Gary Snyder '51

July 22, 1998

John Sheehy '82, Interviewer

Location: Snyder's home in California

The following interview with Gary Snyder '51 was recorded on July 22, 1998, at his home on the San Juan Ridge of the Sierra foothills, that he calls Kitkitdizze, by John Sheehy '82, for the Reed College Oral History Project.

Sheehy: Let's start with a bit of information about your early background. I'm interested in some of the seeds that were planted, or perhaps that started to sprout, while you were a student at Reed. But let's begin with some biographical information. You were born in San Francisco and then your family moved north of Seattle to a dairy farm.

Snyder: A very small dairy farm. Three cows.

Sheehy: And how old were you then at that time?

Snyder: I was only maybe two years old when they moved up there. So my first memories are from Washington State and from this little farm. It was outside the city limits in those days, up north of Seattle.

Sheehy: Did your family have background in that area? I think I heard that your grandfather had been a pioneer up there.

Snyder: Yes. My grandfather homesteaded in Kitsap County when it was still the Territory, and then my father was born in Seattle in 1900. He was the youngest of a number of brothers that were all working in logging or on ships when they were young men. Then he went to sea and ended up being a purser on ships for a while.

My mother, who was originally from Texas with her mother moved to Seattle when she was about eleven or twelve, and finished high school in Seattle. For a couple of years she attended the University of Washington. All my father's relatives were Seattle people. I had a sense of myself as a person of the Pacific Northwest.

Sheehy: You were born in 1930, so you came of age during the Depression.

Snyder: Yes, or began to, anyway.

Sheehy: I'm curious about some of the influences from that time, specifically what it was like growing up on a little dairy farm during the Great Depression outside of Seattle.

Snyder: Well, my father was out of work for six years, and we were on relief off and on. The economy didn't pick up until World War II came along, actually, although he did finally get a job just a year or two prior to the outbreak of the war. It was a hard scrabble rural poverty life for us and for lots of other people in the area. Having the cows and the chickens and the garden was subsistence strategy. And picking up odd jobs and so forth.

Sheehy: In your time at Reed and also in you later work later, there's a fascination with hobos and tramps. Does that spring from that early time?

Snyder: That was part of the world of the thirties, not romanticized, but real, that people would come to the door and ask for work, ask for a meal in return for, classically, splitting some firewood. I heard many stories of poverty and strikes, of people riding the rods and seeking work. My grandfather was an IWW activist in his spare time, and my father was out organizing, doing labor organizing, on the Grand Coulee Dam Project. Like so many, he was a socialist and my mother was an early feminist and socialist. That was in the air in the thirties, you know. Everybody was a Marxist, if you look at the literary magazines of the time. [Laughter]

There was a big Marxist, socialist, bohemian crowd that lived down on the shores of Lake Union in houseboats. My father knew some of those and we went out on the waterway sometimes. They had meetings at the house too.

I think I absorbed a sort of sense of social conscience just out of the events of the time, but I also have a clear memory of not even thinking that we were poor. I was not thinking of myself in a poverty mode, but knowing that there were people, and knowing some of them personally, that really were truly poor.

Sheehy: Relative to your situation.

Snyder: Yes. And that's what I thought poverty was. And feeling very concerned about them.

Sheehy: What about early spiritual influences?

Snyder: Atheist.

Sheehy: When did your early animist experiences begin?

Snyder: My animist experiences came to me, as it were, by nature itself. A matter of my own character, I guess. As many children do, I had a kind of animist sense of the world. We lived right on the edge of forest, so I was out in the woods a lot.

Sheehy: Was there an age when you became conscious of having a spiritual framework of the world?

Snyder: By eleven or twelve I became aware of it, and by thirteen or fourteen I had heard of Hindu and Buddhist views and ethics that included the non-human world, and I was tuned to the Native American view.

Sheehy: So, did that exposure also come from your readings as a child?

Snyder: It was also from readings, yes. Readings as well as experiences. In the Native American case, it wasn't just readings; it was the Salish people that came by the place selling smoked salmon from their trucks, and then the big group of Native American Salish people that used to sit down at one end of the Pike Street Market and spread out blankets and sit on the floor and sell things out of baskets in the thirties. I was told that they still were coming across the sound in handmade canoes sometimes to sell things, but with outboards on them. That was a presence.

And as I was telling Mark [Gonnerman] the other day, another teacher for me was the big University of Washington Anthropology Museum. The University District of Seattle, which is at the north end of town, was only a twenty-minute drive from our farm. We weren't really that far out of town, although population and houses dropped off drastically when you got past the University District in those days. We made a Saturday journey into town, usually to go to the Goodwill, to the University Branch Public Library, and I would often be dropped off at the University Anthropology Museum by my own choice and spend four or five hours there, just absorbing canoes and masks and artifacts, particularly chilkat blankets. I took all that in non-verbally.

Sheehy: There's a story I've heard about a childhood injury you received from walking on coals that resulted in some heavy reading habits as a boy.

Snyder: Right. Yes.

Sheehy: Can you relate that.

Snyder: At the end of my first grade year, I burnt my feet in the ashes of a burnt-down brush pile, and I couldn't move around very well the rest of the summer. My parents brought me books from the public library, and by the end of the summer I was reading fluently. I mean, really fast. I just jumped into gear with it.

Sheehy: Can you talk a little bit about some of the early reading influences? As a teenager, what did you tend to read?

Snyder: You know, I had read so much by the time I got to high school, it's hard even to track it down, but I had read a lot of Native American material, history, novels. There were many novels in the thirties that were on social themes. I remember novels about the suffering of Indians mining in Peru, about silver mines in Mexico. I don't know where those books are now, but they were part of the social conscience world of the thirties and the New Deal world. Then the Nordhoff and Hall novels, Mutiny on the Bounty, Pitcairn Island, everybody read those. By the end of high school, I was reading James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, Gertrude Stein, beginning to read the moderns before I even got into Reed.

Sheehy: Your family then moved from Seattle to Portland at what point?

Snyder: The first year of the war. After the first year of the war. '41, '42. '42, it must have been. It was part of the disruptions of the war.

Sheehy: How old were you?

Snyder: Twelve. I did eighth grade at--I don't remember the name of the grade school now. Then went to St. John's High School in Portland for a while, and then I graduated from Lincoln High in Portland.

Sheehy: Where did you live when you were in Portland?

Snyder: Several places around town. Once we were up in the hills back of Council Crest, then out north in the St. John's district, and for a while we were out by the Columbia River. At that time the Columbia River had almost no development along it, just riparian forests and sloughs. I spent time exploring the sloughs and bird-watching, fishing, and muskrat-watching along the Columbia River. That was a great place to be.

Sheehy: What was it like for you coming into the city after growing up in the woods?

Snyder: I made a pretty fair adaptation. I made the same adaptation I've made ever since with cities: I immediately found where the nearest wild area was. Learned how to get to it whenever I needed to.

Sheehy: Why Reed College? What attracted you to apply?

Snyder: Because a high school teacher said that would be a place for me to go, recommended it to me. I wasn't thinking about college particularly. I was primarily interested in mountaineering and in making a living by working in the woods. But also, you know, I had a lot of intellectual curiosity.

I got turned down by Reed the first time. My high school teacher, one of them, sent over a bundle of poems I'd written, to the college, and they asked me to come back, and suddenly admitted me. So it was on the basis of some poems I had written.

Sheehy: That was within the same year that you applied the first time?

Snyder: Yes, the very same time. It all happened the same fall.

Sheehy: And your feeling is, the poems really made a difference.

Snyder: Oh, no question of it. That's what got me in. I didn't have that good a record, academic record, because I was paying attention to other things when I was in high school.

Sheehy: For example?

Snyder: Mountaineering, skiing, and reading all the books I wanted to read. And I worked at the Portland Oregonian every afternoon from four till midnight.

Sheehy: As a?

Snyder: Copy boy.

Sheehy: Your mother was a journalist. Was she working at the Oregonian then?

Snyder: She worked over on the Vancouver Sun. She started working there during the war. She then worked on newspapers until she retired. She came down to California and worked all over Southern California and finally retired in Santa Barbara.

Sheehy: How did you find your way into poetry?

Snyder: Poetry was in the air. The possibility of poetry was in the air. My mother had an interest in poetry. And song. I taught myself to play folk guitar and learned to sing numerous folk songs and blues songs while I was still in high school. So my transition into poetry was, in part, a transition from singing and from song to writing my own poems. I was an early aficionado of Leadbelly.

Sheehy: What attracted you to Leadbelly?

Snyder: Oh, man, great songs!

Sheehy: But Leadbelly wasn't accepted or that popular in the mainstream at that time, was he?

Snyder: He was in the left. Did you ever hear of an organization called People Songs?

Sheehy: No.

Snyder: It was a left wing front that published a journal of folk songs and labor songs. Leadbelly was very much a favorite. In fact, he was supposedly supported by them when he was living in New York. The folk song revival in the United States is very closely connected with end of the thirties and World War II left-wing politics, and the hope of making a connection with the American working class and with the American folk, and with the black people, because the

American Communist party was the only official urban-based political group in the country that took black people's interests really seriously, and was the first group to make a public declaration of opposition to racism in all its forms. The American Communists should be given credit for that, and the Communist-dominated labor unions carried that into their own labor union practice, like the National Maritime Union, which I joined at about eighteen. First case of racist language or behavior, a fine of $100. Second case, the seaman was kicked out of the Union. That was in the late forties.

Sheehy: Going back to your applying Reed--What was the reputation of Reed within Portland at that time?

Snyder: Bohemian and radical and hyperintellectual. Those three. [Laughter]

Sheehy: And this was attractive to you?

Snyder: Yes. It seemed--

Sheehy: Fitting?

Snyder: Fitting.

Sheehy: What kind of expectations did you have?

Snyder: I had no expectations, except to have a good time. [Laughter] I think that's all the expectations everybody has when they go to college.

Sheehy: You had at that point no career path in mind?

Snyder: No. I think the closest thing I had to an idea about career was forestry and I thought of myself as probably being a writer.

Sheehy: Did you apply to any other colleges?

Snyder: No, I didn't. I remember once when I was asked in the eighth grade, when a teacher asked us in the eighth grade what I wanted to be, all of us wanted to be when we grew up or when we had a career, I wrote down "conservationist and writer." "Conservationist" was the term then. I was also reading conservationist literature. I had already gotten the idea. The thirties. I was seriously concerned about soil erosion. And deforestation, by the time I was fourteen or fifteen, if not earlier.

Sheehy: Partly, I would imagine, from your early experiences in the woods.

Snyder: Well, yes. There was a lot of logging going on, but also I was reading “The Living Wilderness” journal. Then I joined the Mazamas when I was fifteen.

Sheehy: The Mazamas was a mountain climbing club?

Snyder: A mountaineering group, yes, when I was fifteen, and they had a conservationist agenda as well as a mountaineering program, just like Sierra Club.

Sheehy: So now you're at Reed. What was it like coming to that environment? Do you have any memories of early rites of passage at the college?

Snyder: It was a difficult adjustment for me. I was used to not working in school. I had gone through my entire school career without doing any work, basically, sort of pulling it out of the fire at the last minute by getting a few quick bright ideas and being articulate. But I neglected to really pay attention to what people were trying to do. I never learned to write papers, for example, because we weren't really made to write papers in high school in those days. I wasn't prepared for the kind of self-discipline that it took, and I didn't have a clue about footnotes or anything like that. So I scrambled, my first year, to just keep my head above water, enjoying it at the same time, enjoying the faculty people and also really enjoying the students that I got to know.

They had given me not what they call a scholarship, but something they called a grant-in-aid for that first year, because my parents didn't have any money and they were splitting up also at the same time. But at the end of the first year, I was out of money. Not that I'd ever had any, but I didn't have any grant-in-aid for the following year because I had done poorly. So I didn't think I was going to be able to come back the following fall.

But I hitchhiked to the East Coast just after I turned eighteen, with one of the Reed kids I'd met who was from New York City. His mother was secretary for the National Maritime

Union. I got seaman's papers, got onto a ship, and worked the summer between New York and Venezuela on one of the old Graceline ships. I was able to save up some money.

Then I hitchhiked back west from New York, set kind of a cross-country speed record. I got hitchhiked from New York to Los Angeles in four and a half days, traveling day and night. It ended up that the last best ride I got was out to L.A. instead of up north. It was from St. Louis. So we went down 66 all the way.

Then I hitchhiked up north, put in a few weeks working on a stone mason job to earn a little more money, and entered Reed in the fall.

Sheehy: With the money to pay for your tuition?

Snyder: Yes. But I had had a change of spirit in the meantime. I decided I would be serious about being a student, and I jumped into it with a ferocious and focused attitude, and maintained that attitude the rest of my time in college.

Sheehy: Did this come from having to pay your own way?

Snyder: Well, it also came from resolving my ambiguity about being at Reed the first year. There was a certain thirst for some experience out in the world. Getting to New York and down to Venezuela, doing a lot of hard work and being on the streets of New York, meeting a bunch of different types, satisfied that. It also gave me the sense that, "Well, this is fun, adventuring around the world. I can see this is interesting. There's a lot to be learned here," but I realized that I also needed to get some solid intellectual ground.

So I went back to school with my mind made up to do that, and not to think about going on the road anymore for a while. So I got my little "on the road" period over in three months. [Laughter]

Sheehy: [Laughter] My impression is that the student body at Reed was changing after the war. I understand that it was somewhat of a regional college prior to the war and then after the war there was an influx of veterans on the GI Bill. How did that influence the social and academic environment.

Snyder: I have no idea what it was like prior to the war, except that it was considered liberal. I hear that it was in the Emersonian New England Protestant liberals style, with a New Deal liberal and socialist presence also. Lloyd Reynolds, he was there in the thirties.

I didn't understand the sociology of Reed very clearly, or even pay attention to it, but we did have several groups. One, was a big chunk of GIs just back from the war. And then there were the students from New England prep schools, partly because there was good skiing in the area--Mount Hood. [Sheehy laughs] So they came out for the mountains as well as the of WASPish New England style that Reed had. Portland was considered a kind of extension of New England for many years, whereas Seattle is more Swedes.

Then there were Jewish kids from the East Coast and Midwest and some from very liberal families. It was the first time I had met affluent radicals. [Laughter] I had a hard time putting that together.

Sheehy: This was quite a fascinating stew, then, you walked into.

Snyder: Yes. And there were the locals--sharp students from Portland. Like the brilliant--and I'm not kidding now--the brilliant Gale Dick, considered one of the smartest people in school and he went on to get a Rhodes Scholarship I think, and went into physics. He's at the University of Utah. So some of these people I climbed and skied with.

Sheehy: Were you aware of class distinctions at Reed when you were in these activities?

Snyder: I wasn't aware of class distinctions, actually. Took me years to figure that out. [Laughter] See, a part of the style of the impoverished intellectual left of the thirties was that they assumed they were equal, to everybody, anyway, because they had politically correct ideas years before anybody knew the term "political correctness." They just figured they were right. Just like Marxists used to figure they were right. "History is on our side." Took Marxists a long time to give that up and to suspect that maybe history wasn't always on their side after all. Part of the confidence of the left in those days was that sense of destiny, and I think my parents instilled a little of it in me.

Sheehy: I want to go deeper into the political environment, but first I want to get into social life at Reed a bit. In your first year did you live in the dorms on campus?

Snyder: The first year I was homeless.

Sheehy: Oh, really? How so?

Snyder: My mother's life was falling apart, and, besides, the house she was living in was way across town and it was not feasible to live there and commute. But I had no income, either, except what I was making working part time for the Oregonian, which was very low wages. So for a good part of my freshman year at Reed, I slept around in different dorm rooms by virtue of the generosity of my friends, and didn't have a room of my own. I was really itinerant, and I was living out of my backpack a lot of the time, with my books and everything.

Sheehy: Were you eating in Commons?

Snyder: I was eating in Commons, often overlooked, you know. It was a very generous thing on the part of the people in Commons, that they looked the other way and just let me get meals.

Sheehy: So then you went to sea, made some money, and came back in your sophomore year. Were you still homeless then?

Snyder: Well, that was when we started getting focused on a place to live. I had enough money to pay rent. We drifted over there and rented it together, and then I was at Lambert Street for the rest of my time at Reed.

Sheehy: Was it common at the time to live in group houses? I've heard that your group house at 1414 Lambert Street was either one of the first Reed houses or *the* first Reed house.

Snyder: There were students that lived in houses in the neighborhood, you know, the Sellwood neighborhood, that rented rooms here and there, but I think it was the first house that was totally taken over by Reed people. Yes. As far as I know. I mean, who knows. [Laughter]

Sheehy: And was the house coed?

Snyder: Oh, sure it was. It was whatever arrangements that we wanted to make in renting our various apartments. The college paid no attention to us, as far as I could tell.

Sheehy: Your landlord was a Reverend Cranston, correct?

Snyder: Yes, Cranston. Who told you that?

Sheehy: I've got my sources.

Snyder: You've got your sources. Yes. Poor Cranston. God, he didn't know what he was up against. But, you know, we did pay the rent on time every month and we kept the place clean. But he was pretty prudish. A look of dismay and disgust sort of passed over his face as he visited the house and people in various stages of clothing, many of them women were around, and he gave up trying to even ask if anybody was married. [Laughter]

Sheehy: You called him "the shadow," is that right?

Snyder: That was one of his names. He was okay, actually. He was long suffering.

Sheehy: I've heard that you functioned as sort of a manager of this house.

Snyder: I was sort of the manager of it, yes.

Sheehy: You had a room in the basement in exchange for managing it.

Snyder: That's right. I had a very tiny room in the basement.

Sheehy: Do you want to describe that room? Your classmate Michael Mahar describes it as having a Japanese influence.

Snyder: Michael thought that was Japanese. That was apple boxes and orange crates. If that's Japanese. Well, unpainted wood, that's a variation. Right. [Laughter]

Sheehy: Japanese prints.

Snyder: I had some Japanese prints. That's right.

Sheehy: And a little water garden from when the rain leaked in from the casement window.

Snyder: Yes, yes. And a little cooking outfit that was basically a good backpacker's cook set. It was simple.

Sheehy: He describes it as "the aura of the sheik of Arabi, that attracted women of all persuasions."

Snyder: Oh! That's totally off the wall, Mahar is just tweaking you now.

Sheehy: Tell me a little bit about the other housemates you remember there.

Snyder: Martin Murie. Carol Baker and her husband Bill Baker. They were married. These are some of my old and influential friends from Reed in those days. Martin Murie was the son of Olaus, of the famous wildlife biologist Murie brothers. They had worked first in Alaska and then in the Yellowstone region. His mother, Mardie Murie, is a wonderful person. Martin was an impressive guy. He was a climber, too, both mountaineer and a left-winger.

Sheehy: Ed Harper. Is that a name you remember?

Snyder: Ed Harper was there for a while. That's right. He was majoring in anthropology. he died still young.

Sheehy: Don Berry.

Snyder: Don never lived there, I don't think, but he often visited. Others were--at various times--Michael Mahar, Robin Collins, Lew Welch, Roy Stillwell, Philip Whalen, and many more. Dell Hymes was a regular visitor. Alison Gass, Les and Rosemary Thompson lived there for awhile. Have you seen the picture of that house?

Sheehy: No, I haven't.

Snyder: Have you seen The Dimensions of a Life by John Halper?

Sheehy: Yes, I have.

Snyder: There's a photograph of some of us down in the basement.

Sheehy: Oh, yes, I saw it. I was trying to find the Japanese prints. So was this your first taste of communal life?

Snyder: Yes, and it was very workable. It was economical, it was cooperative, we all shared in a lot of cooking. We had good potluck meals together, and we got a lot of study and scholarship done. It was just the right balance. Most of us biked to school, a two-mile ride. There was a sense of family. We had Thanksgiving dinners together there.

Sheehy: I think I'm remembering in Carol Baker's tales in Dimensions of a Life, her talking about a Thanksgiving dinner that landed in the pages of the Oregonian. Your mother was involved and fed it to a columnist.

Snyder: Yes. My mother had these journalistic instincts that you couldn't head off sometimes.

Sheehy: And it caused a minor scandal at the college.

Snyder: Yes. We were trying to keep a low profile. [Laughter]

Sheehy: Your mom kind of blew that.

Snyder: Yes. But that blew over.

Sheehy: Do you recall the code names "Leitswics" and "Hoodlatch?"

Snyder: Indeed.

Sheehy: What meaning do they have?

Snyder: Those were nicknames some of us went by.

Sheehy: Just nicknames and no other meaning?

Snyder: Ok, they were Vision Quest names. The idea was that you had to get your Vision Quest name by sequestering yourself in an industrial part of town. Then it comes to you as a kind of a flash of insight and the promise of help from a material object. So my friend Hoodlatch was the first who got this Vision Quest accomplished. He saw an old thirties car, the latch that holds the hood down, and he said, "That's my ally. Hood Latch. I will take that name." So he became Hoodlatch, and I became Leitswics.

Sheehy: Who was Hoodlatch?

Snyder: Bob Allen. Then Steamboat was another one. [Laughter] Steamboat is still around. He's now in San Francisco. So that was our little joke, you know. But for some of us, those nicknames stuck.

Sheehy: Was this group from the Lambert House your gang on campus as well?

Snyder: Not entirely. There were a lot of other campus friends that didn't happen to live there. They might come and party there.

Sheehy: David French described your group as "the intellectual, poetic, truth-seeking group."

Snyder: Well, probably not the only one, but I suppose, you know, you could say that. There were people who were in the sciences there, too. Martin Murie was in biology and not particularly in poetry.

Sheehy: I'm curious to get into some of your relationships also with Phil Whalen and Lew Welch

Snyder: Yes, Lew lived there. Now it comes back to me. Lew lived there initially with Carol Baker for quite a spell, and after Carol and Lew split up, she got together with Billy Baker, and they got married. That's right.

Sheehy: Do you remember your first encounters with Whalen and Welch?

Snyder: I remember my first encounter with Phil as probably in the sophomore year after he had been acting in a play, I went back stage after it was over and we talked. I became aware of his knowledge of literature. He was a fine teacher and conversationalist, Air Force veteran, GI Bill. So we became friends and stayed friends.

And Lew probably was in one of the classes sophomore year, and also a very sharp literary mind, very keen, also left wing. We all became friends.

Sheehy: It seems like, looking at some of that crowd, you all shared a common interest in cross-cultural issues. I'm struck that a number of you were interested in anthropology and literature, for example. Was that a common topic or influence around the college at the time?

Snyder: Yes. I don't know quite why that was so. Philip was already well-versed in East Asian painting and art. We were discovering translations from Japanese and Chinese poetry about the same time, and quoting it back and forth to each other. I discovered the Tao Te Ching. Philip put me onto the Bhagavad-Gita. Philip had a good personal library.

And Charlie Leong, a Chinese American GI, came into our world and provided first-hand quick short-hand teachings, like how to do brush calligraphy. He taught me the basic moves of Chinese characters and how to grind ink.

Some of us were taking courses in anthropology with Dave French, getting Native American understanding and insight. David was working with some Native American people up east of Mount Hood. It was almost a living contact.

So, yes, broad cultural interests, but I don't see that as being in any way unique or special. The presence of Japanese and Chinese people and cultures on the West Coast was just part of the world I grew up in. Near our farm at Lake City was a truck farm run by Japanese. I remember when the posters went up on the telephone poles saying, "All persons of Japanese ancestry must report." Three families in our area went to the camps, with several kids that were playmates of mine, kids I went to school with. That was in grade school, 1941.

Sheehy: So this was sort of an evolving interest from your early years?

Snyder: Well, it was part of being on the West Coast, yes.

Sheehy: David French taught a course on the Far East at that time, correct?

Snyder: He taught one Far Eastern Culture course every year or so. I took that and it got me through a couple of good books on Chinese and Japanese history and was one of the early places where I first ran onto the term "Zen Buddhism." Robert Richter, who had studied briefly with Senzaki in Los Angeles, had also spoken of Zen.

Sheehy: Also I understand that Lloyd Reynolds, who you studied with as well, was also a lover of East Asian art.

Snyder: He gradually became one, more and more so, interested. I think one of his first connections was his interest in italic calligraphy, and he and Charlie worked together a lot. Charlie was a fine calligrapher in Chinese, and then Charlie took up Lloyd's calligraphy classes and made himself into a marvelous calligrapher in Chancery cursive. So he was doing both. Lloyd looked at that and said, "Well, if you can learn to do Chancery cursive, I can learn to do Chinese characters." So he got Charlie to teach him how to grind the ink and hold the brush. [Laughter]

Then Charlie took us all downtown to Chinatown. Every once in a while we would get Charlie and go out to eat. He was a Portland kid, a Portland Chinese-American kid. There was a big population there in those days. They all knew him and they would put together a great dinner for us. Charlie would tell us what it was. [Laughter]

Sheehy: Was there a lot of other Eastern studying going on at Reed?

Snyder: Not so much. But I was as much taken with getting a handle on the humanities and classical culture. Frank Jones was one of the humanities teachers, and he had been a Rhodes Scholar and he could sight translate from Greek. He later went to teach at the University of Washington.

I took courses I took with Bill Alderson, who taught eighteenth century literature, and restoration comedy. And Shakespeare. I took another course from him on the Scotch-English

traditional ballads, which filled out what I already could sing, with the history of where these songs came from, what the background of songs like "The Gypsy Laddie" was.

Stanley Moore was a philosopher and a very sophisticated Marxist, who had been an officer in Berlin at the end of the war, and rode jeep together with Soviet officers before the city was formally divided up. He was from an old California ranch family. Stanley Moore had a great teaching style. He was a great mentor and a very good friend, and you know the political story already I'm sure.

Sheehy: I heard stories that he entertained students at a houseboat down on the river.

Snyder: Yes, we went down to his houseboat sometimes.

Sheehy: What was that like?

Snyder: It was very high level. Stanley never had anything to say that wasn't rigorous and challenging. So, yes, and Dave French had seminars at his house in the evenings too.

Sheehy: Would you say that there was a close relationship with the professors outside the classroom as well as on campus?

Snyder: With some. It depends. You know how young people are. They can form friendships with some adults, but not all. They're very picky in their own funny way. I felt that I could be

close to Dave and to Stanley. Not so close personally to Alderson, although I really admired his work and the kind of scholarship he did. Not close to Jones or Owen Ulph.

Sheehy: Owen Ulph.

Snyder: Owen Ulph, yes, who much later wrote a novel called The Leather Throne, and who ended up his life mostly involved with cowboy culture in Nevada.

Sheehy: Yes, he also authored a book *The Fiddleback*, about cowboy lore.

Sheehy: What was your relationship with Lloyd Reynolds like?

Snyder: I was in and out of different activities with Lloyd. He's the one who hosted William Carlos Williams when he came to Reed. So it was over to Lloyd's house to spend an evening with Bill Williams after he had done his on-campus stuff. Then the students that were invited by Lloyd hung out. Lew and me and Phil, you know, and Bill Dickey.

Sheehy: Were there any professors who were influential in terms of poetry? Was there any contemporary poetry classes that were taught at the time?

Snyder: Frank Jones. But we did most of the contemporary poetry on our own. There was a course in which we read the Four Quartets, as I recall, and I stumbled onto--I had already become

aware of Pound, Ezra Pound, as a translator from the Chinese, but then I stumbled onto Pounds' Cantos.

I was speaking earlier of some of the sub-populations that I sort of identified at Reed. Another was a very hip sort of francophile group that spoke with Bloomsbury accents, and they were intimidating because they were so sarcastic. William Dickey the poet was one of these.

Sheehy: The wits.

Snyder: The wits. They scared me, because I knew they didn't like skiing or nature. [Laughter] So I wasn't going to expose myself to them. But I admired them from afar, and some of them became eminent scholars, too.

Sheehy: So you were influenced by Pound and by Eliot. You mentioned Williams. Was that more than a casual meeting with Williams? Were you and your group studying Williams at the time or looking to Williams as a model?

Snyder: Williams became a very strong inspiration or model, especially for Lew Welch. Lew really took to Williams, and you can see that in his poetry. I took a bit more probably to Eliot and to Pound, both, than Williams. I also had the memory of what D.H. Lawrence was able to do in his collection *Bird, Beasts and Flowers* with nature, with animals and birds, which, of course, is absent pretty much in Eliot, not quite so absent in Pound, but we were constructing things out of everything that was out there, the way people always do. There's not just one influence.

Sheehy: Let's go back a bit to campus life and talk about the social environment when you were on campus.

Snyder: The social life was great. The style that seemed to have already been established at Reed by the time I was a student there. It seemed to be that you had considerable liberties in your personal life, as long as you could keep up with the school work, and freedom in dress. People came to classes barefoot, wore shorts if they wanted to, and entertained themselves however they liked on weekends. There was no code of any kind of proper behavior, except "do your work." So there was a style then that I saw going on with some people, and I'm not including myself in this particularly, somewhat wild and outrageous behavior combined with excellence in scholarship. This was a difficult image for some of the students. Some students couldn't do both, and crashed. Reed had many people that didn't make it, especially in the freshman year, because the combination of freedom and discipline is not easy.

Sheehy: Still a legacy there.

Snyder: I think that living off campus at 1414 Lambert Street was good for us, because we actually maintained a working atmosphere throughout the whole week, and people were a little bit too mature to have gross-out and throw-up drinking parties. It was more adult and that was good.

Sheehy: That would run counter to living on campus.

Snyder: Campus had the younger kids. Half the people at 1414 were GI Bill people, older people. A lot of my friends were from that older set, which was good for me.

Sheehy: So was that a real social split at Reed, then, between the younger and the older?

Snyder: Oh, I wouldn't say it was a real social split.

Sheehy: Off-campus, on-campus living?

Snyder: Maybe there was some split there, and there always is, you know, especially since it's generally the freshmen and the sophomores that are more solidly on campus, and in your upper-division years you tend to move off campus.

Sheehy: In *Dimensions of a Life* Michael Mahar talks about the campus coffee shop. He mentioned that this was a place you held court every day. Any memories of that?

Snyder: I worked there. That's why.

Sheehy: He tells a story that you used to bring your own cup and tea every day.

Snyder: Yes, I was into discriminating between ordinary black teas and better teas. [Laughter] Even though I couldn't afford them, hardly.

Sheehy: What was the coffee shop like in those days?

Snyder: Oh, it was just a place that you could buy coffee at and it stayed upon till 10 p.m. or so. It wasn't much, just coffee and doughnuts. But, yes, it was a place that students came to talk to each other. It was useful in that regard. I don't recall actually holding court there, but when I worked behind the counter, people came in and talked to me while I was working.

Sheehy: Any other social Reed celebrations or rituals that stick in your memory?

Snyder: They used to have a very interesting Christmas dinner in the Commons. I don't know if they still do that or not. It was very British. Reed was anglophile, there's no doubt about it. And they had a couple of recorder groups, even had with bass recorders, that people would be rehearsing Christmas recorder music, Renaissance recorder music. God. And then a kind of English-style Christmas dinner where they had a boar's head carried in on a litter by gentlemen who marched along and sang a song. And everybody wore fairly formal attire to that Christmas dinner. That was amusing. [Laughter] I went to that. I got a tuxedo at the Goodwill, with tails. I was very adept at finding whatever I needed at the Goodwill.

Sheehy: Was the honor principle enforced strongly in those days?

Snyder: It was.

Sheehy: Do you have any recollections of how that worked on campus?

Snyder: In my experience, it totally worked. We believed it. We believed in it and we did it. It never occurred to me, you know, that you would do anything else. It seemed like a good idea. Self-government, freedom, honesty, and bohemian outrageousness all go together. [Laughter]

Sheehy: All fairly well adhered to in your day?

Snyder: Very well adhered to, yes.

Sheehy: Dropping back a little bit into the political climate, then, you were mentioned your involvement early with an on-campus leftist group.

Snyder: Yes, which later I left. I wasn't involved formally in any political groups in my later campus life.

Sheehy: Were you still at Reed when the Velde Committee came to Portland?

Snyder: That was just after I left Reed, but I was back in town on my way to a lookout job up in the north Cascades just when the hearings were being held in town, so I stayed around for a couple of weeks and observed. That was when they called Stanley Moore.

Sheehy: Carol Baker tells the story in *Dimensions of A Life* about the FBI coming to 1414 Lambert looking for you.

Snyder: Yes. I was gone by then.

Sheehy: Something about a passport application you had made.

Snyder: Right.

Sheehy: And being denied the passport application.

Snyder: Right.

Sheehy: Was that going back to your involvement at Reed or in Portland?

Snyder: Well, my passport was turned down because of the pathways by which I got seaman's papers and When I shipped out through the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. The Marine Cooks and Stewards Union gave me the letter by which I got my seaman's papers. You can't get seaman's papers without guarantee of a job. There's a Catch-22 there, which is you can't get a job without seaman's papers. But the Marine Cooks and Stewards was considered to be a Communist party-dominated union. I later found that anybody who got their seaman's papers through them was immediately put on a list, so that was against me. Then I guess some other associations were against me.

The first time I applied for a passport--this would have been now 1953 or '54 when I was a graduate student at University of California, Berkeley--I was turned down as a security risk. With the help of the ACLU, I got a passport about a year later. I wasn't a big security risk.

Sheehy: Was that the same list that created problems for you ran in later working for the Forest Service?

Snyder: It was the same list, yes.

Sheehy: So it wasn't directly related to your activities at Reed, you're saying.

Snyder: I don't think it had anything to do with my Reed life particularly. I mean, those groups at Reed were really harmless, in truth.

Sheehy: Were you involved with other activities off campus? You mentioned, I noticed, in your book Practice of the Wild, something about a revived anarcho-syndicalism group in Portland.

Snyder: There was the beginnings of a revived anarcho-syndicalism movement that started with some of us at Reed as we became more and more dubious about the Soviet Union and about Soviet-style Communism, and that did become something of a split between me and some of my other friends at Reed who stayed a little bit more orthodox Marxist, as I tempered that with syndicalism and non-Marxist revolutionary angles, alternatives, and with the information I was getting from anthropology. That made me feel that defining all of history in terms of class struggle is certainly short-sighted and a narrow view, and cultural and ethnic differences were real differences.

The Soviet Union and China argued, up until late in the game, that you need not worry about ethnic minorities or think about small cultures, because they are basically just a category of

underprivileged low-class people who, when brought into the full light of classless socialism, would not need or want to have ethnic cultures anymore. This was the official view. I mean, they dismissed ethnicity as a serious category. It was like being a ghetto person in the city or something. When you get better living standards and an education, you're not going to want to be a Turk or a Tibetan, you'll be a member of the new socialist world.

My studies in anthropology just went absolutely the opposite direction. These are huge human identities and huge bodies of information and knowledge that cannot and should not be dismissed. So I saw Marxism on a collision course, in my own mind, you know, with the understanding of human societies that I was getting from studying Asia, from studying Native Americans in depth, and so forth. I pulled back from that, and got a certain amount of heat from some of my friends.

Sheehy: Was French teaching ethnobotany at this point?

Snyder: Not yet. He was just teaching basic cultural anthropology.

Sheehy: You were coming to that somewhat on your own, too.

Snyder: Yes. And also my environmentalist views, which I never let up on, I had them from early on and they never went away, also ran counter to what I understood of Marxist theory, which did not take that seriously.

Then as soon as I came to San Francisco I got in touch with Kenneth Rexroth. Kenneth was an outspoken anti-Stalinist. To be an associate of Kenneth Rexroth's was to become a target for the Stalinists in those days. Stalinism was alive and well for a long time, you know.

Sheehy: Shifting toward the environmental side, let's talk about the influences that Reed might have had for you in the study of ecology. Were you introduced to the concept in biology?

Snyder: Yes, there was a biology class and during the last two weeks of the course it did ecology, and I think that was one of the first places I came across the term. It was a familiar idea to me because I was already a self-taught naturalist and vernacular systems-thinker. So I thought, "Well, if I were ever going to do biology, this is the field I would want to do." That led me within a few years to picking up ecology textbooks.

Sheehy: But basically it was just that little piece at the tail end of a biology course?

Snyder: Right.

Sheehy: That you started looking at energy exchanges.

Snyder: Right. Exactly. Exactly. Interrelationships with organisms.

Sheehy: Were there any environmental groups or conservation groups active on campus at the time?

Snyder: Not a one. The Mazamas would holler and tell everybody to holler if there was a threat to public lands, if there was an attempt to do excessive logging in the Olympic National Forest or something like that. So "conservation" meant defense of public lands, basically, back in those days. Reed students were not in that loop. In fact, there wasn't any interest anywhere with students until 1968 or '69, after Rachel Carson's book and Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, and then Earth Day 1970. There was then a real turn in the awareness of young people, and from that time on there's always been a segment of the younger people who have taken those issues on.

Sheehy: I wanted to ask you about the poetry scene on campus. There were some poetry literary magazines, I believe.

Snyder: Yes, we started one, as a matter of fact. What was it called?

Sheehy: One was called Janus.

Snyder: Janus, that's it. Yes.

Sheehy: And you started that with some students while you were at Reed?

Snyder: Yes. I wasn't really one of the people who started it, but I was a bystander, and I think I had a poem in the first issue, certainly in the second or third. Lew, Phil, Bill Dickey, myself, two or three others became aware of the fun of writing poetry. Lloyd Reynolds taught a creative writing class for poetry, which I never took. There was definitely a big informal poetry

discussion group going on all the time, and also there was a folk singing group, an informal folk singing group, of which I was a strong member.

Sheehy: You were involved?

Snyder: Oh, yes. I took my guitar with me to every party.

Sheehy: Were they just house parties?

Snyder: Yes, parties at people's houses.

Sheehy: Did you have folk dancing at Reed?

Snyder: Once in a while. Once in a while, yes. I learned folk dancing when I was in the Mazamas. They had folk dances up at the big Mazamas Lodge, you know, when you came back from skiing, and there would be a couple of hours of folk dancing in the big lodge room there.

Sheehy: Did Reed have the ski cabin at that time in Government Camp?

Snyder: They did, yes.

Sheehy: Were you went up there often?

Snyder: No, I didn't go to the ski cabin. I was a Mazama. Who wants to go to a college ski cabin when you're in Mazama? [Laughter] Go where the grown-ups go.

Sheehy: Did you have any Mazama friends from Reed, or was that pretty much just a Portland group?

Snyder: See, those other skiers, they were from New England prep schools. To heck with them. [Laughter] I had some friends who were some old Norwegian kippers who taught me how to cross-country ski, old Swedes and old Norwegians that had been Mazamas for years and years, were buddies of mine.

Sheehy: So were you doing cross-country as opposed to downhill?

Snyder: Both. No, doing both, and doing winter climbing, too.

Sheehy: Really?

Snyder: Yes. Mid-winter climbing on Hood.

Sheehy: So you stayed active with your mountain climbing during your time at Reed?

Snyder: Well, I had to tone it down as I realized that you have to give full attention to your studies, so I laid off, practically laid off of climbing for a couple of years.

Sheehy: Were there summer jobs that you held after that first year when you shipped out as a seaman?

Snyder: Yes, that's right. That was '51. No, that was '48. '49, as I recall, I worked most of the summer in the Columbia National Forest, which is now the Gifford Pinchot Forest, on trail crew. Then I think the subsequent summer I worked on an archeology dig over at Old Fort Vancouver, across the Columbia, where they now have a Visitors Center with some of the artifacts that I dug up on display. We were just grunts doing the digging. As soon as I graduated, I went to work up at Warm Springs as a timber scaler for the Warm Springs Lumber Company.

Sheehy: Was Dell Hymes up there too?

Snyder: Yes, Dell is one of my close friends. He came and went from 1414. He didn't live there, but he was one of the regulars.

Sheehy: Were you both up at Warm Springs together at that time?

Snyder: Yes. He was out doing research and I was working in the logging camp. He had a trailer set up doing some work with Wasco language, and I had some Wasco men on my choker-setting team, so they were teaching me Wasco swear words while I was setting chokers. [Laughter] We would see each other sometimes on weekends.

Sheehy: So you didn't participate with some of his oral studies?

Snyder: No, I wasn't able to. I did a little tiny bit of oral and language work with some of the people up there. I wish I could find my notes on that. But I didn't really manage to get into it. I was headed for Indiana University for linguistics and folklore, graduate school. When you're working as a logger, you've got no time. I wasn't working as a logger that summer; I was working as a timber scaler, but I was on the same schedule as the loggers. I had to be out there. We were a hoot-owl show. You know what a hoot-owl show means?

Sheehy: No, I don't.

Snyder: "Hoot owl" is the term for when it's fire season. When the fire season is really high and there's a tremendous amount of danger in the woods, then you go to hoot-owl hours, which means that you get up at 3:00, start logging at 4:30, and then you shut down the show about 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon, because from 3:00 on to about 7:00 or 8:00 is the highest fire danger, the most apt to catch fire in the woods. It's the hottest and driest every day. So we were doing that kind of a schedule. We'd get back mid-afternoon and be exhausted.

Sheehy: Did you have any contacts with Native Americans while you were at school?

Snyder: There were none at school. No Native American kids in school. So my Native American contacts were out on the reservation, on the Warm Springs Reservation. Some were with people that, through Dave French, like Phillip Kathlamet, I was meeting with Phillip and talking with him, and so was Dell. And others were my fellow workers on the logging crew. See, being a worker is a big advantage in the world. The anthropologist only knows them in the

employer-client or scholar-client relationship, and that was where Dell was. Meanwhile, I was going drinking with these guys. [Laughter] And they weren't worried about whether or not I was going to ask them questions. I was very careful not to do that, except in the most innocent roundabout sort of half-drunken way. [Laughter]

So I went to the big Berry Festival at Warm Springs, a very big cultural thing, the first fruits celebration, when they brought the first ripe huckleberries down from the mountains. They would have a three- or four-day celebration where nobody ate huckleberries till they all ate them together, sacramentally. And a lot of dancing and gambling, Native dancing, and bone game gambling. And big stakes, people coming down from Yakima and setting up tepees to gamble. What a marvelous scene. The logging camp shut down because half of the crew were Indians. Probably three-quarters of my group were Indians, so the whole show shut down during the celebration. I was over there. I got to wander around, tagging after some Indian choker-setter guys that were my crew members, who'd say, "Oh, he's one of the choker-setters. He's Billy's friend." [Laughter] So I got to be right part of it, see. That's the advantage.

Sheehy: I remember hearing you in the past talk about sitting in on the tepee circle.

Snyder: Yes.

Sheehy: And sharing in the good medicine. Was this the same summer or around that time?

Snyder: That was three summers later. That was '51, In '54 I went back to Warm Springs again and was on the logging crew. Actually, I've just mixed that up, see. When I talked about going

round to the berry feast with these guys as a logger, that was '54. In '51 I was a timber scaler, with the same group and scaling for the company, scaling for the tribe. That's to say measuring the board feet in every log, keeping a record of it in a log book so that that was how ultimately they got paid for the timber that had been taking off the res. But that was in '54. Yes, that was toward the end of that season.

Sheehy: You mentioned that you first became acquainted with Buddhism from your studies of the Far East.

Snyder: Yes.

Sheehy: And certainly you'd had the interest in Native American animism when you came to Reed. Was most of your involvement with those two spiritual areas more intellectual during your time at Reed?

Snyder: I'm one of these people in whom the experiential and the intellectual is not clearly divided. If there's something intellectual going on in my head, some part of me is also doing it with my body. I'm trying it out. When I first heard about Native American sweat lodges, without even thinking twice about it, I went out and built a sweat lodge and did it. Then I understood with my body how deep that practice is. [Laughter] Or if there's something to try to make, I would try to make it and see how it worked. So I think that my sense is spiritual. In the same way, as soon as I read about Buddhism, I sat down and crossed my legs to see how it would work.

Sheehy: That was at while you were at Reed?

Snyder: Yes. So you don't necessarily have to divide these things up. You don't necessarily have to read about things and not try them. You can try them right away, in fact.

Sheehy: So you took the ideas right into the practice?

Snyder: Well, right into just doing something in my life.

Sheehy: I'm wondering, from what you've described as an anglophile type of environment at Reed, what it was like pursuing those interests. I would imagine secular humanism was pretty much the dominant culture there.

Snyder: Oh, yes.

Sheehy: What was it like having an interest in spiritual issues and religion in that setting?

Snyder: Didn't talk about it that much, or would talk about it only in some circles. I remember getting into a philosophical debate once or twice because I had been talking with Stanley Moore and some of his other philosophy students about Taoism.

I think I quoted Basho in kind of a Taoist context, where Basho says to learn of the pine tree, go to the pine tree. And I said, "All the kind of learning we're talking about here excludes

going to the pine tree." And then somebody said something like, "Well, no you can go to the pine tree--you learn what the construction of the trunk is, what the cell layers are, what the metabolic processes are that bring the sap up, what role the bark plays. We go to the pine tree." I said, "That's not what Basho means when he says go to the pine. That's science. That's another way, truly. But he means something else."

So the discussion was, well, what does Basho mean by that. I said, "It's like a Taoist thing I guess where you see if you can feel maybe, experience in yourself maybe by spending enough time with a pine tree, what's going on with being a pine tree."

I think Stanley was overhearing that conversation and he laughed and said, "Not impossible. Probably possible. But that's not our kind of philosophy." [Laughter] And he was right. He used to joke every once in a while about me, and he said, "Leitswics here is going to learn about the world by going and looking at it." [Laughter]

Sheehy: What a radical notion that is.

Snyder: But it was very good-humored.

Sheehy: I'm curious now, as you moved into working on your thesis topic, did you feel a little out in left field given the areas of study you were pursuing? Did you feel like you were trailblazing into new areas at Reed?

Snyder: I didn't particularly think of myself as trailblazing, no, and I was just pursuing my bliss, that's all. So trying to get away to do it was interesting to me, get them to let me do what I

wanted to do. That's all I've ever done my whole life. Just try to figure out how to negotiate a way to get the forces to stay in order so I can follow my bliss. It wasn't hard.

Sheehy: It wasn't hard at Reed to do that?

Snyder: No, it wasn't hard. I talked to Dave French about it and I talked to Lloyd. He was my other advisor. They said, "Sure, that's interesting." I wanted to work with oral literature. I knew there was such a thing as oral literature and oral performance. And then that there is the formal study of civilized literature. Now, how do we bring these together?

Sheehy: Coming to the thesis experience, how did you come to select your thesis topic--the study of a Native American myth?

Snyder: I was progressing toward it, no doubt about it, when I was a junior. I was reading exhaustively in Native American texts, folklore or mythology, folktale texts, and at the same time was learning what could be learned (in those days) of the literary critical schools, and at the same time studying a bit of linguistics. I started looking at all of these fields. There was so much interesting stuff there that whole scholarly movements were born and bloomed and withered in the forty years between then and now. Like structuralism and post-structuralism came out of that interest in the linguistic-literary scholarship mix. Those were exciting intellectual places to be back in those days.

Sheehy: I see also in your thesis a strong interest in Jungian theory. Was that something you got on campus?

Snyder: No, that was self-taught. There were certain things that came out of our own discussions and conversations with each other--especially with Phil.

Sheehy: Phil Whalen.

Snyder: Phil Whalen and Lew and myself and Roy Stillwell, the musician. Really thoughtful people, thinking things that weren't even in the curriculum, weren't part of the college's sphere.

You were asking earlier, talking about spirituality. The truth is, you could probably talk about anything at Reed as long as you didn't talk about literal Christianity. I think that was taboo. [Laughter]

Sheehy: In my day, too. Were French and Reynolds encouraging of your extracurricular readings?

Snyder: I'm not even sure they knew about it.

Sheehy: Really?

Snyder: Oh, you mean when I did the thesis?

Sheehy: Yes.

Snyder: Oh, yes, they were okay with that. There were some cautions. I was reminded of some cautions in regard to Jung, and they were correct, of course. Jung is not always to be relied on, and I figured that out pretty early. But interesting, very suggestive.

Sheehy: What was the thesis experience like for you?

Snyder: I enjoyed it a lot. Once I got into writing that, I had a great time.

Sheehy: Not difficult at all?

Snyder: No, I just kept truckin'. I just kept working on it. I worked every night until 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning and then I would sleep in between writing it.

Sheehy: Wow. David French has said that you turned in your thesis earlier than any other student he'd ever had at Reed in his forty-one years of teaching. So I'm assuming that this was a fairly swift process.

Snyder: No, it took a long time, but it's just that I stayed right on it and enjoyed the process. I wrote *The Practice of the Wild* in very much the same spirit, except it took me two years. I can understand what [Henri] Matisse is reputed to have said, "Work is heaven." [Laughter] I'm as happy as I ever am when I'm working.

Sheehy: Were you a studyholic at Reed?

Snyder: No. I mean, I studied a lot, but--

Sheehy: Pretty balanced?

Snyder: Well, "pretty balanced." I studied all the time. [Laughter]

Sheehy: Did you see yourself as an emerging scholar through the thesis experience?

Snyder: Sort of. As it grew near graduation, I realized there was such a thing as graduate school. I hadn't really understood that earlier. I saw people going off to graduate schools, and that seemed like a good way of deferring making any further decisions for a while. Then I became aware that Stith Thompson was teaching folklore in Indiana, and that Charles Voegelin was an excellent Americanist at Indiana. And Dell was going to go to Indiana. So that took me to Indiana. But things happened to me after I left Reed that made me switch entirely toward Zen Buddhism. When that caught up with me, I decided to leave Indiana.

Sheehy: Looking back at your thesis, Bob Steudling's book makes the point that you took a lot of the framework for your first book of poetry Myths and Texts out of your thesis. Is that true?

Snyder: Some of the ideas. I wouldn't say framework. They're present. Some of the themes that come into the Myths and Texts were things that I had come across in my Native American literature readings.

Sheehy: Were there other seeds planted in that thesis process that had a deep impact on your work later in life?

Snyder: Probably so. Several different ones. And some of the interests there amounted to interests I've kept up all my life.

Sheehy: There's one area you talk about in your thesis, I recall, about the poet and the poet's role in this society as a transformational force.

Snyder: Yes.

Sheehy: Was that an idea that came out of the thesis process, or was that something you had already recognized?

Snyder: I was beginning to get the point that story tellers, myth tellers, singers and dancers have a deep role in culture. In the relationship of art to culture, art to the main society. And of course I could pick that up from seeing what Eliot, Yeats--I forgot to mention Yeats. Yes, he's a big influence. I love Yeats. See, what Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and Williams had done--they were cultural transformers. And in ways that people don't even get today. Bob Hass' talk on mountains

and rivers, when he talked about mid-century high modernism, was really astute. Look: Pound was a pagan and a nature worshiper. In fact, there's a thesis on Pound which was published as a book, about Pound as a shaman.

Sheehy: Really?

Snyder: Yes. There's a lot of rich stuff. There's probably going to be a revisioning of all of those guys and the role they played in the early twentieth century thinking one of these days.

Sheehy: So how conscious were you of choosing the poet's role in the culture for yourself?

Snyder: I think I was quite aware of it, because if I look back at my journals from the same time, I am explicitly saying to myself, "I'm going to get out there and try to change this culture." I actually say it.

Sheehy: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about in the thesis process that I haven't touched upon?

Snyder: Well to repeat something I said earlier, I was one of the people who, fortunately, had a temperament that flourished under the Reed-style approach, and so by the time I got to my senior year, I knew how to write papers. The whole experience at Reed, once I got through the first year, was a bracing experience for me, and I appreciated the opportunities we were given in the small-class contexts to learn how to debate each other, learn how to debate the teachers, and I

had a few unorthodox ideas in my Reed years and tried them on people--they really were repugnant to some people--nonetheless I was given plenty of slack. I was never made to feel like I should no longer be allowed in civil company.

It was only in retrospect that I realize that Reed might be a very unsettling and difficult place for some people, and also realized that in some ways you might say it was over-intellectual, because not everybody immediately goes out and tries to put ideas in practice. That can make you a little bit lopsided.

I learned how to research, how to get information. I realized that there is a path into any information in the world you need to get. All you've got to do is figure out where the doors are. Talk about empowerment! And to know that nobody has the right to stop you. And then to realize that having the right information in the right way at the right time is a kind of power and possibly an aid to wisdom. Realizing that there's a parallel path of art and information, in which both of them are very important, very valuable, and may have the capacity to change things for better or worse.

All of this I just picked up, I think, in terms of what the experience was. It gave me the tools. Reed was like a kendo dojo, where you practice sword-fighting with bamboo swords. It gave me the tools to hold my ground in any territory.

So you come out of Reed in a way like a Medieval Japanese Ronin who has been trained in sword-fighting techniques, and now goes out in the world to find an employer. [Laughter] Which Daimyo are you going to go to work for? The down side of that, too, is, of course, that it's often value-free. You can work for either side.

Sheehy: Agnostic training.

Snyder: There were a few of us who had a strong sense of values at Reed. There was a larger number who were getting these advantages for the purpose of being in the main society to their own advantage. If you look at the list of Reed graduates and what they have done in the world, I realize that my feckless, impractical friends and I were really a minority. The rest of these people are big CEOs, academics, big this, big that, but they're not particularly adventurous or creative. So we were really a tiny minority in all of that. One thing that Reed is good at is producing a few strong, successful, powerful people that might help run the world.

Sheehy: That's a scary thought.

Snyder: Well, so it's just like a little Harvard.

Sheehy: You've written in a couple of places about de-educating yourself after Reed.

Snyder: Yes.

Sheehy: What was that about?

Snyder: It was about returning to my own roots in some ways as a worker.

Sheehy: De-education?

Snyder: De-education. I'm thinking in terms of a person who is going to be engaged with the Dharma, engaged with the arts and with community. You have to de-educate yourself and descend from the pinnacle of elite, centralized, Occidental education and information and its power to realize the importance of community and place and personal vulnerability and impermanence and personal practice. It leads toward a life of practice, toward a certain amount of modesty and humility, which is hard to come by if you end up in any sort of contemporary power elite.

Sheehy: That was the process then you chose to go through.

Snyder: Yes. So it started with working up in the Warm Springs Reservation, working two seasons on lookouts, having jobs with ordinary people, and hanging out in the bohemias and underworlds of San Francisco, various things like that, working in the logging camp, realizing how many places there are in the world that all of your college smarts won't help.

Sheehy: Quite a few.

Snyder: Quite a few.

Sheehy: That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the history that we haven't touched upon?

Snyder: I can't think of much, except to say that the young women were remarkable comrades, intellectual sparring partners, brave spirits, proud sweethearts. They were ahead of most of the other women in America, and taught us males about feminism before we even knew the word. I honor them! [Laughter]

Sheehy: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]