

INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD EISENBUD
FIRST CHAIRMAN OF PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

March 21, 1987

Dr. Hartzell: This is an interview with Leonard Eisenbud, a retired member of the Physics Department at Stony Brook, at his home in Pelican Point, Sarasota, March 21, 1987. I suggest that we go quickly to these questions and then freewheel after that.

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, you've given my name, Physics and rank, then Professor and originally Chairman.

Dr. Hartzell: Chairman, you came initially as Chairman of the Department?

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes.

Dr. Hartzell: All right. What year did you come.

Leonard Eisenbud: '58.

Dr. Hartzell: In '58, the second year.

Leonard Eisenbud: The second year. The institution I came from, Bartold Research Laboratories and Research Physicist.

Dr. Hartzell: Where was that?

Leonard Eisenbud: Bartold, that's in Bryn Mawr, on the Bryn Mawr campus. Well, I had been looking for something in the New York area; I wanted to return to academic life. I heard about the beginning of SUNY at Stony Brook, not at Stony Brook at that time; and then heard that Francis Bonner was coming, and I knew him from ten years prior to that at Brookhaven. So, I called him and talked to him about it. I guess if any one individual is responsible, then it's Francis Bonner.

Dr. Hartzell: Francis Bonner of the Chemistry Department, formerly of the Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Leonard Eisenbud: Right. He was at that time at Arthur D. Little.

Dr. Hartzell: I see. Why did you come? Who interviewed you for the position?

Leonard Eisenbud: Leonard Olsen was the Dean and he interviewed me with, oh, about a half dozen people that were on the faculty at that time. I remember being interviewed in Coe Hall there in that den. Why did I come? What factors were most important? Well, as I said, I wanted to return to academic life. The location was what I wanted, being close to Brookhaven Laboratory, being connected natural for a Physics Department would lead to attract people. I liked the area. And then there was, of course, something exciting about starting a new institution. Just the general beauty of the Coe Estate What was my understanding of the purpose behind the creation of Stony Brook? Well, personally I never really very well knew; at that time it was presumably a teaching institution; that is, it was primarily designed to get teachers of science for secondary schools.

Dr. Hartzell: That was the earliest context.

Leonard Eisenbud: We all felt that that certainly would be rapidly expanded, and I presume that, I don't know what evidence there was for that but certainly everybody there talked in terms of something other than that developing rapidly. Well, impression of the campus; well, the campus was extraordinarily pretty, of course, at that time. Although the facilities were few, the general set of the surroundings was very attractive, the location was very attractive.

Dr. Hartzell: This was the Coe Estate?

Leonard Eisenbud: The Coe Estate, yes. The leadership, well, Dean Austill was, Dean Olsen was extraordinarily enthusiastic and was devoted to the idea of creating an institution of great merit, etc. His vision, of course, was something that went close to the Chicago School at that time.

Dr. Hartzell: He came from Chicago.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes.

Dr. Hartzell: I think he had been an Assistant to Carlson up in the Central Office.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, he had been and then came down to head this institution or to direct the institution. He was really a very dedicated man and that was both a good

thing and a bad thing, because they quickly got into problems with people in the institution who were opposed to the Chicago type of conception.

Dr. Hartzell: What about you?

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, I must say, I never took that whole thing very seriously. You know, when you have a new institution, you don't know where it's going. And that so and so has a particular conception. I tried to be friendly with both sides of that issue until it got really sticky. But, well, anyway. As far as leadership, however, the early leadership ran into serious difficulties with President Lee, and that was peculiar. I recall that, I don't know whether one is interested in Lee?

Dr. Hartzell: Well, I think we've got to get at as much as we can. Who hired him? How did he happen to come?

Leonard Eisenbud: They were looking for a Chairman of Engineering, and I think that Olsen had interviewed him for that position, a prospective person who might come into that position. At that time then there were I think indications from the, or suggestions from the administration - excuse me. I think that what happened was, as I recall the story, Olsen did not like the suggestion of Central Administration as to a possible President, and said that he had interviewed a man, Lee, that he thought was better than that person, that suggestion.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you have any idea who?

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't recall who that was at all. I must say I'm not sure I ever knew, but the next thing he knew, and much to his regret, the Central Administration had appointed Lee to be President. And then Lee came in. There was a great division about Lee; I thought it was rather a catastrophe myself.

Dr. Hartzell: Why, do you have any reason

Leonard Eisenbud: For one thing, his notion of the possible was grandiose beyond any reasonable expectation. It's all right to be grandiose, but also he didn't work at it. He was a, I'll give you one example. I had an application for the Physics Department

from Nandor Balazs at that time and I thought it was a good application but he had asked for the position with tenure.

Dr. Hartzell: Where did he come from?

Leonard Eisenbud: He was then at Princeton, I think he was at that time connected with the project for nuclear energy. He wasn't on the faculty but on the generator. I went to Lee with this statement that there was Nandor Balazs, I thought he was a very good man, but it was a serious appointment and with tenure. He never really looked at the application, he said, I trust you, go ahead. Now, I thought that that was going too far. It was nice to be trusted, but, nevertheless, he should check and he didn't. I felt that there was a good deal of that sort of thing. He would send a memo that they were going to appoint people like, and then listed six Nobel Prize winners in various schools; there was just no way in which that could conceivably be done. All this could be tolerated, but I think that finally he got into very serious dispute with Olsen and Hawthorn; that also was something that one could stand.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you have any idea with the nature of the dispute was, did it involve students or curriculum?

Leonard Eisenbud: of temperament. I think that just how it worked out in detail, I don't know, what that situation was. You know Lee asked if I would be Acting Dean of the Graduate School at that time. And after thinking about it, I decided I didn't want to do it, simply because I felt he was erratic in that I couldn't trust his judgment, and that it would be a position in which you would be floating and you wouldn't know what you were doing. It came to a head with his abrupt firing of Allen Austill, who was then Dean of Students. I had been friendly with Allen Austill, the whole community was quite friendly, except for these wars that broke out. But, in the middle of the semester he abruptly fired Austill, told him to leave his house, which was on the campus and so on. And, at that point I realized Well, that was about the time that the whole thing blew up. Lee fired and When, of course, we had temporary administrators, acting administrators, of which you

were one. After the first couple of years when I was Chairman, and when the Department grew slowly and we had instituted the beginnings of a graduate program, we planned a graduate program, I resigned from the Chairmanship

Dr. Hartzell: Did you hire Pond?

Leonard Eisenbud: That's, of course, I think a very important step He was very active, of course, in building the Department and a significant person. Well, indeed I have to take credit for a little more than that. At that time they were still looking for a Dean of the Graduate School, and a suggestion was made that John Toll be Dean of the Graduate School.

Dr. Hartzell: Was that Alec's suggestion?

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't know who had suggested it. I remember hearing about it from a member of the Department.

Dr. Hartzell: I think Arnie Feingold was there by then.

Leonard Eisenbud: Arnie Feingold was there, Fox was there. I think it was Fox that told me, because I think he may have been acting as Acting Dean of the Graduate School at that time. In any case I heard that Toll was being considered for, or had been considered but was not going to take it or something of that fashion. I think that why not ask him if he would be President; and I met with John Toll shortly after that in New York. We had lunch together in a Chinese restaurant because he was a meeting of the Physical Society in New York and we talked about the possibility he'd do that and about the nature of the University, and so on. I think Alec and I sort of nursed him along in the application in the question of his attempting a further position.

Dr. Hartzell: I was there then. I remember meeting him at the time he had been considered for the Dean of the Graduate School. There had been others looked at for the Presidency, Loren Eisley had been considered at one point before I got there, as I understand it.

Leonard Eisenbud: And they offered Bentley Glass.

Dr. Hartzell: Really.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, he had been considered at one time, although

Dr. Hartzell: Did he ever come?

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, what happened with Bentley is that there were a couple of letters, one or two letters which put him down so much that it was never followed up.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you remember what dates this was, was it '61 or '62?

Leonard Eisenbud: Something like that, yeah, '61. Bentley was considered for the presidency, and we had letters, letters had been requested, and at least one said something like 'he couldn't think administratively out of a paper bag.' I don't know whether one should reveal that point. In any case that was dropped on the basis of some negative replies and so but a really strong negative is almost a blackball when you do that sort of thing. And of course Bentley was brought back by John Toll.

Dr. Hartzell: Well, I was asked by Judge Sullivan, who was Chairman of the local Council following Ward Melville, what I thought of John Toll; whether I thought he would make a good President, and I said, yes, I thought he would. And he asked me, would you go down and interview him and see if he is interested, which I did. I went down to Maryland, where he had his house, stayed overnight with him and came back with the report that, yes, he would be interested. And later he came up and I briefed him at Planting Fields for eight hours as to what he was going to find up in Albany the kind of people he was going to deal with because there was a vacuum there. Hamilton was gone, Gould not come. And he went up, he saw Larry Murray and Harry Porter, I think. And then when Gould was appointed, Judge Sullivan said that the function of the Council was to recommend who should be President, that he was going to tell Gould to go nowhere else for a President until he had seen John Toll. So, that's my side of the picture.

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, in the course of negotiations, Alec and I met with him at my house and Alec's house on a couple of occasions and told him the situation at Stony Brook and what its possibilities were.

Dr. Hartzell: What did you think its possibilities were, this is getting back to seven, I guess, or eight?

Leonard Eisenbud: I think at that time there was the feeling that

Dr. Hartzell: '63 or '63, about that time?

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, things were opening up and it seemed to be opening up dramatically; the building program at Stony Brook, Rockefeller apparently was very much interested in promoting the University and with that kind of backing, one felt that things could go forward. I had considerable optimism at that time about things.

Dr. Hartzell: What do you think the reasons were, as you saw them, the proximity to Brookhaven?

Leonard Eisenbud: The proximity to Brookhaven, the backing of Rockefeller who was an able Governor, and although I wouldn't have bet my life on it, on the prospect, a guy like Alec Pond, who was really willing to bet on it, he felt that the sky was the limit, and all you had to do was somehow show them that it could be done and people would see it was possible and they would grab it.

Dr. Hartzell: He had a vision.

Leonard Eisenbud: A very strong vision and was optimistic about its realization, and Toll also had something of this very strongly with all the sense of accomplishment of what he could do was everything, he was ready to devote heart and soul to the task. They had a strong vision of a growing University. What was your understanding of your own place in the future of Stony Brook? Well, I don't know. Why do you think you were appointed? Well, at that time they were certainly looking for strength in the sciences and people were not that easy to find. What expectation did you have when you came?

Dr. Hartzell: Think about that, were you interested in teaching or research, or both?

Leonard Eisenbud: Teaching and writing. I had not been successful I wanted to write in quantum physics and nuclear physics and maybe I thought of myself as a teacher. How have these expectations worked out both personally and for the institution? Well, personally I think they worked out very well.

I've been happy at Stony Brook; I've enjoyed working there. It's hard for me to say how they worked out for the institution. I think I made contributions to the institution; contributions to the Physics Department, to the growth of the Department.

Dr. Hartzell: Were you involved with the appointment of Max Dresden, for instance?

Leonard Eisenbud: Not immediately, I knew Max, and maybe when he came, but I think that this was engineered mostly by Alec. And Alec and he together, actually Alec's vision produced the idea of the Institute for Theoretical Physics and he got Yang to head it. That was really a most remarkable coup.

Dr. Hartzell: That was John Toll also involved in that, wasn't he?

Leonard Eisenbud: I know it only from Alec's point of view, I think. Yes, that was a real coup. Of course that was a great boost to the Physics Department generally as well as to the University.

Dr. Hartzell: Alec, I think, was an experimentalist.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes.

Dr. Hartzell: And he came from St. Louis?

Leonard Eisenbud: He came from Washington University; he was a student of Bigley's. My activities were confined mainly to the Stony Brook campus, but I had some relations with a federal office through the Research Administration, I was a member of that group that went over there and reviewed research grants and proposals. And at one time I was a Vice Chairman of that group; that was all that I did with respect to the federal

Dr. Hartzell: This is the Research, what do they call it, Mort Grant Group.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yeah, Mort Briefly I was, while early years put in there while Mort was and I was Associate Dean for the Sciences, until the appointment but then I decided I didn't want to do it, I'm a retiring fellow.

Dr. Hartzell: How did Stan Ross work out?

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't know, I find it very difficult to make such judgments because I don't see any interior of the authors, I know that there are people who say he didn't do this or he didn't that that he should have done. But I don't know what the boundary conditions on him are and so I don't try to enter into those judgments unless they directly influence me and they did influence me at that time.

Dr. Hartzell: You know that he had died.

Leonard Eisenbud: No, I didn't know he had died. When did that happen?

Dr. Hartzell: Well, a year or so ago at least. Last time I saw him he was using a cane and limping. I don't know what

Leonard Eisenbud: What do you feel you have accomplished at Stony Brook by 1971? Well, I got the Physics Department started. I got Alec Pond appointed; I had gone through the business of building design initially, although that didn't work out terribly, nevertheless, we did what we could about the original design.

Dr. Hartzell: Did you have input on the design of the whole Physics Building?

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, it was very little.

Dr. Hartzell: Very little. With whom were you working then? Was it Elwin Stevens in the Architect's office or

Leonard Eisenbud: I've forgotten the name of the man or lady; it was an architect's office in New York that were going to visit.

Dr. Hartzell: Voorhees, Walker?

Leonard Eisenbud: Yeah, Voorhees, Walker. I remember being terribly annoyed when they built the Physics Department, and we had had very little input what kind of people to put into it. They had called me after the building had been completed and said "where could I find out information on how to build a physics building?" Their restrictions on that building were so severe, they paid almost no attention to it, they had so little profit form the enterprise they didn't put any great effort into it.

Dr. Hartzell: Well, I think it was Rockefeller that took all University construction out from under the Bureau of Public Works, put it under a new Construction Fund, the

University Construction Fund. I interviewed George Dudley, who was one of the three Trustees of the Construction Fund under Rockefeller.

Leonard Eisenbud: Whoever it was, I think that it was very shortsighted. Buildings were put up in a hurry; they were put up without thought and any real concern for any long term plan. Can you name individuals for the future development of the University as a whole or some part of it? Certainly, Alec and John Toll and more locally, Max Dresden. John Toll was a man of he had a fixed notion of what the University should be and, of course, he followed it very strenuously. He was extremely careful, unlike, for example, Mr. Lee, he knew about who was being appointed and why; and he was a good judge of quality. But I think he did not again I don't know what the boundary conditions on his activities were. As to the question of the general quality of life, somehow he didn't see that as a total, his mind was elsewhere.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you think scientists, in general, are less concerned with that?

Leonard Eisenbud: Probably, probably they are as a class, but it is a highly individual matter, but Johnny particularly. Well, then I think we've read through the questions; is there somewhere else we should go?

Dr. Hartzell: Quality of students?

Leonard Eisenbud: I remember in the early years having some excellent students. The students who were, had come back from the wars and older than the usual student, more serious and with good quality. But, like everyone else I guess one feels that the quality of students in the University has gone down the University scientific creek. I think that's not merely a local but a problem for the country as a whole. But, my thinking is also that it's more severe at Stony Brook, but then this is going to be only '71, more severe for Stony Brook than before. I think we have watered our student body as a result of our demands for growth and it has lasting consequences. Growth was necessary in order to increase the size of the faculty, if you wanted to recruit the faculty, of course, as time went on you were able to make better and better appointments, and so that

growth was essential to improve the faculty's position but I think that growth has also affected the level of the student body and this now is a situation which is hard to revert. I know students that I had a call from a mother who heard that Stony Brook had a good Physics Department, her daughter wanted to study Physics but she didn't want to go to Stony Brook, she was going off to one other, and what did I think. I said I think we have a better Physics Department than Binghamton does, but her daughter didn't want to go because many of the people in her class had been accepted at Stony Brook and they weren't good, they were low level in the class, and if they were going to Stony Brook, she didn't want to go.

Dr. Hartzell: Where was she from, the high school?

Leonard Eisenbud: A local high school somewhere on Long Island. So that aspect of it, I think, we did suffer. I think that the quality of but nothing went how we had hoped it would. we get more applications the applications from foreign countries I think have improved considerably but we still don't get by and large in the United States.

Dr. Hartzell: What about faculty life, that is, what about the community of scholars concept within the University?

Leonard Eisenbud: There is a problem, I think, practically everywhere, and I don't know how you can handle it, that is given the departmental structure there is almost a kind of isolation between departments.

Dr. Hartzell: Is there any means of breaking it down? Do the Deans have a function or the Department Chairmen have a function in doing that?

Leonard Eisenbud: I think the Department Chairman really doesn't; I think you've got to go beyond that. Take of considerable strength, I'm not sure how you would organize programs in order to make it work. You know you are judged within your profession, you are judged by the work that you do in your department. If you do something outside of that, well, in the first place, it's new. It is going to be

experimental. It probably doesn't work very well. A commitment is made to the students on a one-time basis, we don't want to do it forever, but then there isn't an effective way of following it up, of improving that particular activity, because once you leave it, you have done something that is of interest to you, you leave it, someone else doesn't want to do that. There is no particular form which might be followed, it becomes an individual matter but the individual is not committed to it long term; that makes it extremely difficult. I've never seen a reasonably effective program; I think, however, of the one that was run, what do they call, the 'Conversations in the Disciplines.' I didn't think that that made any difference.

Dr. Hartzell: It was certainly voluntary and a lot of people don't think that way, they don't ask questions outside their discipline.

Leonard Eisenbud: That certainly is true. I don't know how you get thing going. It seems more than just a casual matter really, more than complete theater. I think it is a really very serious problem and I think that in a way you've got to get good people who will organize within a separate group and decide that their responsibility is toward integration, but they are not going to be members of a department any longer. They give up that particular aspect for the development of something else.

Dr. Hartzell: Integration is a key word and you are educated for analysis.

Leonard Eisenbud: you have a commitment to a particular profession and you don't let, you don't know where you are, you have no of judgment.

Dr. Hartzell: Well, Harvard has really made an effort to institutionalize the, what they call their core curriculum. They put money behind their project, dollars for what they call general education three or four years ago and they were revising You have to institutionalize it outside the department actively.

Leonard Eisenbud: It is difficult to get people to commit themselves to long term effort in that direction.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you know when Oakes Ames came in the Department?

Leonard Eisenbud: He came shortly after Alec, Oakes was a good friend of Alec's. I believe a year or two

Dr. Hartzell: For a while he was chairman of the Department. Did he make a good one.

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't think that it was He wasn't bad, but I don't think that he had an effect of strong growth or vision, major corporations or direction or anything of that kind. It was more, I would say, mixed.

Dr. Hartzell: Did you know Andy Jackson?

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you know how he happened to get into the Department?

Leonard Eisenbud: No, I don't. When I was expecting, he didn't come after, he and Jerry Brown I think it was Jerry Brown.

Dr. Hartzell: He had my house two years ago while I was, I got to know him quite well. He was in the middle of a divorce. I found him unusually intelligent, broad based individual. I don't think we're going to be able to keep him.

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, that may be, he's in strong demand.

Dr. Hartzell: Do you have any other comments for someone who would be writing a history of the early years of Stony Brook, to guide him either in looking for material or in interpreting it?

Leonard Eisenbud: Writing any history, I guess, as you know, is a difficult job. And all history gets rewritten.

Dr. Hartzell: Their point of view.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, different points of view, different temperaments, different judgments would be eventually involved and so I expect that this will be too, that is, as we read the history we will see certain things that we recognize, and other things we wouldn't think, not the way it happened.

Dr. Hartzell: Well, that's what I want to get at from you, what you think was the way things happened.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, but it's so hard to reconstruct. fact that I threw away when I retired and moved my office, I threw away an enormous amount of memos of one sort or another that I kept through the course of time, but I'm sure that somewhere this sort of thing can be discovered.

Dr. Hartzell: Central files ought to be preserved and I think they now have a good man, but he is understaffed in the Archives.

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't know how, you will find people in this respect who have, certainly plenty of people who lived through that period and no doubt they will get conflicting stories of what went on, conflicting theories about what went on. I know that in the early years there were those who had what I thought were incredible expectations of the University. I think the University has done extremely well but nothing like, I think that what considerable but compared with some of the dreams in the beginning, we haven't done that well. we haven't mentioned them at all the difficult years of the, when Toll had a pie thrown at him, when, the drug bust, we didn't fit in, I remember the faculty retiring from one meeting hall and running of students jeering and shouting at them as they walked through to another portion of the campus.

Dr. Hartzell: Stony Brook wasn't alone in that.

Leonard Eisenbud: Of course no, it started out and passed through the whole country, a fantastic project.

Dr. Hartzell: Had there been no Vietnam War would you have the same kind of intensity?

Leonard Eisenbud: I don't think so, no, it certainly types of emotions were involved, when you recognize that these students did have a prospect of going to a country that they didn't and being killed in a battle that they didn't know anything about it, they couldn't explain, you were left with enough to make them feel

Dr. Hartzell: When I came, the faculty was divided and the students were anti-administration. Two weeks after I got into the office a Full Professor in the Philosophy Department came in and said, “If you don’t fire so and so and so and so, this place is going to go to the dogs.” There’s a philosopher for you.

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, before you were there, we had similar things, that is unless so and so goes, this place is finished. I remember I think it the second or third year I was here being visited by a delegation saying the University will be and last. So I learned to ignore things.

Dr. Hartzell: The argument *ad hominem*, I don’t agree with you, I don’t like you; there was a lot of that. To what extent do you think I was finally able to bring about some kind of harmony, bring people back on the track?

Leonard Eisenbud: In other words, I think that, I don’t know exactly after, this period is not one in which I was directly involved so much in what was going on. I think the intensity of the original conflict and the intensity when old friends wouldn’t talk to you any longer on the basis of divisions this sort of thing, so that as the University went on, life seemed to continue despite one’s work, imagining, there was lessening of that kind of tension. What part you directly played in that, I don’t know. I don’t think that I as aware enough of what was going at that time to make a judgment of that kind.

Dr. Hartzell: I don’t think you were in any of the committees, as I remember, with which I was dealing.

Leonard Eisenbud: I don’t think I tried to avoid conflict which went on

Dr. Hartzell: For some people you can only that intensity so long and you get tired of it. Well, do you think there is anything else that I ought to ask you?

Leonard Eisenbud: Gee, I don’t know.

Dr. Hartzell: What’s your conception of Stony Brook’s position now within the State and nationally?

Leonard Eisenbud: Well, it is a known institution, it has a reputation. When you say Stony Brook now, people know what you're talking about. Certainly in Physics, in Mathematics, in the other sciences, people are aware of Stony Brook. In journals or in the papers, the contributions from Stony Brook There is no question that it has been And that I think is quite an achievement, it's not something that would automatically have happened.

Dr. Hartzell: There had to be a lot of effort.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes.

Dr. Hartzell: Money, support, some good decisions.

Leonard Eisenbud: Yes, the Physics Department I think has fared particularly well. We got really excellent people here

Dr. Hartzell: Okay, well, I think that's about all I can ask you.

Leonard Eisenbud: It was a good move for me coming to Stony Brook

Dr. Hartzell: Well, for me going to Brookhaven was an eye opener. I was in the Director's Office for five years from '47 to '52 in the same carful with Got acquainted with many different types of scientists, including Ollie Schaeffer, I talked to him about development of the Earth and Space Science Department. There were some who took themselves very seriously and looked down on anybody who was not either a physicist or in the There were others were perfectly normal individuals with far less ego, within the science realm but in those days scientists were the top of the pecking order