

YHR: How did you enter Yale?

JG: I should say that while I've always liked history, I came in here thinking I was going to major in city planning. My sophomore year I took City Planning 10a, which was taught by Christopher Tunnard. I worked for two summers during my undergraduate years in the planning department of Suffolk County on Long Island. But at the end of my sophomore year, they cut the major, so I switched to history. Junior year I took a two-semester course with Howard Lamar on the History of the American West, and that class really shaped my future direction.

YHR: What was your experience in the history major?

JG: The most famous professors in the History Department at that time were the Americanists. The three core people were Howard Lamar, who was the department chair when I was an undergraduate and taught Western history; Edmund Morgan, who taught colonial history and the American Revolution; and John Morton Blum, who taught twentieth-century American political history. Howard is still with us. Morgan was famous for *The Puritan Dilemma*, his biographies of Benjamin Franklin and Ezra Stiles, and also for a book called *American Slavery, American Freedom* about colonial Virginia. He was very well-known. These three professors all had great personalities and were pied pipers for the major. Even to this day, when I go to 211 HGS for a history meeting, I just feel like I'm standing on the shoulders of giants. These professors were my heroes. C. Vann Woodward taught southern history and had written a very influential book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. At the time there were southern politicians who said you can't move too fast with civil rights because segregation was so deeply ingrained in southern history. Woodward used history to show that this was not the case. We didn't know Woodward. He didn't teach undergraduates.

Although I was more interested in American history, my advisers in Calhoun College [Editor's Note: every college had a departmental adviser] were two medievalists. One was Roberto Lopez, who was very respected and did medieval economic history. I took a wonderful class with him that resonated with my interests in urban history. In one essay we read, he described the city as a crossroads within the wall, an "x" within a circle. The wall or the circle represented the idea of the city as a home, a community. That enclosure also allowed people to be free. You didn't have to pay homage to a local religious or secular lord, as the city in the course of the Middle Ages [might have] paid for the privilege of freedom. (The old German phrase was "*stadtluft macht frei*" or "city air makes you free.") That is why "citizenship" derives from the word for people who live in the city. The other defining aspect of a city was the crossroads, the "x." The "x" stood for the roads into and out of the city that brought in strangers, visitors, and goods – commerce, culture, and innovation. Lopez signed my schedule. Paul Freedman, our current medievalist, has written about Roberto Lopez. The other person who was also in Calhoun was Jeremy duQuesnay

Adams, a younger medievalist who had just recently died. He was a fountain of knowledge. We would just sit there and listen. He was immortalized by being written into the script of the Beatles' animated movie *Yellow Submarine* by a Yale Classics professor named Erich Segal [one of the screenwriters]. We all kind of knew this. Most of the classes at the time were lecture classes, but they were usually smaller. Many met in WLH. There weren't as many seminars. Some of the lecture classes attracted a lot of people. The two professors who really packed them in then were Wolfgang Leonhard, who had been an insider in the political scene of East Germany. He taught a class on the history of communism. A younger professor at that time was Cambridge-trained Jonathan Spence, who gave a big lecture class on the history of China.

The department was different in a number of ways. It was by far the most popular major at Yale. Political Science and Econ were distant cousins. Most history majors, and I was one of them, thought we would go to law school. History was good training for the law, given the emphasis on research, writing, and precedents. And we all just thought history was the kind of thing you major in. You were required to take an introductory class and had to choose between an introduction to American history, European history, or English history. There were very few classes on African history, Asian history, or Latin American history. Most classes were in European and American history. Another thing that was different was that junior seminars, which you were required to take, were for the most part year-long. The first semester focused on reading, the second on research and writing. It was assumed that one might discover and pursue an interest that carried into your senior essay. And the senior essay was relatively new when I was an undergraduate. Before that you had to take comprehensive exams (comps), oral exams, and you would be examined by people in the history department. We were all very glad to have a senior essay instead.

YHR: Who were some of your most influential professors?

JG: Howard Lamar and Ed Morgan were important to me as an undergrad and also wound up being on my dissertation committee in graduate school at Yale. For my orals, I focused on the American West and frontier history, and my related minor was American colonial history. My unrelated minor was colonial Latin America. I passed my orals with distinction. The first thing that happened was Howard Lamar, Dean of Yale College at the time, took out a bottle of bourbon and we all had a drink. And Morgan asked me a question I could talk about for an hour. And I realized I was having a conversation with these people as if they were my peers. That was a wonderful experience. These were the two most influential professors, especially at that time, for me. There are things my students see me do that I got from Howard Lamar: writing key words on the board, handouts. Howard was and still is the most genial professor you could ever have. He had no ego. I would occasionally go to his history office as an undergraduate and graduate student, thinking what are we go-

ing to talk about, I know nothing, and I'd walk in and we'd have a great conversation. And I would walk out thinking I did have something to say. And then I'd realize an hour later that all the ideas had come from him and he had made me think they were mine. What a gift. He always said he learned from his students. I loved his attitude. I have wanted to be like him. I took Ed Morgan's class as a first-year graduate student. We'd meet in his office. He would give you great comments and was genuinely funny and unassuming. I learned in his class how to read seventeenth-century English script. He wanted to make sure you had specificity, a solidly grounded knowledge of the past. He would give us little problems like, "How much did a minister make in colonial New England?" Finding the answer was not an easy task – it required a real knowledge of the sources.

The first really popular class I taught was "The Suburbanization of America," which was a follow-through of my interest in urban history. I taught it for fifteen years. (I have always been more interested in social and cultural history than political history.) Following Ed Morgan's emphasis on specificity, I used to talk about gas stations. I would ask why do they call it a gas pump? (Answer: in the beginning, it was an actual pump.) At first, gas stations put their pumps alongside the curb. Why was this a problem? People trying to pump gas would line up and block the flow of traffic, so one guy had the bright idea (a man named C.H. Laessig in St. Louis in 1905 though others say it was a Gulf station in Pittsburgh in 1913) of breaking the curb and having cars pull in off the road. That innovation led ultimately to shopping centers and malls.

YHR: How was the history major changed?

JG: I think Yale students have always been interested in history – they're curious, they're intellectual, they want to work, they want to learn. But they also are thinking about the future – what is my career track. One thing that has changed is so many then were not science majors or pre-med, but rather were pre-law. History then, as it is now, was the major that made the most sense for people thinking about law school (in my opinion). You do research, you document, you learn how to think about actions in context. You need to know how to be a good writer and a good speaker on your feet. History also seemed like one of those solid things that any truly educated, wise person would want to know. If you were interested in foreign countries and the cultures of different places, you studied their history. Nowadays I think more people are interested in economics because they feel like that's something they need to do to get a leg up, which we didn't think or care about, and poli sci because the perception is that it is a better path for people interested in government service. But it wasn't true back then. So many people in government had been history majors. That seemed to be the more appropriate pathway. We felt it was the perspective of history that gives you a deeper understanding – for example, knowing how the British shaped Iraq into a country helps us to understand the situation in that region today.

YHR: Why are students so drawn to Yale and America?

JG: The class seems to have a pretty decent reputation. But I think a lot of it has to do with Yale which is, after all, a four-letter word with a kind of magic about it. You get here and you have old wonderful buildings, but what is it? People are intensely curious. Who are famous alumni? Many students want to attach themselves to that history and hook onto the legends, the traditions. I think there is still a hungering not just to know about the past, but to be part of a broader tradition. I think that's part of it. I think it's enhanced for this generation because people have to do so much – there's so much self-promotion out there. How do I get into Yale, do this, do that? I think there is a real deep longing to be connected to something with a past. What is this place? It isn't simply demographically diverse, it's also multigenerational and stretches back in time. There's something comforting about that – like the words of The Whiffenpoof Song – “we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest.” I get a lot of students whose parents or grandparents went here, but I also get so many foreign students and first-generation college students. Students don't necessarily want to be the way old Yale was, but they are curious to know what it was like and how it has changed. And honestly, I've been here for such a long time, I've seen a lot of those changes, so it's fun to teach. I get to hear great stories from people like Howard Lamar and Sam Chauncey and pass them on – with a few of my own – to a new generation of Yalies.