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Tharin, J Cotter (geology) Oral History Interview: Science Professors at Hope College

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BW:  What brought you to Hope?

CT:  Sometime in 1964 or 1965, I can't remember, Dwight Smith, who had been at Wesleyan University in Connecticut with me and who had come out here to the chemistry department, called me on the phone and asked me if I would be interested in starting a geology department at Hope College. I said that was an interesting possibility. So we talked about it a little bit. The next thing I knew I got a call from Morrie Ryder who was the dean at the time. Morrie said that he was coming to New York and he asked if I would like to meet him. It was either New York or Washington, I think it was Washington. He was going to Washington and asked me if I would like to meet him and so I went down there for lunch. We had a nice conversation about what was necessary for a department and philosophical objectives and so forth. The next thing I knew I got invited to come out here. I had a very nice visit to campus and met a lot of the people in the sciences. Never did meet the president at that time. Then I was asked to come out again and meet Cal Vander Werf, who was then president. We hit it off fairly well, and the next thing I knew, I had a job offer. So I still had a year to go on a contract at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, but they were very kind to let me out of that contract so I could come out here and start the department. Before I got here, Hope had received a large grant from the Sloan Foundation, and Cal asked me if I would mind being chairman or director to oversee that grant. I said, "No, I don't have any problem with that." I think the reason that he did that was because he didn't want the chemists and the
physicists and the biologists fighting each other, and geology wasn't in the grant. So I did that. The first semester that I was here I did nothing but essentially order equipment and write letters and order maps and do all sorts of things that we had to have to start the department. Which is sort of an interesting experience because you get to order everything new. After that, I taught one course the second semester of that year, which I think was '66, it was either '65 or '66. I think it was the spring semester of '65-'66 that I taught the first geology course. I had a pretty good turnout. I had about 50-60 people. Then we started looking for another staff member and eventually hired William French. I forget where Bill was, I think he was with one of the oceanographic services at the time. Bill came in and we were a two-man department for several years. Then we hired Bob Reinking in 1970 or thereabouts. Bob then made the third person in the department. Bill French left and then we hired John Anderson who was finishing his Ph.D. at Florida State at the time. John's work was in the arctic and he could teach a variety of things, so John came in for years. Then he left and we replaced John with Dr. Rena Bonem, who is now at Baylor. Rena stayed for a few years, then she left and we hired Tim Hulst. Tim Hulst stayed for two of three years and then left. So Reinking and I were sort of the people who were here all the time. I hope I am not forgetting anyone, but I think the next person was then Kodjo, Dr. Attoh. We hired Attoh and John Bartley because we had gotten permission to go to the fourth person. So we were four people for a while. Now Bartley is leaving and we've hired a one year replacement for Kodjo, so we sort of have a musical chairs thing here with Attoh and Ed Hansen who was hired in that
latest time frame. Let's see Attoh and Hansen and John Bartley were hired, and then Bartley is leaving and now a man by the name of Richard Batt is coming in to serve as a one-year replacement because Attoh is going on a one-year sabbatical. So we are now a three man department again. I have to look that chronology up to make sure of dates and stuff.

BW: I came across a little bit of that in the Archives. A lot of that is in the catalogs. Had there anything here to start geology on?

CT: No there had never been any geology taught. I think there had been some geography taught, but no geography major or minor. Just some courses.

BW: Geology was just a German professor or something. Hine, or something?

CT: Brenner Hine.

BW: How do you build a department from scratch, just order all the equipment and that's about it?

CT: Well, you do that, and you try to attract as many students as you can.

BW: How do you go about that?

CT: You give high grades (laughs). I don't know. If the subject is timely and they like it and there are jobs, then you can attract them. Right now, for example, we are in a slump as far as majors are concerned, because the job market has been thin. But because of that, today is probably the best time to major in geology. Right now to be a freshman would be great. What is going to happen, what is already happening, is that graduate school enrollments are down, the oil companies in a couple of years and other people who hire graduate degree geologists, those people are going to say,
"What the hell is going on here? Where are all the people? I need people." That will eventually filter back down, and the programs will all crank up again to large numbers of graduating seniors. Then we will go through the same thing again. Geology is very cyclical. We have some years were you just can't find enough people and undergraduates are hired even. Most of the time, however, you have to go in for a graduate degree.

BW: How would you say the equipment was? How do we compare to other schools?

CT: Very well. I think the geology department has all of the equipment that it needs. You have to add things occasionally, but we have all the equipment that we need to do the program that we want to do. Certainly if we have someone who wants to do something in geophysics or geochemistry, we have a great variety of equipment that those students and staff can call upon if the sequencing and the timing can be worked out. So we have no problems in that regard at all. As a matter of fact, I think the college has provided financially for this department very well. We could use more library resources for example.. We could probably use some increase in the budget, but all in all I never thought that the college did poorly by us. When Sheldon Wettack was dean, we really didn't share in the capitol equipment pie the way we should have, but since Irwin Brink has been dean, he has been very helpful in so far as he can be helpful. I always felt that Wettack put most of his money into chemistry and physics.

BW: How important was Vander Werf to the sciences?

CT: Cal was extremely important. I am sure you will hear that from everyone.

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sort of a strange man is some respects. He was very cordial, very genteel. He had inroads into a number of high places in the National Science Foundation and so forth. He had a national reputation which was deserved. I always felt that Cal was very supportive. Cal's problems were that Cal was too sensitive. He let people bother him too much. When people said things against him -- and he had a lot of people who were against him because he came in and really tried to turn the college around. There is just no two ways about it. He took Hope College from a college that was somewhat sleepy and backward and tried to make it into a first rate liberal arts college. I don't think Hope was anywhere near as strong a college before Cal came here as it was after he left. He enlarged the faculty. He enlarged the student body. He built dormitories. He got large amounts of money. Half a million dollars or more for the sciences and various grants. Two grants alone, the Sloan Foundation which when I administered it, it was $375,000, and we got another large grant at the same time, Scientific Instructional Equipment Program of about $175,000. Cal was extremely instrumental in the development of the sciences at Hope. I don't think that we can say that in the last fifteen years that we have moved ahead as rapidly because of the administrative efforts as we did in the previous ten.

BW: Was any of that at the expense of humanities, like he has been accused of?

CT: No. You have to remember, any good college president or any good department chairman or dean of the sciences had to take advantage of the monies that were out there nationally. So that the monies that were being spent on the sciences were not monies that were diverted from the humanities or social sciences. Those were funds,
by and large, that came out of Washington or the Sloan Foundation or something. So I think that is a bum rap. I don’t think the humanities and the social sciences were being held back by Vander Werf at all. They were held back by themselves. I think personally that they lacked a national lobby, they didn’t have the ability to get large grants nationally, and so that hurt them. If anything the amount of money that came from the National Science Foundation and elsewhere, freed up money for the humanities and the social sciences. Because if we had not gotten those funds, the sciences would have been raising hell about that, well not about that, but trying to get a larger part of that pie. So, no, I think the national monies that came could only have been helpful to the social sciences.

BW: He kind of left under a cloud when he left here.

CT: No one could ever quite determine what that was. I think the main reason...Cal could have stayed, but the problem really was that Cal’s health was bad. Emotionally, he had let that whole business of people who were detractors, he let those people get to him instead of telling them to buzz off and not worry about it. I don’t think he left under a cloud. I think he could have stayed, let’s just put it that way. He had done more for the college, from a physical point of view and from a monetary point of view, than any other president the college had ever had. The problem was that he took people in humanities and social sciences and started kicking butt. He said, "Listen, in a modern liberal arts college, faculty do research, faculty do research with students, faculty do these kinds of things." One of the people whose name is probably well known to everybody, simply said, "My research is reading the Wall Street
Journal everyday." There was a lot of that kind of feeling on the faculty. He made it possible for people in the humanities, for example, to go back to graduate school and complete their Ph.D. We had people here who didn't have a Ph.D in the humanities and social sciences. Cal made it possible for some of those people to go back and get a degree. As a matter of fact, one of his greatest detractors, he paid for this guy to go back and he didn't get his degree. And, of course, somehow or other he started dumping on Vander Werf.

BW: Van Wylen, when he came in, did he continue Vander Werf's policies, or was there a big change?

CT: I think that the big change was that Van Wylen tried to move Hope in the direction of being another Calvin, religiously. Van Wylen is operating under a little different set-up. He came in at a time when National Science Foundation monies, for example, were more hard to obtain, and other money in support of the sciences were more hard to obtain. He has not done as well as Vander Werf, but the reason is not necessarily his. He has been a fairly effective fundraiser, you have got to hand him that. I think that the college is one heck of a lot less interesting today than it was when Cal was here. As a matter of fact, I think it is kind of boring. I think that the faculty is boring. The students are always fun. The student body--it's really interesting. When Cal was here, we had far more members of the Reformed Church and a more liberal faculty. Now we have a far more Catholic, if you will, student body, meaning coming from many backgrounds--we have a far more diversified student body and a far more conservative faculty. I don't know if that is good or bad. That is the way it
BW: Do you still rely on grants a lot today? Do they come in at all?

CT: There are not as many, so what we have found I think, and I don't know if this is the same in the other departments, but I think that we've had to rely more on the college for funding than we did earlier. We had a pile of money to spend earlier. With the Sloan Grant and the COSIP Grant and some of the other grants that we've had, we had a pot that we could draw on.

BW: How about student placement?

CT: In what respect?

BW: Graduate school.

CT: We've had no problem with that. None whatsoever. We've put our kids in Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cal Tech, Stanford.

BW: So is Hope gaining a reputation?

CT: I hope so. The trouble is, you just don't send one kid to Stanford--I think we've had two--but you don't send one kid to Stanford and gain a reputation. You know what I mean? That kid takes a few classes and those profs, half of them don't know where you came from anyway. So I wouldn't say we've gained a reputation. I'd put it a different way. Chemistry has been able to do that over a hundred years or whatever. So they have a little edge. But what it does tell us is we've been able to have our kids accepted to those places and none of them have ever flunked out. They've all gotten their graduate degrees that they went after. What it tells us is that first of all, those schools recognize quality when they see it. And hopefully, because those kids have
been able to stay and produce, they obviously haven't been trained too badly. When we did our departmental review last year, I got a whole bunch of letters back from graduates and they all pointed out that the education they got at Hope, and they were geology majors, particularly in geology that it was a quality education, that they were well prepared for graduate school. I think some of them said they wished we had been a little more chicken with them about their writing. One of the things that we started early was a course in what we call today "geo-writing." No other discipline on campus had a course in writing for their own students. We've been pretty hard on the kids. When they do exams, they lose points if they don't express themselves in a way that we can understand. Certainly on papers and things like that, we've been fairly chicken about they way, well, at least some of us have, about the way that they present themselves. With a course in geo-writing, also is a course in speaking, because they have to present their papers orally.

BW: I recall there have been a lot of field trips in the past. Is that still important?

CT: Oh yes. Geology is still, I won't say largely a field science, but geology is still a field science. A lot of the information that we find out, of course, is in the field, not only from collecting rocks, but it's from carefully mapping areas to find out what has gone on. Field trips have been a very important part of our program, and they're also a very important part of our budget. Of course we have other things like geology in Colorado and those sorts of things. Those are sort of fun courses. They're 101 type courses in the field. Every year we have a spring field trip where we go someplace like the northern or southern Appalachians, or the Gulf Coast, the Rocky Mountains,
or what have you. That has been important for us. And it's been well received.

BW: What do you see for the future of the department?

CT: As soon as we get enrollment set, then we'll start haranguing the Dean for another man or woman. But until we get our major enrollments back up...Our lower level enrollments are very good--we won't be able to add to our faculty. As a matter of fact, I was just looking...this year, we have six incoming freshmen who say they're coming here to major in geology. Five of them have G.P.A's in high school above 3.6, so we're very gratified with that. One has a 2.78 from Saugatuck, but he looks very interesting. I spoke to a lot of very interesting kids on the phone. Now when the numbers of majors are down, maybe that idea that's, "Boy, geology is the place to go now, because there aren't too many people in the program." Maybe that's getting down to the high schools. It's exciting to see that many bright kids are interested in geology. Usually, most of our majors don't come from high school kids who want to be geology majors. Chemistry gets those kinds of kids. Biology gets those kinds of kids, particularly pre-med. Physics gets those kinds of kids. But geology has always really depended largely on the introductory course to sort of entice people to say, "Hey, I think I'll take one more course there because it's sort of interesting." If they have a scientific bent anyway. A lot of kids do, but they get turned off somewhere in the ninth grade or tenth grade area. They don't want to do that anymore. I think because it's too hard. I really believe that's largely the problem, that the sciences require a lot more contact, I think more hard work, work of a different kind. If you're an English major, for example, you have to read some stuff and you have to
write a little bit. Those are things you have been doing since you were a little first
grader. But the sciences just require an entirely different kind of attack. When kids
get to college, they say, "Oh God, I have to take three labs a week. I don't have any
time off. All of our friends are drinking beer, coffee, or yahoing around the dorms
or whatever they do. The science kids are in lab." We lose a lot of jocks because of
that too. Jocks who would probably like to be science majors but they've got all of
these damn labs, and the labs often times cannot be scheduled so that they don't
interfere with practice. At Hope we're stressing athletics way, way, way too much.
It's just really getting on my nerves. Well, see, I played college football, and I played
college baseball. But dammit, I had to do what was required in courses. No coach of
mine would ever call up a prof and say, "Let old Tharin out of lab today because
we've got a game." I might ask him, "Can I make this lab up?" but no coach would
do it. I get calls all of the time from coaches, saying, "So-and-so can't go on that
Saturday field trip because of football." And I'm saying, "What the heck is he here
for?" For me, personally, it's grating on my nerves.

BW: I came across a thing in the Archives. Godfrey, the chemistry teacher, held a couple
students back from basketball, and the students threatened to strike back in the '20s
over that. He said he ran into a thing with Jack Schouten.

CT: I think it's a problem now. We've made winning the All-Sports Trophy too
important. And this is a lousy league. You win something in this league you haven't
won anything. Look what happens just when we go play basketball with other good
schools in this area. We get whumped. But anyway, that's another story. We don't
get as many jocks as majors as we should. I think that may be true in the sciences just because of the demands of labs particularly.

BW: Do you recall when or who the first graduate was for geology?

CT: No. When? Every once in awhile I see a list of that. I know who a few of the first ones were but I don't know who was first. Linda Provo was a classics major who took a geology course from me, liked it, and became a geology major. She now has her Ph.D. and works for an oil company. A boy by the name of Jerry Cripe, I think Jerry got his Ph.D. He was a chemistry major, and was going to drop out of Hope. Jerry took a geology course and liked it. He eventually went on to Arizona State and worked on moon rocks and so forth, and got his Ph.D. in geochemistry. Gosh, who else? I can name a whole bunch of the early ones, but I can't think of who were the first ones. Those two kids were among the first ones for sure. Linda Provo, she's very good. I should have a list of that somewhere. I wonder where that is. You've raised my interests now.

BW: How has council worked in with teaching?

CT: City council? It hasn't had anything to do with it one way or the other.

BW: Has that been a pretty good experience, though?

CT: Oh yes, I've enjoyed it very much. As a matter of fact, it has been interesting from the point of view that I've been able, on several occasions, to bring my experience in geology to figure on problems that the city has, particularly with land use and some of those kinds of things. I think it has been a very positive experience. I think that I've been able to add something of a positive nature to the city. (Finds paper) This is
1970, looks like although there's no date on there, but it looks like 1970. Holy mackerel, we've picked up people fast. Jerry Cripe and Ernie Otto was the other one. Ernie went on to, where did he go? I think he went to one of the schools in Arizona. No, he didn't. He went to the University of Utah. He was their top incoming freshman in the Master's Degree program. You know, they take tests. He scored the highest, and he was only about a 2.75 here. His geology may have been a little higher, but his cumulative wasn't terribly good. We were very happy when Ernie went on because when Ernie went on to grad school and did so well we figured, hmm, maybe we're doing it right.

BW: Those were the first two?

CT: Yes, those were the first two. Jerry Cripe and Ernie Otto.

BW: That was in '70?

CT: Yes, it must have been. We had seven graduates in '71. In '72 we had eleven. That was a good year. None in '73, it looks like. Two in '74, and a whole column and a half in '75. That many? One got a Ph.D. and one got a Master's. Ernie got a Master's in '70. '71, we had, let me look at these for a minute, Chris Harris. I don't know what happened to Chris Harris. He was a candle maker for awhile. He was never going to be a geologist, I don't think. He just enjoyed it and figured why not take geology rather than psychology or something. Jonathan Fuller that year went on to get an M.S. and now works for Ohio Survey. Linda Provo was in that class of '71. Paul Hilbelink in that class went on and got a Master's, and is a consulting geologist. Ross Mack, also in that class, actually went on to become an Episcopalian
priest.

**BW:** Interesting use.

**CT:** I think he has left the priesthood now, and is getting a Master's in geological engineering at Valpo. Jim Schipper is the only guy that ever dropped. Well, there's two of them. He dropped out of grad school. Cal Van Holland went to grad school. So that class of '71, six of the seven went to grad school. In the '72 class, John Dykstra has a Ph.D. Doris Getty. I just saw her, she got married. She married a banker so she didn't have to go to grad school. John Heinsus went on to grad school and now works for an oil company. Jan Ouellette got married. Rod Schipper, I don't know what happened to him. Bob Houghton has his Ph.D. Jo Peterson has a Master's from Cal Tech. Phil Russell is a photographer for a newspaper in Grand Haven, I think. Bob Zelinsky has a big job with an oil company. Roy Augustine is in town. Let's see, six out of eleven went on to grad school, one Ph.D. The next year, '74, we only had two graduates. One went to grad school and is working for an oil company, the other one, I don't know what happened to John. I think he's the manager of a Burger King or something. He was the manager of Burger King while he was here. Nice guy, but...In '75, we had six who went on to grad school out of eleven. So it's the same as two years before. That's interesting. '76, Kathy Kolenko. What happened to Kathy? She lives in Holland. There's one Master's degree. Mary Hill went to Princeton. I don't know if she got a Ph.D. or not. John Klanky, I think he went to graduate school. Look at them all. Jan got a Master's degree. Morehouse got a Master's. Shepley, she got a Master's. Greg Slenk, I don't
know. Jim Sloane got a Master's. Vis got a Master's. Van Dyke got a Master's. John Van Vories is a wealthy farmer. Wheeler got a Master's. Bob Wood, I don't know. So out of that class, almost all of them, maybe seven of them got Master's degrees. As a matter of fact, it looks to me like considerably more than fifty percent of our kids have gone on for the graduate degree. In '77, Cathy Bubinsky has her MS. This guy got a Ph.D. at Temp, Yale. So anyway, a lot of good ones. There she is, Cathy Quivela, got her Ph.D. at the University of Washington. Now she's in the Scandinavian countries doing something. We've had it pretty good. Mariaane Walek from that same class got her Ph.D. in geophysics at Cal Tech. She's now doing secret work for the Atomic Energy Commission. We've got a married couple that both have...She's a geochemist and he's at Shell. We've had some good kids. I'm glad you asked that question. It's funny though, you know, someone like, here's a boy, Doug Burns. I know he teaches. Some of these you just lose track of. I ought to keep this on my desk and look at it periodically.

BW: I don't have anything else, unless you have anything to add.

CT: No. You see, our programming has to be changed now because we don't have the number of majors that we want, so it really creates problems with the upper level courses. We have to offer courses in alternate years and all that kind of stuff. But this is a national problem, it's not a Hope College problem. There are only a couple schools who have their enrollments up--Carleton College in Minnesota is one. But I think that that's all that has changed. The whole national program is going to turn around. It's interesting, we've had weaker students in the last five years, or the last
seven years, than we had originally. I wonder why that is. I think the sciences, right across the border, are having some problems right now. You see, we have an unusual group of students today. They're lazy as hell as a group. Students want something for nothing, and they don't want to work. That's just not the way it is. If you ask students to do something, even majors, they whine. The thing is, then you end up with students who are not as well prepared as you would like. You chase students away because they go, "Oh God, it's so hard." Chemistry and physics, particularly if you're not mathematically inclined, it is difficult. If you have trouble with physics, then you better not be a chemist, it seems like to me. If you can do the quantitative work, then you can get by. In geology we're not quite as quantitative. Or you are in geophysics or geochemistry. But on just the general courses that we teach, like mineralogy and petrology, and so forth, we're not quite as quantitative, or demand as much in the way of rigorous chemical or physical treatment as you would in chemistry or physics. But still, you generally attract a student who's just a little less quantitative. That's not strictly true, but it is common. I think biology can say the same thing. But when you get kids who are really not particularly interested in working or thinking, then you do have a problem if you try to be rigorous. So we're always caught between a rock and a hard place. In the early days, prior to 1980, we just didn't have those kinds of questions from students. They realized that being rigorous was part of their training. But kids today coming out of high school are just not in that mind set. Very interesting. They look oftentimes for something that is easier. Serves them right, I guess. It's a shame on bright ones though. Students, by
and large, have the feeling that something is owed to them, that they don’t have to work. Learning is not necessarily easy. Abigail Adams said something to the effect that "Learning is not like manna from heaven. It must be earned." I have always felt that that is true, for most of us.

BW: That's nice.

CT: Oh God, wouldn't that be nice, is right. I was never that way. I always had to work like the devil, and give up a lot in order to do it. I don't think that was necessarily bad, but I just wish the Good Lord had given me twenty more points on my I.Q. so I wouldn't have to do that.

BW: I guess that's about it.

(End of interview)