

Transcript of Interview with Don Wasson.

Interview conducted by Lucas Armstrong at my house in Tacoma, WA, on 12/11/21.

Notes

0:01 LA:	Okay, um, this is Lucas Armstrong, it is December 11, 2021. And I am interviewing my grandfather, who is	
0:16 DW:	Don Wasson.	
0:19 LA:	Okay, so first question, how long have you lived here? Where did you live before? And what brought you here?	
0:28 DW:	Well, um, this is our second time living here and we moved back in 2007. So we've been here 14 years. But prior to that, we were in Portland, where Laura and I both grew up, Laura's his grandmother, and we lived there for about roughly 20 years. But just before that, we lived in Tacoma. And US Army brought me here. And I had six months left of duty at Fort Lewis, and we ended up staying here about four years till we move back to Portland.	
1:11 LA:	Okay. What are some groups you identify with? This could be like ethnicity, race, religion, politics, unions, or any other organizations and cultures?	
1:24 DW:	Oh, that's changed over the years a lot. And now we'll be 69 here in a couple of weeks. And I just think of myself as human. I've really grown out of thinking, black, white, Asian, whatever. I'm Caucasian by birth, a half English, half German, with some other smatterings in there, and I used to identify pretty strong with that as a cultural or race thing, but now I don't even think about that. I just think I'm another human being because I've learned to appreciate other cultures a lot. There's some really great people out there. Skin color doesn't make any difference.	
2:19 LA:	What are some historical events from your lifetime that have had a huge impact on your life?	
2:28 DW:	There's so many of them. It's really hard to nail them down. Because these the last 50, 60 years in the United States has been historical, in so many ways. We've had President assassinations, attempted assassinations, senators, social leaders like Martin Luther King, Vietnam War, Gulf War, Iraqi 20-year war, there's been so many things. Our events have just kept accelerating at a rapid pace. I tried to explain people today what it was like in the 50s and 60s and they looked at me like a stepped off a planet that's unknown, well it is to them. Just like today is very unknown to me. It's a very different world that I'm in now.	
3:34 LA:	What are some major problems in the Tacoma area specifically that you know of? And can anything be done to help that?	
3:48 DW:	I think all problems end up being born from the individuals, each individual should be taking responsibility for themselves and what they have control of and remember to be considerate of others. And those two things. A lot of our problems would go away, because we have so many problems. Because people are saying well, it's your fault. It's their	

	<p>fault. This because of that and people are against me because I'm black or I'm white, or I identify with KKK, or I don't identify with KKK. And there's just so much diversity that it's lost its meaning. Diversity really doesn't mean anything anymore other than a label to put blame on somebody else for your problems. We need to take responsibility for ourselves and our problems and deal with them the best we can, not be afraid to go ask for help. I think if we all took that kind of an attitude, things would improve dramatically. But I'm not going to hold my breath. People, like blaming other people, because then they don't have to be responsible.</p>	
5:23 LA:	<p>What role does culture play in your life?</p>	
5:28 DW:	<p>Culture is another one of those words like diversity, that it's really lost its meaning in the overuse of it. When I was growing up culture was like, Oh, you're Hungarian, or you're Italian, or you're from Africa, or you're India, or you're Philippine. And people took a certain amount of pride in being of that culture. And in those days, that that kind of pride that they were having was a good kind, you know that, hey, I'm loyal to my, my people, who I can identify easily with. Whereas nowadays, there's so much intermingling between the races, which is fine, I mean, intermarriage and you have Black-Asian, Black White why you have Asian versus African, I mean, you got so many things, the culture has blended so much that we just need to think of ourselves as part of the same human race, rather than focus so much on culture. It's good to remember your culture. I'm not saying that. I'm saying it's not good to focus in above our nails.</p>	
7:07 LA:	<p>Do you have any relationship to your culture? Like, I know you said that you don't see that, like it's lost much of its importance, but do you have any kind of like, connection to your own?</p>	
7:21 DW:	<p>Oh yeah, yeah. Because, you know, my, like my grandfather, Gagan Heimer, on my mom's side, he was born in Germany, birth certificates in German. I've still got it. And those are warm, good memories of my grandfather in his culture, because the Germany he grew up with was not the Germany that was Hitler. It was the good side of the German people. Same thing on the my father's side, we were English, Welsh, derivation of United Kingdom. And, you know, we both were white cultures, and so there was a lot of similarity. But there's also a lot of differences. You can see it in people's personalities. There's differences between those cultures, but they're all becoming that one thing now. And that's what I focus on now. I don't take extraordinary pride in being either one. It's just fine. Okay, yeah, I was English. German.</p>	
8:40 LA:	<p>What was your childhood like? And like how does it differ from what you see children living today?</p>	
8:47 DW:	<p>Wow. The difference is, there's two different childhoods I think each of us have was one that we perceive that everybody else has the same time and then the one you personally experience in your own family unit. Mine of those two, my perceived idea of childhood for everybody in those days was very innocent, very trusting. And it was you I mean,</p>	

you didn't have to be afraid to go out in the middle of the night even if you're 12 years old. You know, it might've been scary simply because you're out in the dark by yourself. But there was really nothing to be afraid of, where as today with all the predatory people that are around, you have reason to be concerned about being out there by yourself. So there's a big difference right there. The second is my own personal childhood is, I grew up in uh, I don't know if you understand this reference, but a Pollyannaish view of my family. And that means an innocent view, I thought that we were just fine, we were a normal family, like everybody else, but I was basing that on false information. And one is we hardly saw anybody outside of our family. So I didn't know other families to make comparisons until I was much older, in my late teens. And then looking back, and in my growing up years, I realized now how traumatic it really was and how dysfunctional really was, and trying to make sense of that at this time in my life is hard, you know, because you're used to this thought that "Oh, I was this way" when you really weren't. It's hard to make those adjustments necessary.

11:12 LA: What was a specific experience or memory from your childhood, where you learned about inequality?

11:21 DW: I think the most dramatic one, I mean, there was several incidences. I think the most dramatic one was, I was in Boy Scouts in the summer of '67. We went to Spirit Lake, which is now under 600 feet of ash, when Mount St. Helens. And we were at boy scout camp that week. And we didn't have any radio or TV up there. We had no idea what was going on back in town. And when we got back home, we start hearing about all these reports of race riots all over the country in Detroit, in Watts, California, which is part of LA, and even in Portland, we have race riots in North Portland. And that was a very big shock to me. Because I, why are these people doing this? What are they upset about? You know, and it was partly triggered by Martin- well, that's not true. That was a year later. Martin Luther King was killed a year later as a result of all that uprising, but not by the hands of the blacks, it was a white man who killed him. But that's when I first became aware of Martin Luther King's movement of trying to gain equality for the blacks. Whereas I'd already thought it was already there, because Abraham Lincoln said they're free, you know, and we are teaching in those days was quite colored in not in the sense of black and white, but in terms of not being as truthful about the events as it could have been, because yeah, legally, Lincoln set them free, but in reality that never really fully took place. And in the 60s, and why race riots took place was because the blacks were tired of waiting. It had been 100 years since the Civil War. And there was still way too much inequality between the way blacks and Asians and other cultures were treated, Indians, uh, versus whites. Whites were very privileged to be very in control of everything. Now, I don't feel guilty about that, because I myself or anybody in my family lineage, were not part of that other than we happen to be white. But I remember my dad talking the that blacks were okay people, and I should treat them like another human being. But even he fought with racism, because there was a couple times I noticed that he would slip into some slur or something. Because when he was growing up, it was

	<p>even worse than it was when I was growing up. So there was a lot of that going on. That's when I became aware, was when I was coming back from a summer camp, and it was quite a shock.</p>	
14:48 LA:	<p>Have you ever exp- you- have you yourself, like personally experienced a form of oppression or discrimination, whether that be because of race, age, gender, heritage, practices, beliefs or any other identity? Or have you ever witnessed someone you know go through that experience?</p>	
15:08 DW:	<p>Yes to both questions. I've witnessed it in others, and, you know, being abused because of it. And have also experienced myself, I was kind of an outcast person in school. I was one of the ones that they bullied, you know, they talked about a lot about bullying in school. And I abhor that, but what they experience today is, in some ways, is nothing like what I did. Ours was much more physical bullying. And I'm not sure which is worse, but today's bullying is more taunting and misalignment of character, making them about a joke, being snide and rude and nasty, which can cut and hurt just as deep as a wound on your arm. But mine was more physical; pushed around, slammed up against lockers, threatened, you know, things like that. And that kind of gave me a spirit for the underdog, you know, to stand up, cause eventually I learned to stand up for myself. Back those down. The second part of it seeing other people suffer from it. I've seen what I like to call reverse discrimination, is when I was in the army there were some black men who was taking advantage of the negative race relations that was going on. And used it to start extorting people of money and property and tried to turn it into mini race riot in our own army company I was in. And we ended up having race relations meetings. And I remember very clearly this one black man, that he was claiming that all of his problems were a result of me a white man- speaking generally to all the white people, not just me personally, but I was included in that group. And so therefore, I owe him something. And that was his justification for extorting money out of me is that I owed him money because our forefathers were race- were slave owners. And that's where I draw the line. No, I got up and I said, "No, I have never owned another man. I'm not a slaveholder. None of anybody in my family were slaveholders. All of our families, both English side-" at that time, I was wrong, but I didn't know it. I said that our English side and our German side came over the United States after the Civil War. The German side was correct. My- I found out later that I was still correct in the wrong way. The Wassons, there were seven brothers that fought in the Civil War for the Union. And, can't remember now, it was two or three of them died at Gettysburg, giving up their lives, so this black man could stand there in 1974, and call me a racist. And I thought that was really weird. And I wish I had known at the time, I didn't. But that's, that's the important side of cultural so to speak, or history of your family is to understand what your family has been through, helps you understand who you are. And you're part of that hart- heritage that you can be proud of the fact that the Wasson side in the 1860s were fighting for the liberty of other men and women. And that's part of your heritage. I like to call it heritage rather than culture, because it's too messy of a word. Heritage is more personal.</p>	

<p>19:45 LA:</p>	<p>Are there any problems that you've seen, like today's society that like, maybe disappoint you or possibly even scare you? And like, was it any different growing up for you?</p>	
<p>19:59 DW:</p>	<p>Oh, yeah, a lot different, very much different. I used to deliver newspapers as a boy. Did that for six years. So I saw the headlines on the papers every day, because I was delivering papers. So I had a pretty good general awareness of what our society was doing and going through. And the kind of headlines that we get today, you'll get two or three of them, or four of them. In one day, you wouldn't get in a month of newspapers when I was growing up, I mean, murders, rapes, assassination attempts, scandals in politics, the inequality that people are pushing on each other, the blatant more racism- racism today is more blatant than it was when I was growing up, it was kind of kept on quiet side. And that was good and bad. You know, I think it was good from the standpoint that it created more peaceable living, but it also swept the problem under the carpet, where people didn't acknowledge it and say we need to do something about it. So but there's that difference, right there is just the-- the amount and volume of criminal activity and misbehavior or whatever you want to call it, scares me. Because when people get used to doing that, they want more and more and more, they want more their way, you know, and they start demanding it. And that's where we're going. That's my personal opinion. We're, we're heading for a social collapse. And with maybe within my lifetime, but I think almost certainly in yours. And our only saving grace is Christ in both now and future, because he's literally gonna pull us out of the fire.</p>	
<p>22:23 LA:</p>	<p>What are your perspectives or beliefs about specifically racism in today's society? How does that compare to the past?</p>	
<p>22:33 DW:</p>	<p>Well like I just alluded to, it was more covert in mine, my growing up years wasn't as much as in your face, there was rare examples of rare in terms of how often you would hear about it, not in how often it actually happened. There's a difference. If you lived in the South, it was daily. I was quite shocked when I was in the army from 1973 to 1976. I spent two years in the south in North Carolina. And in '76, we moved back to Portland. And I was still in the army. And we took a southern route because it was in the wintertime. And we went through the Deep South. And I was shocked, literally shocked at the living conditions of the black people in the South. I- I just couldn't believe that all the stereotypes that I had learned from television, people just talking, were true. If you're black, you lived on this side of the tracks and the poor side of town ramble shack places set up on blocks, they're falling apart. If you lived on this side of the tracks, you were white, and had mansions right out of the 'Gone with the Wind', you know these huge plantation places. And the cultural concept along, along with it is a good percentage of the whites. We're talking quiet hushed tones about blacks intimating that there's something wrong. And some went beyond that. I remember we stopped in a little town in South Carolina, because we had a break down. And the mayor of the town ran the only machine shop in town. And we needed some parts made up for our</p>	

	<p>trailer in order to fix it going. And he took a very parental attitude towards the blacks, like little children and I need to take care of and I found that shocking, you know. They think that a grown black man or woman needs to be looked after like a little child. There was two or three examples of that same thing on that trip- someday we'll talk about that, because it'll take a couple hours to tell you all of it. There was stuff going on there in the south that I never imagined was still going on. So it was really something. [mumbling] So that's what that's all about.</p>	
25:48 LA	I'll just go through a couple more questions.	
25:50 DW:	Yeah.	
25:51 LA:	How do you feel about the education system? Does it fulfill, hinder, or even a mix of both, in relation to its purpose?	
26:01 DW:	<p>I think it's grossly failing its purpose. Our young people today as a whole, if you look at all the kids in the United States, are not getting the education they deserve or need. They're coming out without basic skills in so many places in the country, how to add, how to subtract, how to write properly, how to read properly. They're just not getting the quality of education that we're capable of delivering. When I was growing up, I went to white suburban school, and didn't realize how good of an education I was getting. And when my parents divorced, I ended up moving to an inner-city school, and my grades jumped a whole letter from C average to B average, and I didn't work any harder. It's just the way they graded, and the quality of the education was less, there was worse discipline in the classrooms, the materials were much too old, you know, books were long overdue, to be, you know, recycled, and get new editions, band equipment was a poor quality. We had a high school, it was over twice the size of the high school I went to in suburbia, there was like 1400 students, we had 2900 students at my high school in this suburb in inner city. And they had six movie projectors, 16-millimeter, to show films to the school for all 2900 students. Park Rose, where I just left with half the number students had eight. They had more than enough they need. And that was the kind of differentiation you were getting in education. And now that has reached just about everybody. I mean, they're still very privileged suburban schools that do a very good job of teaching out of just sheer determination and hard work, or because they're richer districts and we've got the money to do it. But you are not getting the same level of education that I was given, at the lower level when the inner-city high school. I can't be too hard on that, because I see how well you and your brothers and sisters are doing in school. But I think it would have been harder in my day to get that same grade point average, a lot harder. A's were rare. Now it seems like they hand them out like candy. That might be a misperception on my part, but I just wish you guys had deeper roots in some of the more basics. The school's out of focus on reading, writing, arithmetic in the elementary school level. To get the basics down: you can do math in your head, that you can write in your head and put it down on paper, that you can organize a paper, you can organize a speech. They don't teach those kind of skills anymore that</p>	

<p>30:20 LA:</p> <p>30:26 DW:</p> <p>32:04 LA:</p>	<p>I'm aware of. And they get into higher levels of mathematics way too early, as far as I know. I mean, they're teaching algebra in primary school. We didn't even think about algebra until middle school, you know. And even with that my brother Jim was into math theory by the time he was out of high school, which is a college level class nowadays. So it's, you know, just depends on how you teach it.</p> <p>So, then, uh, what would you say is the purpose of education?</p> <p>The purpose of education is multi fold; there's not just one purpose. The purpose of education primarily, obviously, is to educate. But it's to prepare you to live life, and prepare you to understand life, and to prepare you to how to live life. And if you're not doing those three things in the education world, you're failing the child. And your failing society because if you can't balance a checkbook by the time you get out of high school, you're in deep doo-doo. You really are, you know. If you can't add subtract and divide and multiply with reasonable quickness, you're in trouble. I mean you- you need those skills regardless of how many computers you have. You still need the basic understanding of how those things work in order to make advantage of the tools that you have in computers. I don't begrudge them, they're nice, they're handy, but if you don't understand them and understand how they work you can get lost in them in a hurry. But you need to understand the core of the- of the- what's going on and that's what I think they should be doing is giving you a core to live life with.</p> <p>Yeah.</p>	
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