military.

Marine-Street: And so this is with the Department of Pharmacology at Stanford. The Med School was in San Francisco still at this time, is that right?

Dreisbach: [00:37:57] That’s right. In an old five-story brick building. It was built--I don’t know exactly when the building was built--but probably before 1900 because it survived the earthquake.

Marine-Street: Was the Pharmacology Department very big at that time?

Dreisbach: [00:38:24] I think at that time there were only three official members of the department. We had post-docs from time to time, but it was Dr. Windsor Cutting and Professor Paul Hanzlik and me.

Marine-Street: What was it like there in the wake of World War II, living in San Francisco and teaching at the Medical School?

Dreisbach: [00:39:00] At first, we didn’t have a car…the only housing available was the war housing. At first, we lived in Oakland at one of those housing projects that were built for the workers at the shipyards. Since the commute was very time-consuming, we moved to a housing project in Mill Valley, which had a really good commute. The bus stop was right at the village where we lived, and we zipped across the bridge and the bus stop was just a block or so from the Med School.
Marine-Street: How about the students? Did you have many med students at that time?...Was it a very busy place...the Med School?

Dreisbach: [00:40:29] We had sixty medical students. Our course, I think it took one quarter, spring quarter. At that time, the preclinical years were mostly on the campus--anatomy, physiology, biochemistry--were all on the campus. Pharmacology was the only preclinical course that was taught in San Francisco. The students I think probably moved to San Francisco at that time or they commuted from Palo Alto. I can’t remember what.

Marine-Street: Were all the students men or were there any women by that time?

Dreisbach: [00:41:42] There were usually two or three women in the class.

Marine-Street: Did you stay in San Francisco that whole time before they moved the whole Med School or did they move pharmacology down to campus at some point?

Dreisbach: [00:42:02] Well Dr. Cutting, Windsor Cutting, lived in Palo Alto and commuted. He convinced me that I wanted to live in Palo Alto rather than…see that was back in the late 1940s--there was already agitation to move the Medical School to the campus. He convinced me that I wanted to live in Palo Alto. Actually I built my own house in Palo Alto and lived during this time while we were building the house in the barn at the Cutting’s farm, which was several acres on the edge of Los Altos. [laughter]

Marine-Street: Oh boy. That was probably a really good investment decision in retrospect.

Dreisbach: [00:43:19] Yes, it was.

Marine-Street: You said that there was some agitation even at that time that maybe the Medical School would move down. Do you recall any of the arguments that people had in favor of moving it or what was motivating that?
Dreisbach: [00:43:39] Windsor was really involved in this. He was agitating for this all the time. It, of course, would be a very costly move because they’d have to build a hospital and a building to accommodate the Medical School. I suppose that was the main reason opposed was the cost. Otherwise, I think everybody was all in favor of having the Med School moved to the campus.

Marine-Street: Everything in one place. You said that some parts of the curriculum were already being taught down at campus.

Dreisbach: [00:44:30] The actual move [laughter] the timeline kind of escapes me. What I can remember is that, along the way, Windsor Cutting wrote a book on therapeutics, a little book that was revised I think every year or every two years. When I was in medical school, one of my jobs as a graduate student was to be the handyman for the man that taught the toxicology course. [Clarence Muchberger]…he was the state toxicologist. He would race in, give his lecture, and race out again because he was a really busy guy. Part of my job was to prepare the notes for his lecture. He had a set of notes that I mimeographed and showed it to the students. I kept a set of those notes.

When I got at Stanford, I used those notes to give the lectures on toxicology, which, as I recall, were only four lectures. We had four lectures on poison. Windsor Cutting, who wrote this book on therapeutics and really enjoyed doing it, he kept trying to urge me into turning the notes into a book. I first thought that a book on poisons should just be a little pamphlet for the household. I prepared this--it was probably fifty pages, something like that--all I thought the household needed to know about poisons. I knew the manager of the medical bookstore, Stacey’s at the time, and he was a good
friend of one of the people in the department, [Bing Moy], who was sort of the handyman in the department. I showed my book to this bookstore manager, and he sent it to several publishers and the answer came back that it wasn’t big enough. [laughter] They weren’t interested in it.

Finally at Windsor Cutting’s insistence, I took my notes to Lange Medical Publications, which was in Los Altos at the time and showed it to them. They thought about it back and forth—about a medical book. Lange Medical Publications did handbook-style, small books for med students, and they were very successful with their publications. They thought about it for a while and then they thought well, give us a list of chapters and a sample of a chapter and we’ll consider it further. This was 1955 when the department was still in San Francisco. Finally they decided that they would do this book. I was due a sabbatical. I took a sabbatical of six months and holed up in the library of the Organic Chemistry Building on the campus and wrote the book out in longhand. I would go up to San Francisco once a week with my copy and give it to the secretary in the department. Her name was Clare Forster.

[00:49:59] At the time, Hanzlik had died. I think he had died before that and Windsor Cutting—I think he might have been dean already by that time. This was 1954-1955. Anyway, I had the secretary to myself essentially. I was acting head of the department, I think. Anyway, I had the secretary to myself so I’d take my longhand notes up to the secretary, and she’d type them out during the week. Then I would go up the next week and get what she typed out. Then I would take them to Lange Medical Publications, which
I could get to by bicycle from my home in Palo Alto. They started [laughter] turning it into typeset text.

**Marine-Street:** It’s interesting to me this timing in the 1950s. It seems like this is when they’re first starting to establish Poison Control Centers, the American Association of Poison Control in 1958. I wondered if your work was in any way related to that broader movement and concerns about poisons?

**Dreisbach:** [00:51:50] My book came out at exactly the right time because the Poison Control Centers were just being organized. They were organizing a Poison Control Center in San Francisco. I went to several of their meetings. My book, I think, was already available. You probably haven’t seen it, but my book was 5x7. I don’t have a copy here to measure but it was about 5x7, 4 ½ x 6 ½ and…it wasn’t even an inch thick, I don’t think. I don’t have one here so I can’t measure it, but it was a really insignificant looking thing that sold for like three dollars. Can you imagine [laughter] a medical textbook for three dollars?

The Poison Control Centers lit on my book as their source of information. Lange printed twelve thousand copies and only eight thousand sold. They were really hesitant about doing another edition. They finally decided that they’d do a second edition and that sold out very fast. I forget how many they printed in the second edition but it sold out very fast. The book had come to life enough that they were willing to go on to a third edition.

**Marine-Street:** Isn’t it on number thirteen or fourteen edition now?
Dreisbach: [00:54:09] The last edition was thirteen. That was with a different publisher. By that time Lange Medical Publications had been absorbed into Simon and Schuster, I think. The one edition I did with Simon and Schuster, I was very dissatisfied with my editor. I would have given it up if that had gone on. Then Simon and Schuster--I don’t know why, they decided not to keep it going even though it sold [well]--I think by the twelfth edition, it was selling thirty thousand copies per edition.

Marine-Street: Wow, not too bad. That’s interesting. Do you think it had a pretty big impact then in the field of toxicology?

Dreisbach: [00:55:18] [laugher] Well, yes. My income from the book was sufficient that I actually retired at like age 55.

Marine-Street: I have to ask you another poisoning question, and this is from my early youth…I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and a very big part of childhood was learning about Mr. Yuk, who was a sticker that they would put on bottles to warn children not to ingest them. I was wondering...

Dreisbach: [00:56:20] Oh the Yuk. Mr. Yuk. Mr. Yuk was Bill Robertson who ran the Poison Control Center here in Seattle. There’s an interesting anecdote about that--I was up here one summer working on an edition. There was a journal that I was looking for in the Health Sciences Library, which is part of UW, the University of Washington. The journal wasn’t available and I thought oh, the Poison Control Center would probably have this journal. I called them up on a telephone and, sure enough, their journals didn’t circulate so the journal was for sure there. I went over to the Poison Control Center which
was in the Children’s Hospital, about a half a mile from the Med School at University of Washington.

When I got there, the whole staff of the Poison Control Center lined up and each of them gave me a big hug. [laughter] They said, “Oh, Dr. Dreisbach, you really do exist. We just love your book so much.”

**Marine-Street:** Oh yes, because they were using it to deal with clients on a daily basis.

**Dreisbach:** [00:57:57] Yes, yes.

**Marine-Street:** And emergencies. Your interest in poisons, is there anything other than academic that led to that interest?

**Dreisbach:** [00:58:11] I mean, mostly what got me started on that was helping the toxicologist teach the course at the University of Chicago. I had never had any particular interest in poisons otherwise.

**Marine-Street:** Did you ever clinically encounter a lot of instances of poisoning that you had to figure out what the heck’s going on here?

**Dreisbach:** [00:58:40] Say that again please.

**Marine-Street:** I was wondering if you had ever encountered many poisoning cases as a doctor? Would they bring you in and ask your opinion?

**Dreisbach:** [00:58:52] I think the only poisoning I ever encountered was people trying to commit suicide with drugs. I have been involved in several of those.

**Marine-Street:** I’m noticing in your research it looks like your research shifts a little bit, maybe in the 1960s, to more of an interest in pollutants and environmental concerns. Would you say that was correct?
Dreisbach: [00:59:30] No. I got interested in the contamination problem. That was an especially strong interest. That’s essentially why I retired. Well, part of the reason I retired was to devote my time to the contamination problem.

Marine-Street: What motivated that?

Dreisbach: [01:00:10] My lab at the Med School faced the hills. Those hills were only about a mile away and there were times when the smog was so bad that I couldn’t see the hills a mile away. That really impressed me, and I knew that something had to be done about that. That’s part of the reason that I retired.

Marine-Street: Were works like Rachel Carson’s works in your consciousness at that time? I know a lot of people have said that her work influenced their later environmental work. I was just curious if, other than the smog, there were any other influences on your work?

Dreisbach: [01:01:11] I can’t think what else. The air pollution problem, of course, a lot of people were concerned with this at the time.

Marine-Street: Then you wrote this big book, *The Handbook of the San Francisco Region*? Is that correct?

Dreisbach: [01:01:38] Yes.

Marine-Street: Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Dreisbach: [01:01:43] I did it mostly to educate myself. I thought that if I really did a book about the environment that I could learn something. At the time, there was a Bay Area Study Commission who put out a series of pamphlets about the Bay Area. The San Francisco book leaned very heavily on those publications and reproduced them for the public.
Marine-Street: There were some things in that book about calling for controls on automobiles and more public transportation and gas taxes. Were those pretty radical ideas at that time?

Dreisbach: [01:03:03] Of course, the public transportation was just getting going. There was a lot of interest in public transportation. Pretty fuzzy in my head.

Marine-Street: I understand. Do you recall how your work was received when you published that book? Did you get much reception of it or did people say, “Yes, great idea?”

Dreisbach: [01:03:40] The book came out just at a time when environmental education was just getting started. The colleges in the area had made the book a success. They, of course, had big classes on the environment. They took a lot of the books.

Marine-Street: I mean, it’s really the birth of the environmental movement. You have good timing on these books it sounds like….

Dreisbach: [01:04:43] Yes, it was really fortunate.

Marine-Street: I wanted to ask you a question. I was looking through the archives of the Stanford Daily and your name came up related to some protests against the Vietnam War. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what the atmosphere on campus was like during the Vietnam War and what your personal take on the whole thing was?

Dreisbach: [01:05:10] [laughter] I would sit in my lab at the Med School. I was on the hillside of the Med School campus so I had a view out. I remember there was a big protest at the--Electrical Engineering building or something like that and what made me so amused was that all these people were driving cars, and
it made me realize that all this consumption was what the war was all about.

[laughter]

**Marine-Street:** People were driving cars to the protest you mean?

**Dreisbach:** [01:06:01] Yes.

**Marine-Street:** Oh interesting. Any other memories from that time?

**Dreisbach:** [01:06:11] That’s my main memory. That’s a long time ago.

**Marine-Street:** Yes, it is a long time ago. You retired--was it around 1971? Is that correct?

**Dreisbach:** [01:06:24] Yes, yes, I retired about 1971.

**Marine-Street:** Did you go on to do more environmental work or what did you do after retirement?

**Dreisbach:** [01:06:35] I kept revising my *Handbook of Poisoning* up until about the year 2000.

**Marine-Street:** So that kept you busy.

**Dreisbach:** [01:06:51] Yes. Actually the revision of the book took me just about halftime and when I was on the faculty at Stanford, the department didn’t give me any credit for the book. Essentially I was supposed to do my regular job, and the book was something that I did in my spare time. Something that happened about that time with the book--I don’t have my copy of the book so I can’t remember exactly what the timing was--but I started putting in lots of references into the book, up-to-date references. I think that was the point at which the sales of the book started to climb. I think they just about doubled.

The publisher, Lange, at about that time was considering selling my book to another publisher because it wasn’t doing as well as they thought it should be doing. I managed to talk them out of doing that at about the time I
retired and could spend a lot more time on the book. After I retired, it took me about halftime. I studied the literature several days a week. That was before computers were widely used. I would go to the library, dictate notes from the journal articles, the up-to-date journal articles, and then go home and transcribe them for the book. Only one of the books benefitted from the computer because the next to the last edition… I would make the revisions on the computer in Health Sciences Library.

**Marine-Street:** A whole different way to approach it. I wanted to ask you just a few questions about what the Med School culture was like and what the culture was like in the Department of Pharmacology. It’s something that’s hard to find in the textual documents but what was it like to work at the Med School?

**Dreisbach:** [01:10:33] Once we moved to the campus, apparently the budget for the department was improved sufficiently that the new head of the department could hire several people. Instead of it being a department of three people, it became a department of six probably. We started having post-doctoral fellows and graduate students. When we were in San Francisco, we occasionally had post-docs who were medical grads who came and spent a year in the department. We only rarely had graduate students. But then when we moved to the campus, the new department head, Avram Goldstein, was very much interested in having graduate students and post-doc fellows. The department got very much larger. We had a really very much expanded department.
**Marine-Street:** During all that time that you spent at Stanford, did you do any kind of work on any committees or anything like that that you can recall as being particularly memorable?

**Dreisbach:** [01:12:32] One of the congressman had me for an advisor. After my San Francisco book occurred, I became sort of the environmental watchman for at least one of the congressman. I met him several times to discuss environmental matters.

**Marine-Street:** Do you recall who it was?

**Dreisbach:** [01:13:07] [laughter]…I can’t think of his name. His office was in Redwood City, I think. Redwood City or San Mateo.

**Marine-Street:** As you reflect back on your time at Stanford, I was wondering if there were any particular thoughts you have on how things changed or any particularly memorable moments?

**Dreisbach:** [01:13:46] [laughter] Goldstein was a real go-getter. He came to be head of the department before we moved from San Francisco. He was not about to put up with what we had in San Francisco, which was a couple of cubbyhole offices up in the attic. The lab was a typical chemistry lab, which was 20x20 or something like that. There was an animal room. There was a room where we worked with animals adjoining the chemistry lab, which was probably about 15x15. I should have told about this before. There was a stockroom attached to the chemical lab and in this stockroom was a cupboard under the sink that had a two-gallon jug.

Have you ever seen a wide mouth two-gallon jug full of pulverized marijuana and next to it was a gallon jug of the extract? [laughter] Those two
jugs sat there under the sink for all the time I was in the department and nobody ever did anything with it. Why they were there, I never did figure out. Also in the stockroom was a little wooden box up on the shelf, and in the wooden box we kept, without even a lock on the box, was a quart jar of morphine. You may not know, but morphine sulphate is a crystal--when it’s crystallized, it’s very fluffy.

One ounce of morphine filled this quart jar and beside the quart jar of morphine was a little four-ounce bottle containing sixty grams of heroin. [laughter] The heroin sat there as far as I know--we never used heroin in any of our experiments, but it sat there for years and years and years until we moved to the campus. Wow, the narcotics people really [laughter] once they knew that that heroin was there, they were there instantly grabbing the stuff and said, “We'll keep this in storage for you and if you ever need it, you have to ask us for it.”

Marine-Street: They had like a narcotics control board or something that was active at the Med School by that time?

Dreisbach: [01:17:39] Yes, the narcotics people--they really jumped on that little bottle of heroin. Oh, as I was saying, Goldstein was a go-getter. He wasn’t about to put up with that space that we had. He managed to find space on the campus in the old museum building where the Anatomy Department was and Microbiology was off of there too. He found this unfinished basement in the museum building and had it rebuilt into a lab for us to move there. Next to where our labs were was more unfinished basement. And in this unfinished
basement were three carriages from the Stanford family that the building had been built over. There was no way to get them out.

**Marine-Street:** Oh wow. I wonder what happened to them. I should probably find that out.

**Dreisbach:** [01:19:08] Yes. You will find that out because I just heard the story not very long ago. I think it was Professor Dement. Do you know him?

**Marine-Street:** I know who he is, yes.

**Dreisbach:** [01:19:21] You know who he is. I think he was the one that was instrumental in getting those carriages out of the basement.

**Marine-Street:** No kidding. Oh, interesting.

**Dreisbach:** [01:19:34] You can check on that. The other really funny thing is that, at that time, I was using calcium 45, which is radioactive, in my research. I had injected a bunch of rats with calcium 45. At that time, there wasn’t a mechanism for disposing of radioactive waste. I packed these radioactive rats into a jar with sodium hydroxide and put the jar in with the carriages.

[laughter] I’ve been curious ever since what happened to that jar. The calcium 45 has a really short half-life of like a hundred days. It’s long lost its radioactivity so the rats are perfectly innocuous, but I’m sure the jar was sitting there--it might have been still sitting there when Dement moved the carriages out.

**Marine-Street:** Yes, they wondered what in the heck some crazy person was putting rats in the carriages for.

**Dreisbach:** [01:20:59] Yes.

**Marine-Street:** Oh, another Stanford mystery solved. Oh that’s funny.
Dreisbach: [01:21:07] I think I’m pretty much exhausted. I think I better call it a day. If you want to call me again, you’re welcome.

Marine-Street: I just wanted to ask you one quick thing. Tomorrow’s your one-hundredth birthday. Are you going to celebrate it?

Dreisbach: [01:21:28] I’ve had two birthday parties so far and I have three more to go, two of them today.

Marine-Street: People always ask people on their hundredth birthday, “What kind of advice for longevity?” Do you have any for us?

Dreisbach: [01:21:46] I’m a hiker…that was part of the reason I retired is that I wanted to go hiking. I vowed to do a summit on the average of a summit a week the rest of my life or as long as I could. In 1970, I started keeping a list of my summits and I pretty well did that for…about thirty years….I did a summit a week. I did about fifty to sixty summits a year. I got to going to Switzerland because I’d run out of summits here. I’d go to Switzerland for a month camping in a campground because it was cheap and hiking a summit every day or more than one summit a day.

Marine-Street: That is some advice to live by Professor, and a happy, happy birthday from the Stanford Historical Society. I do thank you for participating in this interview.

[End of Interview with Robert H. Dreisbach - 20160328]
Robert H. Dreisbach  
Curriculum Vitae  

SCHOOLING  
- Elementary -- Baker, Oregon and Pocatello, Idaho  
- Secondary -- Baker High School  
- Collegiate  
  - Stanford University, 1933-1937 -- AB Chemistry 1937  
  - University of Chicago, 1937-1942 -- PhD Pharmacology 1942; MD 1942  

INTERNSHIP  
- St. Mary’s Hospital, San Francisco, 1942-1943  

MILITARY SERVICE  
- United States Army, 1st Lt.-Capt. MC, 1944-1946  

ACADEMIC POSITIONS  
- Teaching and Research Assistant, University of Chicago Department of Pharmacology, 1939-1942  
- Instructor, Department of Pharmacology, Stanford University, 1943-1944  
- Assistant Professor, Stanford University, Department of Pharmacology, 1946-1949  
- Associate Professor, Stanford University, Department of Pharmacology, 1949-1955  
- Professor, Stanford University, Department of Pharmacology, 1955-1973  
- Special Research Fellow, National Institute of Dental Research, University of Freiburg, Germany, 1960-61  
- Research leave of absence, supported by grant from National Institute for Dental Research, University of Heidelberg, Germany, 1964-65  
- Professor Emeritus, Stanford University, 1973-  
- Clinical Professor, Department of Environmental Health, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of Washington, 1973-  

SOCIETIES  
- Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine (to 1970)  
- American Society for Pharmacology and Therapeutics (to 1970)
PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- Associate Editor, Annual Review of Pharmacology (1959-1971)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

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Stanford University--Department of Pharmacology
Stanford University--Medical School
toxicology
University of Chicago--Pharmacology Department
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universities and colleges--United States--history--20th century