Interview with Fred Visel

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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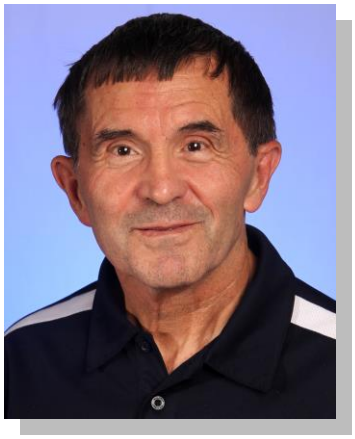
Pogue: This is Phil Pogue. We're on the campus of Carl Sandburg Community College. It is September 24, 2013. This is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library project on the history and development of the community college system. At this time, I want to introduce Fred Visel, who has been a teacher and an administrator at Carl Sandburg. Fred, would you give us some background about yourself?

Visel: I wasn't even born in the United States. My birthplace is what is now the country of Slovakia. We were Germans, and towards the end of World War II, the German army evacuated us back to Germany. [We] spent some time in a refugee camp and lived in Germany until 1950, when an aunt in Cleveland, Ohio brought my mom and I over. So, I grew up in Cleveland.



Fred Visel

I got my bachelor's at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and I got a master's at the University of Iowa. Later on, through the GI Bill, got a master's at Illinois State [University]. I have to say that I didn't even know Galesburg existed. I served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army, and my second tour, my best friend, who I grew up with in Cleveland, he had gotten a job at Carl Sandburg College.

He was getting his master's in geography at Western Illinois [University]. He only found out about Western Illinois through one of these bulletin boards that you see outside college offices, and he went to Macomb and Western. He was there, and when this college…this college, of course, was born in sixty-six. He saw another notice that they were looking for a geographer, so he applied for that job. He got it.

When I was in Vietnam, for whatever reason, he sent me a letter—in those days, we didn't have internet, of course—he sent me a letter saying, "There's a history teaching job opening up here at Carl Sandburg. I think you've got a good chance for it. No promises, but I think you might get it. Do you want to try for it?"

What happened is the school year in those days began in September, and I was due to get out, not out of the army, but I was due to have my second tour end in September. So I had a difficult decision to make. Should I both (a) resign from the army, from the active army and go into the reserves, or should I just forget the whole thing, because remember, I'd never been to Galesburg before. If it wasn't for my friend who wrote me [I'd have] never heard of Galesburg. I had always wanted to teach history, and I thought, well, I'll give it a shot. I'll try to get an early out.

You could get an early out from Vietnam if you could show them that you had a chance of getting employment in the civilian sector. There was some kind of hardship. You couldn't just say, "I want to leave after eleven months." So, they sent me some paperwork saying that I could apply for the job in Galesburg at Carl Sandburg College. They were going to interview me, but that was it.

The army let me out a month early from Vietnam. I left Vietnam the first week in August of seventy-one. I came straight to the Quad-Cities. I came down; my friend picked me up. I interviewed with Dr. William Kelly, who was the dean of instruction in those days. He interviewed me, and he said, essentially, "Don't call us; we'll call you." And I went back to Cleveland.

I was fully intending to go back to Colorado, where I'd been stationed at Fort Carson, but I got a call stating, "You've got the job." So I packed up my stuff in a U-Haul [truck rental company], came out, and I started teaching the first week in September. I left Vietnam the first week in August of seventy-one. I started teaching at Carl Sandburg College the first week of September.

In those days, there were no transitional programs, so it must have been hard on my first students. Also, when I came out here, this was a pretty rural area. I thought to myself, I don't think this is going to work. I'm here for two years, at most, and then I'm gone. That was seventy-one, and we're

having this interview in 2013. Obviously, there was something here that I liked, and I did. It's been a great place to work.

I was full-time as an instructor from seventy-one to eighty-four. While I was teaching history, I'd gotten a master's in instructional media at Illinois State. The library director's job at Sandburg came open; I applied for that. I got that, and I was the head of the library from the fall of eighty-four until the spring of 1999, when I retired. But since I'd been an administrator, I was able to come back as a part-time instructor. I came back as a part-time instructor in the fall of ninety-nine, and I've been part-time instructing ever since.

Pogue: What attracted you to the field of history?

Visel: I just loved history. I thought, history is… I mean, it's the story of peoples' lives, not dates. I've never asked my students for dates on exams. I think that history is better than these so-called TV reality shows or the old-time soap operas, which may or may not exist.

There are things that happen in history, that if you saw it on TV, you'd say, "Things like that don't happen," like I was talking today about how, in my opinion, back in the period of the Roman Republic, Mark Anthony threw the Roman Empire away because he became infatuated with Cleopatra. Think of that. You give up possible control of the world because (laughs) you're behaving like a junior high school kid. If you saw that on TV, you'd say, "No, stuff like that didn't happen," but it did.

Pogue: You came over from Europe. What kind of education did you have over there?

Visel: I went to the first grade in Germany. We came over to Cleveland after I completed the first grade. When we got to Cleveland, I redid the first grade in Cleveland public schools, then went to parochial schools until the sixth grade. But essentially, since we started early in Germany, I wasn't, age-wise, behind my counterparts because I repeated the first grade. I **had** to repeat the first grade because, when I came over, I knew not one word of English.

I've got to be honest and say that my first several years in elementary school were really, really tough because that was right after World War II, obviously, and most kid's parents had been told whatever they were told about Germany. It was rough.

I learned English as quickly as I could. Since I lived with a single mom—my dad was killed in the Second World War—she had to go out to work and learn English as well. I'm like a lot of immigrants; when I went home, we didn't speak German; we spoke English as we were picking it up. It was a rough initiation

Pogue: And you went to Bowling Green State University and the University of Iowa. What were you studying there?

Visel: History. I loved my time at Bowling Green. I loved my time at Iowa. I've got to honestly say that, from the time… I loved my time in the army too, so from the time I went into the active army, up to my teaching now, I've never experienced a day where I said, "Gee, do I have to go to work?" because I've spent virtually all my adult, working life—except in the time in the army—at Carl Sandburg College, and it's been a great place to work. Every teacher will have certain days that are not as good as others, but by and large, they've all been great. I just have to thank God that He gave me a place that was so great to work at. It never felt like I was going to work.

Even now, when I'm teaching part-time, a lot of people ask me, "Are you still teaching? Don't you get tired of it?" I say, "No, because it's..." I've got to confess, I don't think we're getting paid a lot of money as part-time instructors. And in my early career at Sandburg, as a full-time instructor, the faculty had issues with what they were paying us, but the check was never what I was into. In fact, when I was an administrator in the library, I also did grants administration, and whenever you deal with grants, usually they want to know what the salary of the grant administrator is. I always had to ask, "What am I getting paid?' because that's never why I worked.

Pogue: When you were going to Bowling Green and Iowa, were you planning to be a teacher?

Visel: Yes. At first, I was planning to teach in the secondary schools, but I have to be honest and say, when I took my education courses at Bowling Green, I wasn't all that impressed and decided to try to be a college teacher. I did get a fellowship with University of Iowa, a fellowship which paid my tuition and fees and gave me a stipend to live on. I completed all of my coursework, but I didn't do my doctoral dissertation. I did an MA [Master of Arts] thesis, but I was going to have to write a doctoral dissertation.

In the meantime, the Vietnam War is going on, and I had a commission in the army because I was in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] at Bowling Green, and they allowed me to go to school without paying allowances. But I always knew that I was going to have to go join the army. I was going to go on active duty eventually. It would have been like the spring of sixty-seven [when] I kind of thought, Gee, I think I'm getting a little jaded, and I've got this dissertation to go. In the meantime I thought, Who knows, maybe they're going to end the Vietnam war, and I ought to at least see what it's all about. So, I just left Iowa and went into the army for the next four years, two of which were spent in Vietnam.

Pogue: As a first-time teacher at Carl Sandburg, what classes were you teaching?

Visel: Well, I was teaching basically what I'm teaching now, American History Survey, Western History Survey, and I also taught Military History, occasionally.

Pogue: How did you get help to survive that first year of teaching at a community college?

Visel: Well, I had one education course in college, and that was all I ever had. But in the army, most of my time was spent as a company commander. When you are stateside and garrisoned, you're basically a teacher. You're going on training exercises with your troops, but they also expected you to teach.

The army had training on methods of instruction, so I had a basic idea of what a teacher does, although it was a lot more formalized than you get in a community college setting, because in the army, if you're giving a class, you have to have a lesson plan in the back of the room, and the operations section of whatever unit you're in is liable to come in and inspect what you've got on your lesson plan, look up at what you're teaching. If you're not doing it the way they expected, they're going to close the class and relieve you, and you're career's going to be in a serious problem. You've got a serious problem with your career.

The point is, I knew something about teaching the army way, which I applied in the classroom. It may not have been the way everybody was doing it, but that's the way I used. I was not unfamiliar with standing in front of a group of people and getting questions and asking questions. I already had done that, although obviously in a more formal setting than you would find in college.

Pogue: How many other history people were in the department when you were first here?

Visel: At the time, there was only one other.

Pogue: Could you describe what the campus was like when you first arrived?

Visel: Oh yeah, I can. Carl Sandburg College had started out in downtown Galesburg, using basically two… They had more facilities, but the two basic facilities were like a four-story building called Brown's Business College, and the college had taken that over. Then they taught classes in the basement of the Presbyterian Church, which was on the town square in Galesburg.

Just before I came, they had acquired land to build a permanent campus on the outskirts of Galesburg, along Lake Storey, right next to Lake Storey. So, when I came, the campus had been moved out to the Lake Storey site. But the campus consisted of… I forget how many Butler buildings, metal buildings, and one or two wooden buildings that were pre-fabricated.

Then number of offices were basically in-house trailers. The president had his office in one trailer, and the Humanities-English Division had theirs in another, and the Social Sciences Division had theirs in another. No instructor had their own office. It was just… There were desks for all the people in the

Social Sciences Division, and students who came in just had to… If they wanted to talk to you, if it wasn't something that demanded privacy, they'd talk to you right in the trailer. In those days, we didn't have a full-time secretary, and there were no computers, obviously, so we had student secretaries. They ran off tests, using those old ditto machines. That's the way it went.

Pogue: At that time, did you feel that teaching in those temporary buildings was a challenge, or that it was just the norm?

Visel: It was just the normal… The only time it was a challenge is that in the buildings, some of the rooms were separated by like a folding curtain, so they could turn it into a bigger room. I'm kind of loud when I teach, and if I'm next to another teacher who is loud, and we're separated by a plastic folding curtain, the students could get two classes for the price of one. So that kind of was a little bit of a problem, but not an overwhelming problem.

Pogue: When did you get to move in to a new campus?

Visel: I'm trying to think. I'm not good with dates, as I've shared, even though I'm an historian. I think the permanent facilities opened up, I want to say, in the fall of seventy-six. And, of course, there were all kinds of structural problems once we moved to the new facilities, as beautiful as they were. I'd have to say I think we've got the most beautiful campus in the community college system, but there were some serious structural problems that needed to be addressed, and it took a little bit of time to get those fixed.

Pogue: Did the structural problems present issues for you and your area?

Visel: No, they didn't. The structural problems never presented any significant barrier until it came to the fall of eighty-two. In the fall of eighty-two, we had a tremendous rainstorm, and apparently the drainage system underneath the college and on the college roof, they weren't up to whatever the code was. At any rate, what happened is, in the fall of eighty-two—I think it was eighty-two—we had this tremendous rain.

I was up in the library in the evening; I was giving some help to students—this was in the new facility— I get done with my student, and I start to go down the steps from the library to the main floor. Here comes these kids running up, and they said, "You can't go down there." "Why not?" They said, "There's a flood down there." I went to the doors, and I'm telling you, there were **whitecaps** going down the main hallway.

Everything was flooded. We have a circular driveway out in front of the main admin section. It's a little bit low lying, and the cars that were parked in front of the admin section, they had water literally over the rooftops. I don't know exactly what the drainage problems were, but there were some serious

drainage problems, which, oh, by the way, we had the flood of eighty-two repeated in the spring of 2013.

I had just turned in my grades after spring semester, and my wife and I took a long trip to Alaska, which we'd always wanted to do. I'm sitting in a hotel room in Anchorage, Alaska, watching cable news, and suddenly I see the front entrance of our college appear on the TV. I just kind of like jumped up and said, "Oh, my God!" The same thing happened. There was such a rush of water that it blasted in the main doors by the Admissions and Records Office, pretty much what had happened in the spring of eighty-two. Who would have ever thought that…

I think that, in the 2013 flood, from what I can gather, the drainage system had been fixed. I thought at first, they must have allowed the drainage system underneath the college to get plugged up. But apparently—I've been told by some of the physical plant—it wasn't that the drainage system this time didn't work; it was just that the rainwater… The land around the college is flat, and it doesn't start to go downhill until you get in front of the college. We'd had weeks of rain, and this one evening, I guess the rain was just so overwhelming that it just overwhelmed the drainage system.

Pogue: You talked about a salary issue when you were teaching. What was the relationship between the teachers and the administration?

Visel: When I first came here, the administration just basically met with faculty representatives—there was no union in those days—They talked about, "Well, we're going to be able to pay you this" or whatever it's going to be. The faculty had input, but the board obviously had the final say. They decided what it as going to be, take it or leave it. The faculty compared what we were getting paid to other community colleges, and they thought, "Well, that's way too low." They formed the Sandburg Education Association, which of course, is basically a union, and we eventually came to collective bargaining.

There were, I think, in the history of the college, there were two strikes that I remember. But the last one was held way back, I think, in the middle to late eighties. Since then, we haven't had any. We've always managed to work it out.

I was, in fact, at one time, the head of the union, but I was the wrong guy for that because, like I said, I never (laughs) knew what I was making, but I joined the union, as most people did. So we entered into collective bargaining.

The statistics indicate—that I saw, that compared to other Illinois community colleges—we were paid pretty low. Obviously, weren't not talking about what's paid up in Chicagoland area, but what's even paid downstate. But given that the cost of living in this area was so low, I've got to

be honest and say I never became wealthy, but I went along with my colleagues.

Pogue: Some colleges in Illinois are lucky and have hardly had any referendums. Is that the case for Sandburg?

Visel: We have had… I'm trying to think how many referenda we've had. We've had several referenda, and by and large…They're not many, it's sort of like about two or three, and we've only had one that passed. I'm trying to think when that one was. But Dr. Robert Luther, who subsequently left to become president at… What's the college we've got at Danville?

Pogue: Danville Area?

Visel: Danville Area Community College or wherever he went to. Anyhow, he had some political experience in regular election campaigns in the political sphere, and he ran an absolutely brilliant campaign. We had phone banks; we had… We did… Thanks to Dr. Luther, this referendum got passed. I think that may have been the only one. It gave us a badly needed shot in the arm, so we could do things insofar as the physical plant was concerned and insofar as faculty salaries. But it was just… Most people thought that the referendum couldn't pass, but boy, it passed.

Pogue: There is a book written about Carl Sandburg, and in it they talked about the Burl Ives speech.[1] Were you there at that time?

Visel: Yeah, I admit I was. I saw Burl Ives primarily as an entertainer. I enjoyed his speech. He spoke at commencement, and he sang a few songs. But I have to say that I've… My wife right now complains about just that my outlook is pretty focused to the classroom when I'm teaching. I just… I don't know. It's nice, but you know.

Pogue: And how about President Clinton's speech, here at Sandburg in ninety-five?

Visel: I think we were all excited about that because anytime a sitting president speaks, where you're working, that focuses the entire country on you. I think that this college is a pretty darned good college. Any exposure that we get, I think, that puts us more out in the public eye, is good for us.

What really amazed me was the security measures that are taken for American presidents. I was library director when President Clinton was here, and the FBI went through my office. They opened all the desk drawers and all the file cabinets. They even looked inside the file folders, which was pretty impressive.

[1] Burl Icle Ivanhoe Ives (June 14, 1909 – April 14, 1995) was an American singer and actor of stage, screen, radio and television. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burl_Ives)

I just think that the president's visit here just focused attention on the college that, by and large, has done a pretty darned good job. There is hardly anybody in this community—I'm talking about Community College District 518—who hasn't had some connection in some way to Carl Sandburg College. I am absolutely convinced, and I think we've done a number of surveys that bear it out, that the college has impacted the entire community.

Right now—maybe I won't do it this year—When I started teaching as an adjunct, I also taught some courses in continuing education. Basically, my courses I taught were history courses, but they were for non-credit, obviously. There were retirees who came and still come, who were really interested. The impact that everybody… We have a program now that started after my time, called College for Kids. My point is that the college impacts people from virtually toddlers, up to people who have been retired for a good long time. I've got to be proud to be part of an institution like that.

Pogue: When you moved to the library, what were your duties there?

Visel: My duties were basically to decide or to consult with the faculty to see what resources they needed to run their classes and to provide those resources. Also, I might say that I was in the library when the technology era was getting started, and we were the first institution in this area to have a fax machine. My predecessor was getting people from the business community into where we kept the fax machine, and we had people from various businesses look at that. [Their reaction was] "Oh my!" because we did inter-library loan requests using fax technology. In the days when we got that first fax machine, it was like "Wow!"

And then I've got to say also—pat myself on the back—that as computer technology came in, I wrote a federal grant, and we cooperated with Blackhawk [College] East [campus] and Spoon River College in basically digitizing the records for our collection so that they were accessible via computer. Of course, since we got the money, Blackhawk and Spoon River also benefitted from that. Eventually they would have digitized their records anyhow, but I wrote a federal grant; I wrote a grant into the feds to get our records digitized.

In some ways it turned out to be—I was still in the reserves—a negative for my career in the Army Reserve because, at the time of the first Gulf War, they called me and said, "We're not going to mobilize you, but if you want to participate in this thing, would you volunteer to be mobilized? We're not going to send you to the Middle East, but we're going to send you to Fort Bragg, North Carolina." I was in the middle of what I thought was some high-tech projects that needed to be done, and I said, "No." The result of that was I retired from the reserves at a lieutenant colonel instead of a full colonel, which I would kind of liked. I'm not happy about [that] to this day, but that's the way it is.

Pogue: In either your teaching or your experience in the library, did you have any connection to the Sandburg family?

Visel: I didn't personally, but this college has always maintained a strong connection to the Sandburg family. Helga Sandburg Crile, who was the daughter of Carl Sandburg, she visited this college many times, spoke at commencement, and she visited on many other occasions. There is a pretty strong connection there. By the way, the ironic thing is, Helga Sandburg Crile, her married name, she was married to a doctor who… Crile Veterans Administration Hospital which used to exist in Cleveland was practically next door to me when I was growing up. It's been closed now and turned into Cuyahoga Community College. My point is, a Veterans Administration hospital named after her husband, I grew up next to it.

I think, I don't know whether, obviously… I didn't keep tabs on the family's personal life, but when Helga Sandburg Crile first came here, she used that full moniker. The last couple of times, she just called herself Helga Sandburg. I don't know whether that's because she knew she was coming here because we wanted to do her honor as being the daughter of our patron saint, so to speak. But, yeah, the point is, we've had, I think, a pretty good connection with the Sandburg family.

Pogue: Sandburg kind of evolved and added territory, an extension, from its original Knox-Warren area. As a faculty member, was that significant to you?

Visel: Not directly, not directly. But all of Illinois was going to have to be in a community college district. So, when the Illinois Community College Act was passed—I'm kind of like on shaky ground here because I didn't know when, but at any rate—as far as I understood [under] the Illinois Community College Act, everybody's got to be in a community college district. So, the area surrounding the original Knox-Warren community college district, there was kind of a competition between ourselves… Competition sounds harsh; I wish I could think of a different term. Anyhow, call it competition, between ourselves and surrounding community colleges, Spoon River, Blackhawk East, Blackhawk, the SEED, because these rural areas were going to have to get into a community college district, and it was either going to be us or somebody else.[2]

The first president of the college, Eltis Henson… I don't want to stereotype, but he was pretty much of a farm boy, although he was a college administrator and a very good one. He could—how can I say this—he was pretty good at relating to people on the farm. I think it's primarily due to his

[2] SEED (Sustainability Education & Economic Development) is a leadership program and resource center, created by the American Association of Community Colleges and ecoAmerica that will provide strategic guidance and detailed resources for community colleges to dramatically ramp-up their programs to educate America's 21st century workforce and build the green economy. (https://www.rockvalleycollege.edu/About/Sustainability/SEED.cfm)

efforts that the college district became as large as it did, because people decided to connect with Carl Sandburg. President Henson was never a pushy kind of a guy, but he always was able to sit down with people and just kind of relate to them on a personal way. My understanding of it is, we became as large as we did because people in the areas, away from Knox-Warren County, could relate to the guy and say, "This is our kind of guy."

Pogue: Following up with that question, you talked about some competition between some of the surrounding community colleges about where new districts might be going, as well as the failure to pass referendums. Was there ever any worry that Carl Sandburg might disappear?

Visel: I don't think that there was ever a worry that the college was going to disappear, but it would have been nice to have some of the territory that escaped us.

If you take a look at the map of Community College District 518, what you'll notice is that [on] the map of the community college district there's like a sharp indentation where Macomb, the city of Macomb—which, of course, has Western Illinois University—that went to Spoon River. I don't know how that escaped us. That would have been really desirable to have that for many reasons.

To be honest, we send graduates everywhere, but the lion's share of Carl Sandburg graduates eventually wind up in Macomb. If they're in the college transfer program, they wind up in Western [Illinois University in Macomb]. It would have been nice if we could have had an attendance center there. We would have not only derived the revenue, but we would have had, obviously, a tighter connection with Macomb and Western.

We still have a tight connection with Western, but you can tell that this thing was gerrymandered because the boundary runs south towards Macomb and then takes a sharp swing out, around Macomb, and comes back in. Obviously, I wasn't in on all of everything that went on that Macomb became part of the Spoon River District, but I think we all felt that, gee, that should have been part of ours.

Pogue: Compared to when you started teaching in the sixties, what's changed about being a teacher?

Visel: What has changed, of course, is the impact of technology. I think that the technology now allows you to do more things to present stuff in a meaningful way than we could in the old days. Back when I first started teaching, all that you needed was one of those old yellow, legal pads for your lesson plan, and that was pretty much basically it.

Now, you can do all kinds of things with computer technology, using YouTube and things like that.[3] So you can bring things into the classroom that you never could before. Back when I started teaching, the technology that we had were those old sixteen-millimeter movie projectors and those old opaque projectors, which [were] king of like as big as a Volkswagen Beetle, and you could use that.[4] That was the technology, or the overhead projectors.

Oh, yeah, filmstrip projectors and the movie projectors, you always had a problem with them. The filmstrip projectors, eventually they got eaten up, if they were used too much. I know that when we finally got more into the computer age, a lot of faculty had difficulty. They were wedded to these. They had certain "pet" tools, stuff that they used, like filmstrip projectors and movies. We had a lot of filmstrips in the library collection, but eventually it got to the point where, even if you wanted to keep those in the library collection, you couldn't do it, because nobody is making filmstrips anymore; nobody is repairing (laughs) filmstrip projectors.

We had one of our faculty— I'll not mention his name; he's retired now—bless his heart, when we told him we were going to get rid of his favorite filmstrip series, and we were going to get rid of the filmstrip projectors too, he said, "Can I have theme?" He'd be going down the hall, carrying a filmstrip projector and filmstrips.

Computer technology doesn't save faculty work. In fact, I think it creates more work because you have to be able to try to find all this stuff online. And if the power goes out, right now my courses are so geared in with computer technology, if the power goes out, we're done. Whereas, in the old days, if you give me a candle, you can still carry on because I can read my lesson plan. But now, if the power goes out, the class goes out, even if we can still see, because I haven't got any of my stuff; it's all on computer.

Pogue: What course changes have taken place over the last fifty years?

Visel: I think, in the field of history, I think we put a lot more emphasis upon social history, because the country's changed since I started teaching. When I started teaching, there were still a lot of people in the country who thought that, for example, females only worked as a hobby, that their main role ought to be in the house. Now, of course, we know that there are… I don't remember the exact statistics, but I think close to half of family households are headed by female breadwinners. So you've got to have their role in history as part of your course. I think that's the main thing. You're taking a look at a lot more

[3] YouTube is a video sharing service where users can create their own profile, upload videos, watch, like and comment on other videos. (https://www.webwise.ie/parents/what-is-youtube/)

[4] The Volkswagen Beetle—officially the Volkswagen Type 1—is a two-door, rear-engine economy car, intended for five occupants (later, Beetles were restricted to four people in some countries) that was manufactured and marketed by German automaker Volkswagen (VW) from 1938 until 2003. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volkswagen_Beetle)

sides, getting more into the social history than we used to do about political history.

Pogue: Working in the history department here, what relationships did you have with similar faculty at Knox and Monmouth Colleges and Galesburg and Monmouth High Schools?

Visel: With the high school the relationship was never that close, although I personally knew some of the high school teachers because when I was in the reserves, I was the admissions representative for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. I'm not a West Point graduate, as I said, but I did have that as my reserve job. I would go to the high schools and talk about West Point. But everybody, although I wore a uniform, also knew I worked for Carl Sandburg College.

Now Knox, I personally knew and still know some of the Knox faculty. In the early days—it was still happening when I first started—Knox College made some of their facilities available to us. One might have thought that Knox would kind of like not want a competitor for freshmen/sophomore students, but they were very helpful, so was Monmouth College. My point being is, the relationship was always very positive. Rationally thinking about it, you would have thought there might be an adversarial relationship, but there never was. They just were always… If we needed something, whether it be facilities, or if they had a faculty member who a particular area of expertise, I could invite them to talk in one of my classes. I think we have to say that in that respect it was very, very positive.

Pogue: How did the nickname, the Lake Storey campus, come about?

Visel: I think it was called Lake Storey University or something. I think that was in the early days of the college, really, the entire community college movement, when I think there was a tendency among some students to feel, Well, if you went to a community college, you're basically getting an inferior education. It must be because you're not good enough to go to a four-year college; you've been rejected.

But I haven't heard that name in a long time, and I think there's a couple of reasons for it, because I think the statistics show that our students do just as well as or better than native students when they transfer to a four-year college. Also, quite certainly…Although nowadays, we're not cheap…We're inexpensive when it comes to tuition, but we're still a lot less than it costs you to go to a four-year college.

One of the things I see now—and this is anecdotal—we've got a lot more "traditional students" now than we've ever had. When I first started teaching here, it seemed like we had a lot of returning moms and stuff, non-traditional students. But now my classes are pretty much filled up with what

we would refer to as traditional students, high school graduates, because I think they've figured out that, although again we're not inexpensive, you can come to Carl Sandburg College for a lot less money than you can go to a four-year college, and you finish up at a four-year college and pay less. You get their degree.

Pogue: Western Illinois University has kind of suffered economically, compared to some parts of Illinois. How has Sandburg tried to meet that need?

Visel: Well, I think we met it as well as we could in the early years of the college, when we annexed that territory that we've been talking about, by building a branch campus at Carthage, an extension center at Bushnell. If you take a look at the map, Carthage is probably about… I'm thinking it's got to be a two-hour drive.

By the way, I give my courses over interactive TV. Although I'm teaching in Galesburg, I also have students in Carthage and Bushnell. Now, we're doing the interactive TV over compressed video lines. I think eventually we'll go to doing it over computers. We've not only established campuses at Carthage and Bushnell, but we've served them by interactive TV, although it is compressed video you have to do now. It's a little bit herky-jerky.

You can still do what they're doing over network TV. When you're interview somebody over network TV, you can see that the guy that they're interviewing is on TV. I do basically the same thing. I think we've reached out to the entire community, not just the Galesburg-Monmouth community. When we have annexed land that's fairly far removed, we haven't forgotten about them. We've always reached out and tried to serve them. It wasn't this, "Well now that we've got this tax money, we'll see you later." We've tried to go out there.

In the courses like at students at Bushnell and Carthage, I taught them over TV. But at least once or twice a semester, I make an effort to drive there and then teach the course the other way.

Pogue: You've talked about some of the unique events that have occurred at Sandburg during your years here, such as the flood and the strikes, referendum. What other significant things do you remember about Sandburg?

Visel: I think that the significant things that I remember about Sandburg unfortunately occurred earlier in my career, when I was a lot younger. When I started here, I also started a soccer club on which I played. It was very easy to recruit players, even though they may never have played before, because I was able to just talk to them after class and haul them over to the soccer field. We had a soccer club for a long time, which has now been replaced by a varsity team.

I think you can relate more to your students when you're involved. Of course, in the early days of the college, we had a lot of Vietnam vets, and I was obviously able to relate pretty well to them. I was also the intramural athletics director for a while. I related to kids a lot more easily outside the classroom. Although I make myself available now—I have an office hour in the cafeteria—it's not quite the same relationship as when you're younger. I regret that, but that's the way it is.

Pogue: What have been some other challenges for Sandburg over its history? You've talked about some of the funding issues and the issue of damage due to water. What other challenges has Sandburg had to deal with?

Visel: I really think that the main one has been the one that you mentioned, this idea that somehow, if you're coming to a community college, it must be because you couldn't make it into Harvard or something like that, that somehow a community college education can't be quite up. But I think we've overcome that, as I said. I think to me, that's the main one, that students have to realize that we give a pretty good education.

I think, though, that one of the main problems that I see now is we're getting students come into our college who are really not that well prepared. That's not saying anything negative about the high schools. It's just that, I think, in the society we're living in, students have been told that you're going to need more than a high school education if you want a job. So we're getting students who are coming in to the community college system, who maybe twenty, thirty years ago would have left high school and gotten a job.

Right here in Galesburg, when I first came here, we had a lot of manufacturing, and that's all pretty much gone. So students who might have worked at Butler Manufacturing or who might have worked at Magic Chef, making refrigerators, they now—this is my own opinion—they might just now go, "I'm going to have to come out and get a college degree," and they're not really meant for it, ready for doing college level work.

Our counselors try to steer them into some kind of non-credit courses that will prepare them to be full level college work. But those courses don't give college credit. I think that's the real challenge. We're getting these students who maybe aren't ready, and how do you convince them, "Maybe you ought not to take full-blown college transfer courses until you've done some extra work to get you ready?"

Pogue: I have just a couple of more questions. You talked about the preparedness of students. Are there certain things that all teachers at Sandburg must do as part of the syllabus?

Visel: Basically, our division chair has said we have to be clear as to what the objectives are. We have to be pretty clear as to what we expect them to do.

Also, we need to pretty much keep track of attendance, because we're getting more and more of our students who are getting financial aid. What you don't want is you don't want people getting financial aid who aren't coming to class.

We have to make it pretty clear from our syllabus that, if you are not doing what we're expecting you to do, we're going to drop you at mid-term. It has to be made pretty clear what the expectations are and that, if you don't meet those expectations, you're going to be gone, which is going to cause all kinds of heartache when you have to pay your student loan back or whatever.

Pogue: My last question is, you talked those early days of not knowing where Galesburg was and how you had a unique opportunity to come here. What do you feel about having been part of the Carl Sandburg development from almost its beginning?

Visel: I'm as proud as I can be. How many of us in our lives have the opportunity to make an impact on our fellow human beings? I think, as I said earlier in the interview, I think Carl Sandburg College has had a positive impact on this community. To have been able to participate in something like that… I really think that… I've got to be honest, as I'm getting ready to take the glory road, to be able to sit down and say I've actually had a positive impact on peoples' lives… It's a great thrill to go downtown and have somebody stop me and say, "Mr. Visel, do you remember me? I was in you class whenever, and I really enjoyed it." I get all kinds of warm, fuzzy goose bumps when that happens, and it happens quite a bit.

Pogue: Well Fred, I want to thank you very much for giving us a close look of your work here at Carl Sandburg and helping us better know the history of the college that serves a large part of western Illinois.

Visel: Thank you.