Victor Strecher

February 4, 2003

Fred Honhart,
interviewer

Honhart: This is Fred Honhart and I'm with Vic Strecher. It is February 4, 2003. As you can see, we've got a tape recorder here. Do you we have your permission to tape this?

Strecher: Yes, you have.

Honhart: Good. If you could start out just giving some of your background, where you were born and raised.

Strecher: Like Ralph [Turner], I was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, actually spent about eight of my years on Pewaukee Lake, and then moved to Milwaukee and attended the public schools through high school and then attended the University of Wisconsin Extension in Milwaukee as a chemistry student for almost two years.

My folks were both factory workers, immigrants from Slovenia and Hungary, and my dad was a welder and my mother was an inspector of electrical parts at Globe Union. My dad worked on airplane engines during World War II and all of that, so we had some connection with the war effort.

We lived on the north side, whereas Ralph lived on the west side of the city. He went to Washington High School and I went to Rufus King High School, but my wife went to Washington some years after Ralph did. We're about fifteen years' different in age.

Honhart: What's your birth date?

Strecher: July 29, '31, and just about fifteen years, half a generation separated us. I went to Madison, after being a chemistry student, to be a music student. I'd been studying music, privately scratching a few bucks together here and there in Milwaukee, with an old composer and a choral conductor and a sax player, who once played with [Stan] Kenton, and things like that.

So I majored in music at Wisconsin in Madison—starving—spring semester of '51, and that's how I got to find my way to Ralph. What happened, I took all my classes in Bascom Hall up on the hill, or in Music Hall at the bottom of that hill, and I lived in a two-dollar-a-week room across from the railroad tracks, and on my way to school, I would walk past a row of buildings on State Street, one of which was the Wisconsin State Crime Lab. It was just a storefront lab with paint up to about chin level, so I would walk past and I'd look in at these guys.

Back then I was just a total musician. I went in one day and I said, "What are you cats doing here?" you know, like some dance musician. [Laughs]

They said, "Well, we analyze evidence." I met the head of the lab, who was named Wilson, and he showed me around. He was very cordial, and he knew I was a student.

I said, "How do you get to be one of these?"

He said, "Well, old Doc Matthews, the head of the chemistry department here, trained a few people, but the person he trained the most highly is over at Michigan State, but why don't you go and see Doc. He might take you on since you've had two years of chem." So I did, and he was in his office and he showed me through his lab, all of the instruments that he himself had developed that, later, Ralph acquired, in fact, wanted to put on display here on the campus, and that didn't

work out. But he showed me his comparison microscope and he showed me his little camera that goes over a developed fingerprint with an internal light source, and demonstrated all these.

I asked him if he would take me on through the rest of my chemistry degree and if I could become his apprentice, and he said "I would, but I'm going on a sabbatical for two years and it's a retirement sabbatical, and I'm going to spend as much of it in Europe as I can, but here." Gave me Ralph Turner's name, address, and phone number. So I wrote a letter, not expecting—you know, I didn't know anything at that time. So I wrote a letter saying that I'd be interested in working with Ralph, and he immediately—I mean, I don't think a week passed—he immediately sent me an application for Michigan State [University], and a nice letter, and invited me to come over. He said, "Get your transcripts and so forth." Well, I did, right away.

This was 1951, and it was late spring. Michigan State had an enormous influx of veterans at that time. They were jammed in everywhere, the married housing complexes and the Quonset huts, all the rest of it.

So I stayed in touch with Ralph and asked if I was going to be accepted, because I hadn't gotten an acceptance. So he said, "Come on over."

So I packed my one suitcase and got on a bus and came to East Lansing. I got off the bus and walked across to the campus with my suitcase and went into the administration building, and they said, "Yes, you have been accepted." They directed me to the College of Business and Public Service, and Dean Weingarten [phonetic] was in charge at that time. They had an acceptance for me and they said, "You have to stay in a dormitory. Go to Philips Hall," and all the rest of that. So I did that, and then I walked over to the Quonset huts, where I was directed, and met Ralph for the first time, during registration week of the fall term. We had quarters then. So I met him, I took

his criminalistics investigation courses and others, fingerprint course for one credit, everything he offered.

Honhart: What was he like as a teacher?

Strecher: Of course, because of his speech impediment, he was a very deliberate, careful teacher, and his style of delivery was not especially liked by a lot of students. They would get impatient. He would hang up on a word and he would then get out a cigar. Today that would be unthinkable, but he'd get out a cigar and he'd handle it a little bit and sometimes he'd light it, if he really got hung up.

Well, the impediment, over the years, really changed a great deal. Back then it was still a little bit severe. He told me at one time, when he took over the Kansas City Crime Lab in 1938, It think it was, or started it, really, initiated it, I've been told, he told me he could barely speak at all. It was very hard for him to communicate, and sometimes on the witness stand that was difficult. But by this time—he used to tell me, "Well, at one time, I couldn't talk and now I make my living talking," and he was quite proud of the fact that he had beaten it.

But I was one of those who thought, "Well, he does take a long time to say things, but he is the most thorough preparer." I'll tell you how thorough. I took police records management from him, and a lot of students would say, "Ah, that stuff." Ten years later, in 1962, I was assistant director of planning in the St. Louis Police Department, and we had to redo our entire record system. We were going to move into new quarters and computerize it. Everything that Ralph taught in 1952, spring, worked ten years later in St. Louis. Every single thing. Master name index files, numbers connected with alphabetic file. Everything. All the principles he taught were

absolutely germane to what I did, and it ended up with a fifty-four-page project in the procedures manual, how to run the records bureau, and it was about half Ralph Turner. Just astonishing how well he had taught me because I just plain remembered what he had taught me.

Among teachers, Bob Scott, of course, was the philosopher lawyer, and he was entertaining, he was popular, he was glib.

Honhart: Lots of puns.

Strecher: Yes, oh, yes, pun master.

Honhart: Exactly.

Strecher: He got off some puns that were unbelievably quick and could not have been forethought. Astonishing mind. But that's not Ralph.

Honhart: No.

Strecher: But years later, my reflection was that I may have used Bob's ethical teachings a great deal and, perhaps, humanistic outlook, but I used Ralph's knowledge much more. So they influenced students in totally different ways. Ralph, what he taught was so principled and grounded in reality that it all stayed. The investigation course, I can deal with criminal investigation today from the notebook that I wrote in his course. It's as good as most of what we see in the textbooks.

Of course, he had us do a lot of practical work, and he taught us about firearms. He would bring all kinds of guns to the class, which today you'd have a furor over something like that. But we'd go to a range and fire some and he'd show how the FBI teaches quick loading and things like that. He taught us about the practical pistol course versus target shooting.

His breadth of knowledge was astonishing. Everywhere he went, he learned something, and he went everywhere he could. He had a list at one time of nineteen or twenty things he wanted to do in his lifetime, and I once saw the list, but it's been so many years. But one of the things was Machu Picchu, and that was way back before it became a tourist attraction. He wanted to see China very much, and he wanted to see Polynesia. He wanted to see South America, Australia, Africa, and the Middle East. But that was just one item. He wanted at see the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, for instance.

Honhart: You'd have a little problem with that one.

Strecher: He wrote these things at some point in his life out of intense curiosity to see what is that really like. So he had the list and he may have scratched some of them off, but my feeling is that he probably got most of them. He was pretty persistent about getting to China and getting back to China. He wanted the mainland so badly, but he took Taiwan as a substitute two or three times, and then finally got to the mainland.

Back to—I realize I've strayed way off Ralph as a teacher, but, you know, we were in those Quonset huts and they were connected to the campus police station, because Art was the chief of the campus police as well as having the school. So our offices were right there and we would see

each other all the time. One thing Ralph didn't do, he didn't forget about students once they graduated.

Honhart: That's my next question.

Strecher: He always stayed in touch with people and remembered who they were and what they were doing and was always interested in how they were doing. So on the campus police, when I made sergeant, he—

Honhart: Okay, let me clarify. You went from graduating from MSU and then joined the campus police?

Strecher: I did.

Honhart: That's my assumption.

Strecher: I did. Los Angeles PD [Police Department] at that time was advertising that they wanted educated people from all over the country, and my field training partner, Charlie Eggleer, and I both wrote them letters, to personnel, and never got a response. Charlie went with the Department of Corrections, I went with the campus police because I wanted some immediate experience. Actually, I got to do things I wouldn't have got to do in a big city department for several years. I got a detective assignment in which I worked on a homicide and several sexual assaults, and some serious drug things.

Honhart: Here on campus?

Strecher: Yes, all on campus, or involving the campus in some way. For instance, there was a gang of people who were stripping cars and stealing cars and they were working out of Laingsburg. I was on detective duty at that time, so I got to work on a stolen-car ring, a car-stripping ring, and this was four or five people out there in a ramshackle house. One night I'm tailing them there, at my lieutenant's direction, and I get stuck in a ditch and they come out of the house and I thought, "Oh boy." Well, our radio in the plain car was in the glove compartment, so they come by and they say, "Hey, buddy, can we help?" They helped me get my car out there, and about three months later, we arrested them, after we had compiled everything. They looked at me and said, "Hey, you're the guy—." But that's a different story, too.

But, yes, back then, field service training was three semesters long. After you finished all of your academic work, you had to go—have you heard any of this before?

Honhart: No, go ahead.

Strecher: Ralph said, more than once, that the major difference between Michigan State's program and any other program in the country was that every student who completed the degree had nine months of intensive exposure to every agency in criminal justice. Now, that sounds exaggerated, but we would spend between one and four weeks, four weeks with a state police post, living at the post, two weeks with a sheriff's department, a total, probably, of two or three months in Detroit with various segments of the Detroit PD, Recorder's Court. We had to be assigned to a court, to

the Liquor Control Commission, to a retail credit investigative agency, to an industrial security plant—I was with Oldsmobile for two weeks on that—with a fire marshal, a major prison for a month, a youth facility. Altogether, if you look at the whole thing, you looked at everything at the front end of the justice process, juvenile and adult, police, city, county, state, and federal, we all went to the Secret Service or the FBI or one of those. I went to three. I went to U.S. Bureau of Narcotics, U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tax, and Secret Service.

So we got a view of the local, state, and federal agencies in enforcement. Then we saw the courts. We spent a week with the prosecuting attorneys' office to see what they do. Then we went to the juvenile and adult probation, and parole offices, and at least two prisons and several jails. Well, you can imagine how that was for us. You suddenly have a fairly realistic idea of how the whole system works.

Ralph always said that's the difference between Michigan State and these schools where they crank students through four years of classroom work and out into the field, and you've got to decide, without any real knowledge, whether you want to be a cop or go into the law or corrections work or juvenile work. We had a fair idea, after going through all of that, and I think our people went into every one of those kinds of agencies. Everything I just named, I think, people went into, including, you know, Gordon Kettler [phonetic], who was very big. He started in plant security—I'm going to get the company wrong—with a major automotive company, and he's now a major contributor to the program. He's a vice president for security and something else. Anyway, he started that way. Two heads of the U.S. Secret Service came through the program, you know. Things like that. The head of the U.S narcotics bureau.

I look at that and I think this thing was something they put together, between Art and Ralph, because Ralph was his true sidekick. He was Sancho Panza all the way. But I asked Ralph a couple times, "Haven't you ever wanted to run it?"

He said, "No, actually not." Well, that became my ambition, to run a program, but Ralph said, "No, I'm doing the things that I think are important and Art does what he thinks is important, and I help him all I can." And he was satisfied with that role all through his career. He knew what he wanted to be and he was that. But he turned out to be one other thing, and, again, I'm straying here. I think we'll have to get back to it later. He became the host for the school. I don't think it was ever explicit. I don't think Art ever said that this would be good. It came out of Ralph's natural proclivity to get to know people and to enjoy their company and to want to eat and drink with them.

But I guess you started this with where I came from, so we pretty much have that.

Honhart: When you came here to MSU, what year was that?

Strecher: '51, September.

Honhart: Ralph had been involved, I know from my work on him, with alcohol research. Was he still doing that or had he finished that when you came here?

Strecher: Had not at all finished it. He was doing it, and in '53, as a member of the campus police, I was actually involved in driving home his subjects. He used a lot of police officers from surrounding agencies as alcohol testing subjects. I remember a lot of East Lansing officers, some

Lansing, some state police. He never used students; he used police officers who could give informed consent. In going through the experiments and doing the tests and everything, they would get pretty plastered. Ralph was careful to inform their spouses that this was going on, and I had to take these guys and had to help them get up to their door in many cases. The fact that I was in uniform, he thought, would help, and it did. We'd explain, "He's been in this experiment and we just want to be sure—," because we'd get them to Ralph's lab and we'd get them back home.

So I watched this with great interest and I would watch them doing the tests, the mirror tracings and the brake-pedal test response time and all of that, reaction time, and I thought it was great work. I realized what was going on. At that time, he and his friend, close friend, Bob Borkenstein at Indiana University, were both doing this kind of work and they were trying to correlate volumetric results from breath, from urine, and from blood, to see how they compare with degree of impairment, because obviously there are some differences in where the alcohol is at various times after ingestion. Borkenstein invented the Breathalyzer and became quite rich from that. Ralph did a lot of the work that went into that sort of thing, and never went for any kind of a commercial side of it at all, which is an interesting thing about him. "Borkie" did. Borkie just died two weeks ago, three weeks ago. Long retired from Indiana. But, yes, the alcohol work was great work.

Many years later, I'm now at Sam Houston State University as dean of the College of Criminal Justice there, and we have fifty Saudi Arabian students, okay? We're training them for the highway patrol, and it's a two-and-a-half-year project. This was a big program. I hired another graduate of MSU, who had been head of investigations for AID for twelve years and then retired from that, Paul Shields.

Honhart: Oh, yes.

Strecher: You know about Paul?

Honhart: I've met him, I think. He came here for the—

Strecher: For the opening.

Honhart: Right. Exactly.

Strecher: Sure. Well, Paul, I hired him to run the program because it was a big thing, and we had a big segment on alcohol because it is such a problem in Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to be a dry country, but when they drink—

Honhart: They drink.

Strecher: And that went for the students, too. Well, Ralph ran them through the entire alcohol-training thing. He spent a week with us, I think. Maybe a little more. So he took all of the results from those 1950s studies and made use of them in the 1980s with an international audience, and he used some of the staff there. We had one guy who must have weighed 300 pounds, a former highway patrolman from California, Art Smith, and Ralph tried to get him impaired, and Art Smith drank close to a quart of whiskey and was still doing everything well. Ralph wrote this up as a note. I don't know if it's in his archives, but he wrote it up because he said, "I have never in all my

years of doing this found anyone who could drink that much and not be impaired." But this guy was huge.

So Ralph still was adjusting his sights thirty years after he did that work, and he wrote it up. I don't know if he published it anywhere, but he certainly made note of it and said here's a case now, where you could take this guy to court with an enormous blood alcohol level and he's doing everything correctly. [Laughs] So that was a sidelight on the alcohol studies. But the alcohol studies also connected with Marshall Houts, and I'm sure you know about Marsh.

Honhart: Why don't you go ahead.

Strecher: Okay. Marsh Houts came to MSU in about 1956 or '57, and he had been an FBI agent who worked on the Nazis in South America, helped crack that ring. He'd been a judge. He was obviously a lawyer, and he was on Erle Stanley Gardner's Court of Last Resort as their head counsel. He led the law team. In fact, I brought this book because there's a long foreword about Marsh Houts in *The Worried Waitress* by Erle Stanley Gardner, and this is not just a note; it's a three-page dedication to Marsh Houts.

Well, he was close to Gardner for many years in California before he came to Michigan State, and then when he started his medical legal journal, *Trauma* magazine, he moved back and lived just south of Los Angeles. Anyway, he had a big hillside home and a bunch of kids, eight or nine kids, and a room for every one of them in this place. Laguna Beach.

Trauma magazine was a huge success. It was for lawyers and physicians in all medical legal cases. It dealt with every issue of dealing with trauma, but especially the legal side that both doctors and lawyers—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Honhart: Okay. We're on tape two, side one, and you're talking about Marshall Houts.

Strecher: Yes. He was a very, very close friend of Ralph's. I was on the campus police for just three years, almost exactly, when Art called me in one day. A faculty member had left, Fred Jurgens, a former FBI agent, who was running the field training program, which was a big job.

Honhart: Yes, from what you described.

Strecher: Oh, yes, and Art needed somebody right now. Fred tripled his salary by going to the Ford Motor Security detail. They had a twelve-man former FBI outfit run by John Bugas [phonetic], who had been agent-in-charge in Detroit, and Bugas later became vice president of International Operations for Ford, moved up the ladder, and so Fred—all the FBI guys who joined them—this was an elite undercover unit, so—Fred dashed off there on a week's notice and Art needed somebody, and I'd been through the program just three years before and I knew how it was run, so I went through all of the things they did. Fred did one more briefing of the students before he left, the incoming students, and I sat through all of it. So I took over the field training program.

That involved scheduling—I forget how many at a time, but it would be sixty or eighty students per term, in all of these agencies and making sure they got everything on the shopping list and making sure that no more than three went here, no more than four there, no more than two here, and so forth. Sometimes there were onesies, like the Secret Service. So it was a big scheduling job

and they wrote two reports a week on things they had observed, and sent them in and those were to be graded. Well, I had just left the campus police when Art called me in and said, "How would you like to become an instructor here? I'll match your annual salary with a ten-month salary."

I said, "I'll have to talk to my wife."

I went to Barbara and she said, "Go back there. Take it." [Laughs] She didn't like my being a policeman. She didn't like the gun, you know. So I went back and got on and started doing this job.

Fred was doing quite a job of it and he had tremendous rapport with the agencies. He was very good with them. For one thing, he was about six-five, you know, big, burly guy, and looked like a cop.

So I took that on and I'd just worked for Dick Bernitt, who was director of public safety on campus at that time. Dick Bernitt came in my last year in the department and one thing he did influence me greatly, he insisted upon excellent reporting. Up to then, it had been kind of slapdash. They just weren't that careful, and that's when they split it off from Art and made a full-time chief.

Honhart: Dick was already on the force at that time, wasn't he?

Strecher: No. Dick was then fire marshal.

Honhart: Oh, that's right.

Strecher: And all the campus cops resented this. We all did. We didn't like it at all that Art had taken the fire marshal, who he'd known many, many years. I think they had a common military

background. Charlie Becker [phonetic], our campus police lieutenant, had been in the military with Art, and Charlie was a great interrogator.

But Dick Bernitt, you know, we saw him checking fire extinguishers and things, and we didn't think he knew anything about police work. Well, he knew enough to run the department quite well. But the reporting thing, he bounced back every report he got in his first four months, I think, and all marked up. I mean, like an editor would do at a newspaper. He was so particular. Everything had to be correct. "Is this a fact or your surmise?" You know, "The punctuation is wrong here. Bad choice of words." He did that personally, and then he pushed a lieutenant to do it, Al Ellis, and then he pushed the sergeants to do it, and I was a sergeant at that time. I went to him and I said, "I don't think we can get this done. Some of these guys can't write that way."

He said, "They'll get it done." So we pushed everyone very, very hard. I could write, so I could also critique.

Well, when I got into the field training program, I read these reports from the students, and they were dreadful. I mean, they were worse than the campus police reports, and these were seniors, you know, within nine months of graduating. So I started doing the same thing. Every report that came in, I'd bounce back if it wasn't letter-perfect. Art became aware of this because a lot of students complained and said, "We can't do this."

So he called me and he said, "How are you doing this?" I showed him a batch of this stuff marked up, and he said, "Keep it up." He gave me a grad assistant, Roger Reinke, who had just graduated and was working on a master's in something, and Roger helped me. He was another Milwaukean. See, the Milwaukee schools at that time were as good as any in the country, and the one thing they did was teach you to read and write. If you came out of the public school system, you could write.

I think about this a lot because I track it from Dick Bernitt to me and to my successor. They kept it up and these guys learned how to write reports because they had to. They were rewriting every one of them for quite a while into their first semester in field training.

So I got the field training program and I had it from 1956 until I left for Vietnam in 1959, and Reinke was with me, I think, two of those years.

Honhart: So you were on campus from '51 to '59?

Strecher: Yes.

Honhart: What was it like? From when you first came to when you left, what was it like when you came, and what sort of changes did you see?

Strecher: You know, part of it's just plain social change. We lived in the Quonsets. I should say, we worked in the Quonsets. Most of the campus cops lived in married housing because it was the most reasonable thing around until they got enough put together to buy a small home. Some of the faculty lived in the faculty flat-top housing, which was just south of the Quonset huts. Al Germann, for instance, lived there. I succeeded him in teaching a couple of courses in '57 when he left, for Long Beach.

The Quonsets had a flavor all their own. The campus police were in Quonset 104, and then you went to the next Quonset, which had Art's office and the field training office and Betty Rideout with him. Then there were three more offices, and by that time, by the time I got on the faculty, Art had made it a true School of Criminal Justice, not police administration anymore. He had

brought Gordon Sheehe aboard, and I took Sheehe's first course in 1952, fall. That was traffic. He'd been a highway patrolman in Massachusetts or Connecticut. Sheehe was a national authority on traffic.

Then Jim Brennan came in. He had been in the New York City Police, a lieutenant in juvenile, and he had a doctor's degree in social work from St. John's. Got it at night, like most cops do there.

Then Frank Day came about the same time. I'm not sure whether Frank Day came before or after Brennan. They may have been a year apart. But he had been a lieutenant in the New York City PD and he was the aide to Steve Kennedy, the commissioner, when they were visited by Carmen DiSapio and some other top political guys and the local head of the mafia. Steve Kennedy was told, "You're going to open up on prostitution and gambling in certain precincts, and the detectives from these precincts will do the pick-ups and bring it to the precinct station, where the captain will then handle it from there on."

And Kennedy said, "I won't do that," and so within less than a month, he was vice president of Consolidated Edison, and the chief of detectives was brought in and he did open up and Frank Day quit. That's why he left. He had gotten his law degree at St. John's at night, so he joined the faculty.

This is maybe too much detail. I don't know.

Honhart: No. It's great.

Strecher: Okay. But Frank came, occupied the office right next to Jim Brennan, so in the morning, you know, there'd be coffee. Gordon Sheehe and Frank Day and Jim Brennan, and I'd be just

down the hall from them, one office, I think, from Day. So we'd all get together over coffee and talk a little bit in the morning, do our classes.

Then Houts came. Houts came maybe when I did. Anyway, he took over a lot of law courses that had been taught by Jack Ryan, who went overseas to head the Vietnam project. Jack had run the field training program, too, before Jurgens, so we had a succession of people through there and we got to know each other. For instance, just a vignette. When I was a campus cop, yes, Marsh Houts was there my last year as a campus cop, because they were having moot court trials based on setup investigations, so they had these police officer classes, basic classes, and the FBI was involved in helping with those. They made me Johnny Lightfingers, a notorious burglar. I was in a room in Kellogg Center and they came to arrest me, and I ran for it and went to the car and they surrounded the car and they pulled me out and handcuffed me, and I tried to get away. In searching me, they found lock picks taped to the inside of my belt and so forth. They were thorough.

So Marsh Houts was the judge, because he had been one. The coppers were all there testifying about how they caught me with burglar tools and so forth. So they got me on the stand and the prosecutor, who was an FBI agent, asked me, "How do you explain those burglar tools?"

I said, "Well, I'm a saxophone player and that's where my name comes from, Johnny Lightfingers."

They said, "No, it comes from twirling dials on safes."

I said, "No, I'm a sax player."

They said, "Well, what do you use those tools for?"

I said, "To fix my sax when the springs come off. They do on saxophones."

They said, "Is there a saxophone nearby?"

I said, "I have one here."

So I got my tenor out and the prosecutor said, "Just to show us, let's see if you can play." So I tore into "How High the Moon," and he said, "Okay, okay." Then he said, "Now, what do you do with those lock picks?"

I showed him, "See when a spring comes off there, I take this little thing here," which was a lock pick, "and I put the spring back." And Marsh Houts is almost falling out of his judge's chair at this point.

The guy said, "Why do you put them in your belt?"

I said, "You're on the bandstand, you know. You don't have your case up there, you don't have all kinds of stuff. You put a tool in a pocket, it tears the pocket. I keep them taped on the inside of my belt so they're handy in case a spring comes loose on my sax." I'm doing this number, and Marsh finally breaks up laughing so hard he can hardly continue with this thing. [Laughs] And Ralph who had suggested I bring my tenor is there and Ralph is all into this thing, too.

So the faculty was involved in that kind of work at that time. Jim Brennan would be an expert witness on these cases, and Frank Day would be a defense attorney or a prosecutor, and Joe Nicol, who joined Ralph, as a criminalist. Joe was also a very good forensic scientist. When he left Michigan State, he went to head the Illinois State Crime Lab. He was a good guy. He had eleven children. Lived on Abbott Road in a huge old barn of a house.

But we were all pals and we worked together. The spirit in the Quonset huts was something that's hard to describe. In some ways, of course, we had not achieved academic respectability, and we were left in the Quonset huts and that was fairly symbolic in a way, both to the rest of the faculty and to us, and we were there and we knew we were doing pretty good work. Al Germann

had a doctorate and Jim Brennan did. Other than that, there were none. The rest were law degrees or master's degrees. But we were doing awfully good work with the students and some good research.

Ralph was doing the best research. Day did some good legal research and wrote a couple of very fine books. In fact, the all-time bestseller, Germann, Day, and Galatti. Galatti was still with the New York City PD, then became commissioner, then took over the Port Authority. Germann was on the faculty at Michigan State and then became head at Long Beach. Day, of course, was on the faculty until his death. But that textbook, *Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice,* is in its thirty-somethingth printing and has sold millions, I mean millions. Frank once showed me one of his quarterly or semi-annual checks for $23,000, which was one quarter of the royalties, because Germann got half. He was the primary writer. So it was a very enriching writing process going on.

Honhart: I'd say so.

Strecher: Yes. That book is still out there all these years later.

So we were a team. We played poker. We would get together at someone's house and there would be five or six or seven. We included Chief Charlie Pegg of East Lansing. Every time he was playing poker with us for money on the table. The head of the police training program, Harold Haun. Jack Ryan, while he was still there, and then, of course, I was there, and Frank Day and Ralph would come, have refreshments and talk and have a grand time.

We did some drinking together. We'd go to Monty's. Sometimes we even went to Dagwood's. Ralph and I would go to Monty's after I got on the faculty. He'd say, "Bar whiskey and beer and a boiled egg," you know. [Laughter] That was Ralph's style. Bar whiskey.

But the spirit there was extremely cohesive. Everyone helped everyone, and we took the students very seriously. We taught in the Quonsets and only in the Quonsets. We didn't go to any other classrooms on campus at that time. We had enough classrooms to do the whole thing. Ralph had set up a pretty good lab just beyond Art's office—well, one wall away from Jim Brennan's office and Sheehe's office, in two adjoining Quonsets, and the roofed over space between all these Quonsets to join them all. We went down, I think five or six Quonsets. Primitive. Heating systems weren't too good. There was no air conditioning. We'd open the windows, and, of course, the smell from Ralph's lab when he was using hydrogen sulfide or something for analysis, you know, that would drift down the hall. [Laughs]

Honhart: Oh, jeez.

Strecher: He had a crude fume hood and a few other things there and he had some instruments, but nothing like he later got. But he did have a spectrograph and some other stuff there.

He ran his part of the show very pragmatically, but the rest of us were pretty academic, I was doing field training and then I got to teach intro to administration. I even taught investigation one year when Ralph went to Taiwan. I taught criminal law one time for some reason. I can't remember what. But anyway, I took enough forensics to help Ralph, not to teach it, really, but to help.

Where was I going with that?

Honhart: About Ralph and the lab.

Strecher: Oh, yes. The way he handled the whole forensic science part of it. He would require students to get a degree in chemistry while they were in the program. So they had to complete all of the courses that would be required of a chem major, including the math. So they would not end up with 128 hours the way the rest of the students did; they'd end up with another 40 or 50 because of the lab work. He would literally work with them as Doc Matthews had done with him at Wisconsin take a chem major and make an apprentice of him, as sort of a master's. But they didn't get a master's degree; they just came out with an apprenticeship in forensic science and a bachelor of science degree.

I don't know that he ever referred to it as an apprenticeship, but I know he and I talked in those terms. I once said, "Well, Doc Matthews told me that it was his practice to train chemistry majors in forensic science." And Ralph laughed. This was many years later. He laughed and he said, "Yeah, Matthews did one that way." He said, "I was the one." He said, "He didn't do any others." What he did was establish a model for how you turn out a forensic scientist from a chemist, and he said, "I've basically copied his M.O. in this thing. So I take a student, and before he's through, he knows fingerprinting and he knows blood spot analysis and he knows firearms comparison microscopy, and he can run the instruments, the basic instruments. He can do all of the field tests for blood and drugs, all of this stuff. He can take a wax mold of a hand to see if there are any gunpowder particles in there, in the skin."

Most of the students going through the police administration program at that time also took at least one course like that, the evidence course, and that was fairly thorough, much more than any school does today, really. But these majors, they really knew it, and they could even come in as teaching assistants for Ralph to do one subject maybe, like fingerprint development, with brushes and iodine fumes and so forth. All of us learned a fair amount.

The social life, a pattern evolved. Certain people ate together, for instance. Some of us brought bag lunches. When I was a poor young guy just out of policehood, I brought lunches, but then Ralph and Marshall Houts invited me to join them at the Union. Those were, to me, the great days. I think it started sometime in '56 and went all the way through '59. We would walk over there. We'd walk through the pine grove that was south of Dem Hall, Demonstration Hall, right over there and past Sparty and across the bridge and up to the Union, down to the cafeteria. Ralph was a friend of Mike Demochowski, who ran the food service there, and every time we went, we talked to Mike and he'd always ask how the food was.

I remember this. I was a hungry guy at that time, I was skinny, if you can believe that, and I always ordered some kind of a meat dish and something like spinach or something, and then a double order of potatoes, and Marshall Houts would break up because he tended to be pudgy and he was always watching his diet. [Laughs] He'd almost drop his tray.

We would go over to a table and we would talk about things in the business, Ralph and Marsh and I, and a lot of it had to do—he was starting *Trauma* magazine at that time, and it was just getting going and he had a sponsor. I can't remember the sponsor's name, but he was very much in touch with Gardner, who loved the idea of *Trauma* magazine, and so he would tell us the latest anecdotes about Gardner. He had a hot item one day. He said, "This is going into this issue of *Trauma*," and naturally we were interested. He said, "There was this Taiwanese doctor who was in a residency in anesthesiology at one of the hospitals in Los Angeles. They thought he should have thorough training, so they had him at the county for a while and then they had him at another one," and I'm not sure in which order, but anyway, he had been in a place where everything was pretty automated, and he was moved over to this other hospital and they were doing an operation on the mastoid of the arranger for the Herb Alpert's outfit.

Honhart: The Tijuana Brass.

Strecher: The Tijuana Brass. The arranger. He did all their arrangements, this kid, and they were just doing a simple operation, a mastoidectomy or something. So the surgeon is working back there and he says, "Boy, this blood looks pretty dark to me. Would you check the oxygen?" And this Taiwanese resident, who was not all that fluent in English, had been pumping pure CO2 into this patient, and killed him. Marsh took said the hospital and the doctor were trying to settle and all this, because this guy was making like, I think, like 200,000 a year as an arranger. At that time, it was enormous money.

Honhart: Oh, yes.

Strecher: But he was one of a kind, and they killed him. So that was the sort of thing we talked about. Then we would go up to the Faculty Men's Club. Now, this is one of the anachronisms that I dearly love, because the Faculty Men's Club was just that; there were no women at all. We had four pool tables, one of them was a big snooker table, and we would shoot bottle pool every day. We got to be experts, you know, at different kinds of shots, the three of us. We played ferociously every day for at least an hour.

Then they moved a small food operation up there. They talked Mike Demochowski into doing this, so he had a little catering operation. So we'd go up and have a bowl of soup and a sandwich and then shoot pool. It was more efficient.

Then they talked about building this new one, you know, the new Faculty Club, and, oh, we were against that. [Laughs] We just thought that was an awful idea. Out near the golf course.

Honhart: And it was. [Laughter]

Strecher: Well, we thought that was just terrible. Here we could walk up here every day and have lunch and shoot bottle pool and visit with other faculty. There was Bonn Stewart, for instance, a great mathematician. He taught matrix algebra and complex equations, and he did nothing but shoot three-cushion billiards, all by himself. Once in a while someone was good enough to join him, but he was really an expert. We invited him to play bottle pool once or twice, but he just killed us. [Laughter] He was so good.

But there again, you have a certain spirit of the thing. An anachronism, a Men's Club on a campus, but we would go there and we made great use of it all the time that we were there. We were still doing it until we left for Vietnam. By that time, Marsh had gone to Laguna Beach, had his magazine up and running very well. He left, I think, in '58.

Al Germann left and I took over his courses and he went to Long Beach State College and became a crusader and wrote some big pieces in the local papers about the police—

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

Honhart: This is tape two, side one, Fred Honhart and Vic Strecher, and we're talking about the Men's Club at MSU.

Strecher: Yes, and Al Germann, who was really part of our circle, went to Long Beach State College, was the head of the program, wrote that the police were rousting crapshooters, poker players, all day long, and then when they got off, they would go to this veterans post and do the same thing. He said they had slot machines with payouts. They had money poker and crap tables, the whole works. He wrote this piece, and Chief Parker, at that time, the reform chief, said, "No officer of the Los Angeles Police Department will any longer attend the program at Long Beach State College." He was trying to kill the program off. So they were going to Los Angeles State College then, which was run by one of his former officers, and Al lost his directorship at Long Beach because of pressure from Parker.

But, you know, when we heard about that, Brennan's reaction was, "Al, you know, it's that Jesuit training." He and Frank would talk about that Jesuit training having come out of St. John's, and he said, "It's that Jesuit training. He's a moral man and he goes right down that path." And that's what Al Germann did. He became a gadfly because he decided there was a role for one in this field and it would make it easier for all the rest of us if some guy gets out there on point and takes the arrows, then the rest of us could open the parameters a little bit, too. He's right about that. There's no question that he had a capacity for adding to the moral tone. He did that all the time he was at Michigan State in this school.

He would come up to the Faculty Club. He wasn't a regular with Houts and Ralph and me, but he would come up there and join us and eat with us. So would Brennan and Day, now and then. But we were in each other's homes, playing poker and eating sandwiches together. And all of that, the Faculty Men's Club was a great institution for our school at that time. Even though we had to walk all the way across the campus to get there, we did it every day, rain or shine, snow. I don't

think a day went by, after a certain point in my time there that we did anything else, unless someone was traveling. So that was quite wonderful.

We talked about so many interesting things. Houts was a little bit like Ralph; he was curious and interested and he liked depth. He didn't like the one-inch-thick stuff. He liked to get way down into it and find out about things, and he was an extremely thorough lawyer. So we had a great threesome, Houts and Ralph and I.

Later, when I moved to Arizona State, I took the family out—Marsh invited us—we drove out to Laguna Beach and went through all the security gates and all of that, and he had another room for us and all his remaining kids who were in the house, and an opulent setting. His wife, Mary, a lovely lady. When he got a form of leukemia, she wrote it in a quaint way, wrote us all notes and said, "For some reason, Marsh's bones are no longer producing red blood cells." You know, she kept us informed about everything, and we wrote back.

But he'd always terrified of cancer. He knew a lot, because he read the medical literature so much, and he would say, "We're that close to getting it, to nailing cancer and working it out." This was, of course, long before the DNA breakthroughs, but he was reading all the literature on it and he had a fixation about it. He was terribly afraid of getting cancer, and it's ironic that a form of it hit him finally.

But he and Ralph and Erle Stanley Gardner were buddies, and I remember when I did my master's thesis, it was on the Sam Sheppard case—

Honhart: Oh, sure.

Strecher: —and Bay Village, Ohio. It was an analysis of the criminal investigation, with an ideal-type investigation sketched out and then how this didn't meet the criteria. Norton Long, up in political science, was my mentor, and he would go over it with me, because he knew the people in Cleveland, at [Case] Western Reserve [University]. So I got there and I interviewed virtually everyone, and I got into the archives of the newspaper, the *Plain Dealer,* and I drove down to Columbus to see Sheppard. At the last second, his lawyer said, "Don't talk to him." His lawyers gave me a copy of the transcript—it was this high [gestures]—to keep and they opened the way for me to get down there, but an appeals lawyer said, "Don't do it," and that may have been the guy who eventually got him out, the guy in Florida. [F. Lee Bailey]

Honhart: I know exactly who you mean.

Strecher: Yes, I'm just losing his name right now.

Honhart: Yes, he was even on the O.J. [Simpson] case.

Strecher: Yes. High roller. But anyway, at the last second, I was in Columbus, I was in the warden's office, and they said, "Sorry. He's refusing now."

So, anyway, I did that case, and in it I implied some criticism of Sam Gerber, who was the coroner, because he was in deep conflict with the Village of Bay Village chief and the cop who discovered the homicide scene and the homicide detectives from Cleveland, who had been loaned to Bay Village because the Village Police had just never handled a homicide. The conflicts were enormous. The guy named Paul Kirk, who's a criminalist out of Berkeley, California—

Honhart: Oh, yes, I read about him.

Strecher: —did all the defense blood work. Yes, he was a very big-time blood analyst. He wrote a lot on blood spatters, very precise measurement of where people were when this happened and that happened. He testified in the Sheppard case, and Gerber and he just got into it. They hated each other; it's not exaggerating. So at one point, I found criticism of Kirk and Gerber, and Houts was upset. I was just finishing my master's in '57, and he said, "Gerber's a very good man. He's one of the best in the country. Be careful there, because he knows what he's doing." Gerber had testified that the murder weapon was a surgical tool, and Kirk said it probably was not, from the blood spatters.

Anyway, I think I implied that they should have let the detectives do their work before the medical legal people got into it, and Houts said, "Be very careful. Be very careful, because he's probably one of the ten best in the country." He said, "Halpern in New York is probably number one, and Gerber may be number two or three." Kirk, at that time, wasn't in the top ten at all.

So stuff like that was always coming up as I finished my thesis.

Honhart: Just as an aside, after your study of the Sheppard case—because I remember that as a boy, when I was growing up in Detroit. Then I went to Case Western Reserve, and right about the time I went there is when he got the new trial and was acquitted.

Strecher: Yes.

Honhart: What was your assessment as to who was guilty or not guilty?

Strecher: You know, everything I've done on that case, I still don't know, because it was a bungled investigation. My conclusion in my thesis was that we'll never really know what happened because there were too many fingers in the pie. First of all, after the discovery of the homicide scene, a lot of mistakes were made in the first twenty-four, thirty-six hours. For the first few weeks, there was so much tangling about who was in charge, that there's probably some evidence lost. They never checked some of the areas between the house and the lake. It's right on Lake Erie.

My judgment is that the bungled investigation means that we never really will know. I think what really sank Sheppard was the womanizing. The jury didn't like that at all. When this gal, his nurse, his office nurse, Sue something, got on the witness stand and described their trysts in cars and in his office and parts of the hospital and so forth, they just went cold on him and didn't believe anything he said after that, because he had denied that at the outset, during all the police interrogations and everything, because they were looking for a motive, that he wanted to dump her and they had a battle about it. Well, I think it was so purely a circumstantial case that they just punished him for being a dirty guy.

I think I felt nothing but pity for the officer who walked in on this mess. I interviewed him at length, maybe half a day, and he gave me all the details and he just didn't know what to do, you know. Right away he called the chief and then someone called the mayor. Right away, you're talking about small-town politics, and then small town goes big town when someone says, "Well, who here has ever handled a homicide? Well, let's get Cleveland in there," and Gerber wants to be in charge, and so forth and so on. So it was like that. It's too bad, because some of the Cleveland dicks did some pretty good work on it and Gerber tended to discount it because they tried to shut

him out, I think. Anyway, I really don't know, and I've been asked that a hundred times and I've always said, "I really do not know." This bushy-headed stranger and all that, you know, things like that happen. And they were highly vulnerable to a break-in there. It was customary for them to leave all their doors and windows open. He was sleeping on the couch he said. He probably was. He drank quite a bit for a surgeon, and had a number of drinks and probably half passed out. I don't know. I've seen lots better cases.

Honhart: Going back to your work at Michigan State, how did you end up over in Vietnam?

Strecher: This was one of the neat episodes. In 1958, I was called in one day—no, I was not called in. An announcement went out of Art's office that "We are interested in having several faculty members join the MSU group in Saigon. We'd like to know who's interested." It went out to all the faculty. I talked to Ralph, and Ralph said, "Well, I'm going to go."

Honhart: Now, he'd been there in '56, if I remember correctly.

Strecher: He'd been there a number of times.

Honhart: Or '57. He went there for a summer, I know that.

Strecher: Yes, he'd go over for short stints to get the crime lab started, and he brought some people over to study forensics, and he did some training over there, short-term stuff. I talked to Ralph, and he was going to go.

Paul Shields, at that time, was working in the police training program, not in the faculty, and he indicated an interest. The criticism of MSU at that time was that in the police area, it was MSU in name only. We didn't have anyone from MSU except Jack Ryan there, and he was identified as primarily FBI. Then you had Howard Hoyt, who had been chief over in Battle Creek, and Charlie Sloan, who'd been in the New York state police, and Bud Handville from the New York State Police. So the MSU faculty types regarded these guys as hired guns, not interested in the academic side of things, but there was great competence there administratively. They had some good people.

But they wanted to fatten up the MSU presence there. I think it was straightforward, that. So this announcement came out, so I went to Barbara and I said, "How'd you like to go to Vietnam for two years?"

And she said, "Where is that?"

I said, "It's Indochina." And I said, "The French got beaten there by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Remember that?"

She said, "Oh, yeah." We'd just had our third son born just a short time before, November, and she said, "Would we have servants?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Really?"

I said, "Yes. We'd have a house staff of maybe three or four."

She said, "My gosh." And she said, "Well, maybe." So I got her to talk to Arnelle [Turner], as I recall, and I did more talking with Ralph, and then Paul Shields came forward. I didn't know Paul, except casual contact, and Paul had now indicated interest, so it looked like Ralph and Paul and me.

So Art had the three of us in and talked to us about it and laid the thing out. Stanley Scheinbaum was running the business end of it out of Olds Hall, and we had to go over to see Stan to negotiate salaries and all of that. At that time, I was doing consulting for the St. Louis Police Department, sort of developing their senior staff, and I was a kid, you know. I was twenty-nine years old and I was in there teaching their assistant chiefs administration. [Laughter]

I remember—this won't get into print, but I remember the chief, Joe Casey, one time calling me in and saying, "You know, young fellow, I like you." He said, "You've got balls." [Laughter] Because here I was, dealing with these guys who were three times my age. Two of them were reaching seventy that year and had to retire as chief and deputy chief, and here I was, a kid, coming in and talking about management.

So, anyway, I was doing that and I was getting $50 a day, so we factored that into my salary for Vietnam and I was really impressed with what I got, because I asked for it and Scheinbaum said okay,. So I said, "How much could I have gotten?"

He said, "You'll never know." [Laughter]

So I went home and told Barbara, "We'll get $10,000 a year, tax-exempt."

And she said, "My gosh." I was making about $6,200 at that time [academic year]. So she said, "My gosh."

So we got that, and Barbara had some misgivings, but she thought, "You know, I've kind of stuck with him and done all these things, and he goes to Detroit and he goes to St. Louis all the time and so forth."

We had a Vietnamese student at that time working on a master's, and he taught me a lot of Vietnamese in the next six months before we actually went. It was like three times a week he

would be in my office. Then I went to the Foreign Service Institute for a few weeks and got their basic briefing.

We put our stuff into storage and sold our car, and took our three little boys and the two of us for nineteen or twenty shots, in some cases, series. Like the plague shots, we had to go to Detroit for those. Typhus, paratyphoid, typhoid, yellow fever, the works. Little Johnny was only six months old when he started the shot series.

Honhart: Oh, jeez.

Strecher: Barbara still tells the story. We flew to Chicago Midway, got on a helicopter and went out to O'Hare, which was brand new.

Honhart: Took a helicopter? That's fabulous.

Strecher: Helicopter to O'Hare, got one of the earliest 707 flights to San Francisco, and at Paul Shields' suggestion, we had booked passage on the *Lurline*, a luxury ship, but we got into an Aleutian storm, pretty bad seas, so Barb and the little guys were not too well some of the time. But we got to Hawaii and then things were fine.

But back then, no jets flew overseas; they didn't have the range. So we stayed in Honolulu a week and we got a DC-7, with berths, to go to Tokyo. I remember a Philippine consul was on the plane with his wife, who was eight months pregnant, sitting there, and she was very uncomfortable, so I gave her my berth and sat in a seat, and the stewardess hated that. The stewardess was really, really angry with me that I gave away a first-class berth.

But I wanted to watch anyway, because we were going to land at Wake Island for a refueling, and I asked the stewardess to alert me when we were going to go to Wake. She said, "You'll know it because we have to circle a couple of times, lose altitude and go in, it's such a short runway." So I watched this whole operation and this looked like a postage stamp down there when we circled it, a tiny little piece of rock.

Went there, stayed in Tokyo some days. All kinds of adventures trying to figure things out, you know, going to buy diapers and they were about this big [gestures] for little Japanese kids.

Flew from there to Hong Kong on a Boeing Stratocruiser, one of those old two-deckers. It was one of the last years they flew those, and I stayed up all night to look at the islands off the China coast as we went down to Hong Kong, just to see it. I deliberately got a westside seat, and I stayed up all night. And into Hong Kong and spent, oh, a week or two in Hong Kong, getting things. Clothing, for one thing. We were told, "Don't bring a lot of clothing; buy it in Hong Kong. If you're going to have electronics, buy it there." So I bought a stereo system at the Radio People out on the island and things like that. Had a white suit made, because we had to have a white suit. Bought Barbara a string of perals and an ivory chess set for myself.

Then we went down to Saigon. And I made a big mistake; I drank some unboiled water in Hong Kong.

Honhart: Oh, dear.

Strecher: I didn't know it. I didn't know it. I thought the taps there were okay and I got mixed up. They were okay in Tokyo, but they weren't okay in Hong Kong. So, a few days after we got to Saigon, I was pretty sick and went to the hospital and they did the checking, and this one lab guy

yells, "Hey, come here and look at this. Have you ever seen that many amoebae in your life?" and, you know, I was just loaded with amoebae, and it lasted a year and a half, the dysentery. It was just a dreadful thing.

But, you know, like everything else—and back then, they treated it with an arsenic compound that affected your eye dilation, so when you got out of a car, for instance, and stepped into the sunlight, it would almost knock you over because the eyes would not adjust very quickly. But that's the only treatment they had.

But we went there. I got the job of handling all of the what we called participants, all of the people who were sent to the States for police training. They would go first for a month or two to what we called Mr. Smith's organization. It was a CIA operation called the International Police Academy in the old Car Barn in Washington. They said "former" CIA agent; well, he was a senior guy. I taught there after I got back a couple times.

But we sent them there for some orientation, then all over the country to police departments to see how they were run and so forth, and that had been going on since about '56. So I took over that operation, and it was similar in a way to field training, you know. I had to set up itineraries for detectives, for forensics, for undercover work, for every sort of specialization, communications traffic. So I did that, and that was no great strain.

Then we traveled around the country and did schools in the provinces. We'd go into a province town, and invariably we'd get there and the province security chief would get us into his office and we'd be there at eight in the morning and he would pour a glass of scotch for us, at eight in the morning. Their view of Americans was that way, you know, that we've got to have whiskey right away. I couldn't drink with the dysentery. It almost killed me, but you had to make a showing of it.

On one of those training visits, we were in Qui Nhon, province security chief's office, and he brought out a bottle of wine with an interesting label on it. I looked at it and I said, "Is that sacramental wine?"

He looked at it and he said, "Oh, yes, yes."

I said, "How do we come by sacramental wine?"

And he said, "Well, the Viet Cong burned a church and killed the nuns and kidnapped the priest and went away, and we caught up with them and killed them and brought this back." So they ended up with the sacramental wine at the security office and gave it to the visiting Americans. [Laughs] And I thought my dad would finally have been proud of me because I was getting sacramental wine. He was always jealous of the priests, who were the only ones who got the wine in our Catholic church. The peasants only get the host. You just get a little wafer.

Honhart: Yes, right. Exactly.

Strecher: He always said, "They get that wine."

So we put on schools around the country. When I first got there, we could go anywhere in jeeps and we took a three-jeep convoy all the way up the middle of Vietnam, Buon Me Thuot, Dac To, Dac Sut, which is so near—you could walk to the Cambodian and Laotian borders there. Nothing but rock piles. That's all there was up there. It wasn't even really desert, it was just rocks.

Then back down to Pleiku and to the coast, and then up the coast road all the way to the demilitarized zone, where we were not supposed to go, but the security chief up there smuggled us into a little bunker very near to the entrance to the Ben Hai Bridge, so we could see that the north half of the bridge was painted red and the south side of it was painted black, symbolic—

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

Honhart: Okay, we're now on tape two, side two.

Strecher: I'm afraid I wander quite a bit.

Honhart: Keep going. No, that's great.

Strecher: Well, the Vietnam years were quite interesting. The American colony there mixed with the other international types, and we were an American colony, no question about it. We didn't live all clustered. I had a house in back of the ambassador's house, and next door to me there was an intelligence guy who worked directly for the ambassador. But I was afraid in that house, because I was way off from the rest of the Michigan Staters. Ralph's house was kitty-corner from the palace, the backside of the palace, on Hong Thap Tu Street, and I was on Hien Vuong Street.

It was a nice house, a big house, two rooms were air conditioned. We did have, I think, four servants. We had a cook, we had an amah for little Johnny, the young one. He was only nine months old by the time we got there. The other two kids didn't need an amah. They played around the house mostly, and with other kids, Paul's kids, especially. Paul had two boys and two girls and they were just a little older, but not much. So the kids got together with the others and they would have parties.

We got into a bigger international group there, too. The Danish guy, who sold Volkswagens there, who everyone thought was a spy—well, we thought everyone was a spy, really.

I never saw anything like it. But they warned us, to begin, at the Foreign Service Institute, assume that every one of your household servants will be reporting to somebody, either the police or the Viet Cong or to the Germans or Russians or to the International Control Commission, someone, because there's a lot of money floating around for information on what you're doing and vulnerability.

About a week after I got there, a CIA agent came into my office and handed me a piece of paper and said, "We just translated this from Radio Hanoi." And I can still remember the wording of it. It said, "We welcome Victor Strecher and his wife Barbara and their three sons, Victor (age), Michael (age), and Jonathan (age). They are living at 232 Hien Vuong in Saigon. Anybody who finds it possible to execute Strecher will be considered a Vietnamese patriot." Address, everything, you know. Talk about intimidation. I think I lost that in one of my moves, because I've moved so many times since then. It was a flimsy, and I've written it down. I've put that in my personal recall files.

But that came about a week after I got there and I thought, "Oooh, they're inside everything." And the ages really impressed me, because they were correct.

Oh, there was another sentence in the middle: "Strecher's joining the infamous MSU group whose work includes the burning of villages, the torture of citizens, and the training of the brutal South Vietnamese Diem's police." So they were referring to the civil guard, which was out there a lot.

That scared me very much. Every time I left town, I worried that they might victimize Barbara or the kids. When I'd leave, whoever was staying there, one of the guys, like Handville or if Paul didn't go—Paul and I traveled a lot together, but when he didn't go, I'd ask him to stop in every day and see Barb. They did a lot of that.

Honhart: Did other faculty get similar notification?

Strecher: About going there?

Honhart: From the Viet Cong.

Strecher: Oh, you know, I never asked. I showed it to Ralph and I said, "What about this?"

And he said, "Yeah, they do that." He said, "No one's been hurt." So I never showed it to Barbara.

Honhart: Probably a good idea. You would have been on the next boat home.

Strecher: I never showed it to her. When we went to Milwaukee to see our relatives before we flew over, her dad had clipped an article from a news magazine that said, "Saigon, the sin capital of the world." And he thought, "Oh, jeez, you're taking my daughter to the sin capital of the Far East," I guess it said. And it was a lurid kind of a story, but it wasn't as bad as Macao or some of those other places, really. And Diem was a puritan, so he was really beating down on the vice. I have an opium pipe and other things that they confiscated, you know.

But the intimidation was all they could make it. The Viet Cong did try to scare us and the South Vietnamese Government tried to scare everyone. They had lurid tales—I have a few of them I brought back with me—in daily news bulletins about people beheaded and tortured in the villages

and the land development centers, where they were trying to put a lot of people so that it would be harder for the Viet Cong to operate out there.

I sent my family home early. I was criticized for it, but I just didn't like it. When we got there, we could drive anywhere and we did. The first Christmas, Barbara and I drove up to a town called Da Lat in the mountains, and there were French chateaux up there from the French colonial days. One of them was rented by the U.S. Government for employees of USOM and the other outfits. So we got it for a week, we'd get one wing, and it was so big that there'd be two or three other families there. It was nice and cool up there, the first cool weather we'd had since we got there in July, and it rained. Thunderstorms in the mountains were nice.

We drove back in the Volkswagen and we had taken Thi Hai with us, to take care of Jon while we were up there, because she was indispensable to give Barb a little freedom. Thi Hui was sitting in the back seat. Her papers, showed that she was born syphilitic, her face was pock-marked and so forth, and she was a little bit homely. We loved her. On our way back, we saw a Montegnard family. These were Jarais, and they were wearing the baskets on the back and this fine woven cloth with patterns on it, and the man had a pipe in his mouth and the inevitable bow and arrow and his wife had a coup-coup, which is a chopping thing, and they had two children. We drove past them and they watched us, and I slowed down a little so we could see them clearly, and Thi Hui holds her nose and said, "Ugh."

And I said, "What's that, Thi Hai?"

And she said, "Mois." Now that's like the "N" word. Montegnard is the real title, but Moi is the "N" word, and the Vietnamese call those people Mois. And she held her nose, this homely little girl, without any prospect in the world, looking at a magnificent little family group along the

roadside, and I thought, "Everyone needs their underclass." It was such an interesting thing for her to say that, "Phooey. Dirty. Dirty people."

One day I was lecturing on records administration to a High Command school in Saigon. It was a big room and it had maybe fifty people in it, all captains and higher, some very high-ranking. I had an interpreter, so I'd give a sentence, he'd interpret, and I'd draw up pictures of the things that interacted—I was teaching Ralph's old MSU course, you know. So I finished the course and asked if there were any questions, and they would get up and stand next to their seat and give their name and then ask a question in Vietnamese. The interpreter said, "Colonel Bai wants to know what about Little Rock." I've written this up, too, by the way, in my recall. "What about Little Rock?"

I said, "I'm not sure I understand." So he translated that.

And he said, "He wants to know why you have to use military to get colored people into the high school in Little Rock, why your president has to send troops."

I thought about that and I said, "Well, there are people who have prejudice against black people in America, and against other people unlike themselves, too, not just black. Sometimes it's religion." He translated that.

He said, "But why can this happen in America?"

I said, "Well," I said to the interpreter, "ask Colonel Bai how many Montegnards are in the room." And this could have got me in trouble, I've thought since. "How many Montegnards are in the room?"

The interpreter looked at me and said, "I can't ask him that."

I said, "Ask him."

He said, "I can't." So we had a little argument and finally he did ask him, and this guy stiffens, and everyone in the room—you know, the eyes are going around.

Finally, the guy kind of sputters, and he said, "Of course there are none," translated.

I said, "Why not? There are a lot of Montegnards in Vietnam."

And the answer came back, fast. He said, "Because they're ignorant, they're stupid, they're dirty, they can't learn, they can't read or write, they live like animals."

In reply, I said, "Tell Colonel Bai that that's what some white people in America say about black people."

I don't know what I started there, but I was sort of pissed off at this guy, because they're so biased toward the native people there. Well, that course ended in disarray. I don't know if anyone every complained formally, but they were not happy with me. [Laughter]

Honhart: Nobody likes to have shown the hypocrisy.

Strecher: Everybody has an underclass, has someone they consider inferior to them, apparently. That's one of the experiences that I sort of cherish, because it brought it home so forcibly.

Ralph is one of the people in the world who has none of that in him. He just doesn't. And he taught me that. I hope I learned it from him, because I came from a family that was from eastern Europe and they hung together. They had the pejorative term for every other ethnicity there was. No one was Polish. You know what they were. No one was Jewish. I grew up in that setting, and ethnicity is very big in Milwaukee. It comes from being a big immigrant city. And a lot of them are natural enemies.

So Ralph grew way beyond all that somehow, having come from the same place. I think he taught me a lot about all people being people. I have a note—foreign students. He was the guy, when we got foreign students, he was the guy who took care of them. The first Korean was Yung

Chung Sok, got a master's degree from us, and I was on his thesis committee. Several of the other faculty wanted nothing to do with foreign students, you know, they didn't like Korea because of the war, and it was a little chilly. But Ralph would have them out to the house and he helped every one of them.

At one point I heard—and you know better than I, probably, whether this is so—that Ralph actually trained a forensic scientist for almost sixty or even more different countries. I don't know if this is actual number.

Honhart: It's certainly something close to that.

Strecher: It's a number up there. I knew this, I knew that he could go into any country that we would ever think about going to, and visit someone in a crime lab whom he had trained, and get taken around and shown things. He was inside every country—Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, parts of Africa, parts of South America. Just an astonishing array. Philippines. He trained several guys for the Philippines. That part of him, we'd get invited to Ralph's house, we'd meet foreign students there.

Honhart: Oh, yes.

Strecher: He made sure they met the faculty in a social setting, because there was no real other setting. Art didn't do much of that. Art was a—you know, I think at some point, up to about '55, he was overworked running the campus police and the school and the police training program,

which was pretty extensive. That was a big operation. Always had three or four staff therefor that, sometimes maybe five. That's how Jack Ryan and the FBI guys got in there, the police training.

So Ralph simply took on the social function and became our bridge to international students. He'd put them in touch with other people who spoke their language. He knew the people in languages, and he would learn a little of all the languages he needed when he was traveling, but he would get mixed up sometimes and talk French in a Chinese restaurant or something, you know. [Honhart laughs.] Barbara once was with him in England when he was asking for the bill in French in a place where Chinese was spoken. It was pretty funny. [Laughs]

Honhart: That sounds like Ralph. It really does.

Strecher: Oh, he was quite something.

Honhart: When did you come back from Vietnam? You said you sent your family back first.

Strecher: Yes.

Honhart: Was this after the coup or what was the reason?

Strecher: It was after the coup.

Honhart: Coup attempt, I guess we should say.

Strecher: That was November of sixty—just a few weeks before that, and this—oh, this is another Ralph story, and I've written it. One of our members who was a contract worker with our mission, was down at the basic police training school at Vung Tau—Cap St. Jacques—and he got in his jeep one morning to go—he was a firearms instructor—got in his jeep, with his driver, and they're driving along and an ox cart pulls across, and shooters on both side down in the ditch shot them with—we counted like six different calibers. But, anyway, shot them all up, set the jeep on fire from its gas tank, so there was some burning and so forth and so on.

So Ralph says, "I want your help on something." Paul and I both did one thing, it was the autopsy, and then I went with Ralph on the other—and it was the autopsy, because if there's a violent death, it has to be investigated, you have to have a pretty much a full autopsy sent to the ambassador, who sends it to the State Department.

So we kept the bodies in the commissary freezer until we could get to them, which was a couple days later, and we had them brought into this Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. It had a little wing on it where we could have them brought in. They put them on a table and we had a French surgeon do the cutting. So Ralph and Paul and I did the autopsy on one of our colleagues. His name was Adolph. He'd been a military type, military police, hired on. So we did this autopsy. We dug these bullets out. The doctor would say, "Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

And Ralph would say—and he'd probe and get the slug and bring it out and put it in a tray—and Ralph would mark it the way—on the base of the bullet, put it in a glassine envelope, and say where it came from on the body. Photographed everything.

I remember when we were done with it, we had eight or ten slugs out of him. He really got shot up. Ralph said, "Okay, take his ankles, Vic," and he and Paul took his upper side, and we were going to put him back on the gurney, and the skin started coming off his ankles because he'd

been dead a couple days. It started turning under me and I thought I would drop him—I know this is ugly, but that happened in October.

Then in November, we get the attempted coup, and that was a very close thing. If it hadn't been for the Muong troops that Diem brought down, with a promise for very, very big pay—he brought them down from the border with China—very quickly, and one general remained loyal to him, brought him up from Vung Tau, and brought this other group in, and their orders were, "Seem to join the rebels, and in the morning at six o'clock, kill the rebel next to you." That was the third day, and on the third day, each one of the Muongs turned to the guy next to him and popped him. They killed an awful lot of rebels and took Saigon back, because at that time the rebels had Saigon and Diem was holed up in his palace, which was all full of holes.

So that's how Diem put it down, but there was the basic insecurity of the country, the contentiousness of the regime, and then one day some guy flipped a grenade over a wall of the home of one of our guys, who was in the tax group for MSUG. He got out of his car to go to lunch at home and—you always got a two-hour siesta period—he closed the gate and started walking for the house, and he heard something clink on the gravel and he looked and it was a grenade, and it blinded him.

I looked at that and I thought, "Aah," so they were cautioning us, "Don't send your families home. We need a show of support here." Well, at that time, I was just plain afraid because I was going to do a lot of traveling. Jerry Hemmye our radio engineer with MSU, and I went up to Buon Me Thuot to find a location for a new civil guard radio tower, and he was doing tests there. We went tiger hunting, incidentally, but that was after I sent my family home. They went to Milwaukee and stayed with my folks. Then Barbara flew over and met me in Geneva and we spent a couple weeks traveling in Europe and then went home.

Honhart: How long were you there by yourself then?

Strecher: About four months, four and a half. I sent them home in late January, and I left in May. I left the week that Lyndon [Baines] Johnson came. He was there at the time I flew out, and I have pictures of all the little Vietnamese kids holding American flags along the route in from the airport and all that. Signs, "Thousand years for Lyndon Johnson," you know. And, of course, we'd been asking for either reinforcements or get out of there. We were asking for mules and all sorts of low tech things to help the civil guard out there.

I'll tell you an apocalyptic story. One of the guys comes back with his group that had traveled in the U.S., comes back, and I always debriefed them. He was a Vietnamese lieutenant, and he had criticized the Vietnamese government at some place in the U.S., I forget now, big city PD setting, several other guys there with him, and they heard him say, "Well, there's a lot of brutality," or something like that. And there was.

So anyway, someone informed on him, and he came to me, and he was terror-stricken. He said, "You've got to save me."

And I said, "From what?"

He said, "They're going to put me on the Cambodian border."

And I said, "Well, is it a post?"

He said, "They're sending me there with one elephant and a Moi guard to get me there, and I'm going to be by myself with a little radio."

And I said, "I don't know if I can do anything."

He said, "They'll kill me there."

I said, "Who?"

"The Viet Cong." He said, "I have no chance there."

I talked to Ralph about it, and he said, "We can't do a thing. Can't do a thing." He talked to General La, who was head of police and security, but this guy went to the border and we never heard from him again. So don't speak ill of the Vietnamese government. [Laughs] You get an elephant and a radio.

Honhart: Good luck.

Strecher: Yes. [Laughs]

Honhart: Maybe it was time to change sides. [Laughs]

Strecher: Oh, it was about that time that they kidnapped some Americans and kept them hostages for—they were in a different group, they were in USOM, but they kept them for three or four years. Some died in captivity, of illnesses, mostly. They just took them along with them, chained up, you know, tied with bamboo threads and stuff. It got to be a dangerous place.

A year after we could drive anywhere, you couldn't leave Saigon. Jerry Hemmye and I went up to Buon Me Thuot on a Vietnamese Air Force plane, which was almost as dangerous, but we drove around in jeeps.

When I first got there, and we did this great big tour of Vietnam, Charlie Sloan and Ryan and I—Jack was just a hell of a guy. I don't know if you've—

Honhart: I've heard about him.

Strecher: Well, his mother was a French army nurse. His father was the chief of police of Minneapolis and then the sheriff of Hennepin County later, in Minnesota, and Jack came out of the FBI. But, during World War II, he was a B-24 or –5 pilot—I forget which—shot down, parachutes in, fluent in French from his mother's side, joins the Maquis, they get him out to Marseilles and to Britain. They put him right back on another bomber, he got shot down a second time. This really did happen. He gets out again, the same way. By then I think the war was almost over, but you know, that was the kind of background. He was tough, but he was smart. He joined the FBI as soon as he got out of the air force, or the army air force, I guess. No, the air force. Anyway, joined the FBI, got a lot of the spy stuff because of his language—

[End of recording]