L. Winchester Jones came to Caltech in 1925 as an instructor in English, and he quickly gravitated into the freshman admissions committee. By the time he retired in 1968 as dean of admissions, emeritus, he had had considerable influence on the nature of the admissions process and its product at Caltech. He was interviewed for the oral history program of the Institute Archives by Mary Terrall, and E&S presents here the second of two parts of an edited version of those interviews.

As a number of readers pointed out to us after reading Part One, Winch Jones is one of the great raconteurs, and Caltech anecdotes are his specialty. Fortunately, Mary Terrall was able to record a few samples from the Jones repertoire, one of which begins on page 22.

Mary Terrall: I think we’re up to World War II. Were there very many of the humanities faculty members who were involved in war work in one way or another?

Winchester Jones: Not as many as there were in science. We stayed on the job and did pretty much what we had been doing. I don’t recall that any of us except Horace Gilbert really was engaged directly in war work, though we were on various boards and things that were trying to do something for the war, independent of our connection with Caltech. Bill Huse was a kind of historian for the rocket project.

MT: In terms of the teaching, were most of the same courses offered even though the enrollment was down?

WJ: The Navy V-12 program left our humanities, and practically everything else, pretty much to us. They said, “We want these boys educated the way you educate your students, so go ahead.”

MT: So what was the situation — a certain percentage of the students were in the V-12?

WJ: Yes. Of course, they had to volunteer; they weren’t drafted.

MT: But they didn’t have to get admitted by Caltech.

WJ: No. The Navy transferred a certain number of students from other colleges that didn’t have a science or engineering place, and oh boy, what a headache that was. The first day of the V-12 I didn’t go to bed at all, and there were two or three others who never got to bed that night or the next day. These boys poured in from various places with their transcripts in their hot little hands, and we tried to make head or tail out of them, and decide where in the world we could fit them in. Were they partly sophomores or partly freshmen, or all freshmen? Or had they had any advanced algebra? No. What the hell are you going to do about that? Oh, it was a mess.

To make it worse, we had no commanding officer. Here these people all arrived, and no commanding officer. We finally got a man by the name of Mantell who came out here three days late, but he settled things in a hurry.

MT: Did you try to fit the students into the regular Caltech curriculum?

WJ: We tried to, yes. The Navy offered a very few courses — some strictly Navy stuff taught by the commanding officer. For the most part we tried to fit them into just what we had been teaching; that’s what the Navy wanted.

MT: How did that work out?

WJ: It wasn’t as bad as you might have thought. Some of the students got set back a year or two, but it wasn’t all that bad, and the faculty wasn’t quite as tough as they had been. It was wartime after all.

MT: What was the feeling among the civilian undergraduates toward the V-12?

WJ: To the best of my recollection, there weren’t more than about 75 or 80 of them. And they felt out of it, of course. Except for the freshmen, for the most part they were 4F. So we had very few civilians, and it was kind of tough on them; they didn’t get into the activities very much. Of course, the V-12 wanted all the athletic activities it could get — teams and everything. Boy, for three years we had the finest football team Caltech ever had. We had two-thirds of the Stanford football team in the V-12 unit, and the rest of it was made up of Cal and University of Washington football players. We won every game for two years, and one year it
was 66-0 over Occidental. Those were
great days for athletics.

MT: Were you involved in administering
the V-12 thing?

WJ: Yes. They thought the registrar was
the logical place to go, so I was the ad­
ministrator, and I also made some of the
feeding and housing contracts that we had
to make, not only with the V-12 but also
for the Air Force unit we had there, the
meteorological people. In fact, more or
less unknowingly, I rented Tournament
Park to all three services for the same
amount each. Somebody found out about
it later, and said they were going to sue or
something. I believe we were entitled to
fifty cents a head and I got fifty cents a
head from all three services. As a matter
of fact, they were all out there together
at the same time.

That contract-making was kind of fun.
Jim Page was chairman of the trustees at
that time, and when I started making con­
tracts I said to Page, “Look, Jim, I don’t
know anything about business, or how to
make contracts.” He said, “Well, we lost
our shirts on the last contract we had made
by the business office, and you can’t do
any worse than that.” And I said, “Well,
all right, Jim; if I’m going to make a con­
tract, I want a case of Scotch and a case of
bourbon, and I’m not going to pay for it.”

So at the contract meeting we had a cap­
tain and a commander, and all sorts of
flunkies around, and we sat there in a
room and talked, and put things off, and
looked up information and so on until
about four o’clock, when I said, “It’s get­
ing kind of late, let’s go have a drink
back at my house.” Well, finally at about
eight o’clock at night, we made a darn
good contract.

MT: You were also in the California State
Guard at this time. What did that entail?

WJ: That took the place of the National
Guard, which had gone into active duty,
and so they had to have some organization
in case there was a riot or other
emergency. We had guard duty and riot
training. As a matter of fact, on Pearl
Harbor night the company that I was
commanding took over Caltech. They
were very much worried about the aero­
nautics lab and one or two of the other
buildings where the beginnings of the
rocket research were going on, and they
wanted those guarded. They thought
somebody might blow them up or that
some sabotage or damage might be done.
It wasn’t an easy place to guard on ac­
count of those steam tunnels. Every build­
ing could be entered from underground
through the steam tunnels.

MT: So what did you do?

WJ: We had guards down there, and we
changed them every hour and a half or
two hours. You stand there in that steam
tunnel, in uniform — it’s like being in a
Turkish bath. I’ll never forget, about six
o’clock on the morning of December 8 I
went over to the Greasy Spoon to have a
cup of coffee and get some scrambled
eggs — I’d been up all night. They kept
the Greasy Spoon open all night for us.
And as I was going over, I heard a guard
challenge over in front of the aeronautics
building. The word was passed, and the
corporal of the guard came up, and I
looked across to see what was going on,
and there was a poor little Japanese
graduate student. He’d just got up and was
on his way to work; he hadn’t even heard
about Pearl Harbor, much less the idea
that the Japanese had attacked. And this
guard had him nailed right against the
door. He said to his corporal, “Can I
shoot him now, Corporal? Can I shoot him
now, or do I have to wait?” He was really
eager. I got over there in a hurry. I said to
the corporal, “For gosh sake, take that
gun away from him, or he will pull the
trigger before he’s through.” It was a
nervous moment. It was just lucky he
didn’t pull the trigger too, by mistake.

MT: Was this guarding of the aeronautics
building just for a short period?

WJ: Just two or three days. By that time
Caltech got regular professional guards.

MT: So after the war when DuBridge was
brought in and Millikan retired, were there
obvious changes?

WJ: Not a great deal as far as the under­
graduate area was concerned. The transi­
tion was very easy on account of Earnest
Watson. Earnest was really acting pres­i­dent — he didn’t have any title, but he re­
ally was — for the last year or so between
the two. DuBridge fitted in beautifully; he
had the kind of mind that saw immediately
what went on, and there wasn’t any need
for any immediate change. As far as the
undergraduate work was concerned, I
don’t think he had any great plans. It was
going very satisfactorily, and we had good
students, and we were doing all right. I
think he thought that we might step up our
recruiting a little bit, which we did.

MT: What about more general change in
the atmosphere on the campus?

WJ: I wouldn’t say that the change in ad­
ministration had anything to do with that
at all. Things changed as they do any­
where over a period of time. One of the at­
titudes that had changed in that period
made teaching much less interesting for
me. These fellows who came out of high
school were now convinced that they
ought to know something about the
humanities. Instead of saying, “All right,
the heck with you,” and then finding out
what they really wanted, they sat there
almost pathetically: “Here I am, educate
me.” It was a much more passive attitude.

MT: It was after the war that you noticed
this?

WJ: That’s right. Except for the veterans.
The veterans were a prize, really, but after
they got through, there wasn’t the same
feeling about the humanities. The kids had
been persuaded somehow or other that tak­
ing humanities was like castor oil; it was
good for you. We didn’t have to work
with them and convince them. For me,
they were less interesting students.

MT: How did the admissions work then
change after the war? Did you have a lot
more applicants?

WJ: Yes, the applications picked up. We
had much wider interviews and more of
them. During the war, we couldn’t inter­
view at all, you see. We really didn’t have
to with the V-12, but we couldn’t get
transportation and there was no way to do
it. So that was revived. In my day we
never did any very heavy recruiting. In a way, the interview trips were recruiting. But I was about the only one who did any recruiting aside from that — in the fall, for example. Peter Miller did some too.

MT: You mean going around to schools and talking to them?

WJ: Yes. I had a little different system from the other colleges. The schools got fed up with the standard recruiters after a while. People were coming in all the time and wanting to see their top ten students, you know. Well, I never went at it that way at all. I wrote them a letter and asked, "Do you want a vocational guidance talk on science and engineering?" "Why, sure, we think that would be a good thing for our boys." So instead of seeing the top ten students, I talked to a whole class. Often I have talked from eight o'clock — the first class in the morning — until two in the afternoon without a break. I talked to every math class and every physics class that had met through the morning and afternoon. I never mentioned Caltech, but I was always introduced, of course, as being from there, and the students would come up afterward and ask me about Caltech; that was fine, but I never brought it up. And the schools would know that, and they figured I wasn't recruiting. Well, I certainly was; that was what I was doing for the next 20 or 30 years after they graduated. Well, finally it became obvious that we should admit women to graduate school. As you know, that came several years before the admission of women undergraduates. So there was a faculty meeting, and it was pretty obvious by that time that it was going to be approved.

MT: But were there people who were really vehemently against it?

WJ: Quite a number, as a matter of fact. But there wasn't any real opposition at that faculty meeting. It had all been said before. I've forgotten who it was — maybe Ralph Smythe — who got up and made the motion that we admit women to graduate school, provided they gave every promise of being unusually productive. There was a dead silence. And I rose and asked if the gentleman would kindly define his terms. Well, I wish you could have heard the next half hour. Four hundred serious faculty people tried to decide how you define productivity in women. I never had a better time.

MT: Did they then decide on that?

WJ: Oh, yes, it passed; they finally got a motion that satisfied everybody.

MT: Was there a stipulation that the female graduate students had to be especially qualified?

WJ: As I recall, the motion contained some phrase or other that they had to be people who we thought really would go on and make a life career out of it. Of course, the same thing should have been said about the men.

MT: That's right. What about the decision to admit undergraduate women?

WJ: From that time on, I said, "You will admit women to the undergraduate school when I either die or retire, not before."

MT: Why was that?

WJ: I didn't feel that any of us were capable of picking women students. I wasn't prejudiced about it; I just didn't want any more bother. So they said, "All right, we'll wait for this crazy man to get out." However, they took a minor revenge, because the last year I was there, they decided they were going to admit women the following fall. And they made me the chairman of the committee to decide what had to be done in order to admit them — where we were going to house them, where we were going to feed them, what we were going to do about this and that.

MT: Did you get a sense that there was a difference in the overall qualifications of the student body as time went on?

WJ: No, but there was perhaps a little more sophistication. Some of the early students were pretty rugged guys — rugged individualists and everything else. I would say that, on the whole, the later group was — conformist is not the right word; they never were conformists, but they were, I think, a little more housebroken. In the first place, many more of them were theoretical people, even the engineers. In the early days, engineering was a pretty practical matter. I don't mean there wasn't research in engineering; there was. But it was not expected that the engineers would go on in the same proportion and get graduate degrees, or that they would be the kind of engineer that was basically a fundamental research man.

MT: So in that sense the type of student changed.

WJ: In that sense, yes. Our admittees in the 1920s were highly motivated, but not all of them could have made it at Caltech in the 1950s. Maybe half of them or more would have fallen by the wayside. They were bright in their own way, but they were not people who could have taken the modern math and physics that are being thrown at students now.

MT: I read something that you wrote in Engineering and Science back in 1949 about how Caltech has one of the lowest academic failure rates in the country. And then I happened to be looking at the Bulletin from the early seventies and it had some figures about how 10 percent of the freshmen don't come back as sophomores, and 30 percent don't graduate. Now it's obvious that many people just can't do it.

WJ: Can't do it, or don't want to after they find out what it is really like. You see, my figures were failure rate; but the
Have you heard Winch Jones tell this one?

One of the famous people on the faculty was Fritz Zwicky. He was a wild Swiss. And a very controversial figure, a very definite figure. And very amusing. Well, I came into the faculty club one day, and I sat down at the table where I usually sat, a big round table. There were more foreigners, it seemed to me, in those days on the faculty than there were later. This must have been before the 1941 War. It was a rather dull lunch, I thought, so I threw a remark out to see what would happen. I said, "You know, all foreigners are rotten automobile drivers." Three or four months opened around the table, and Zwicky got his open first; he usually did. He turned on me and he said, "Jones, that is the kind of idiotic remark you have been making around here now for twenty years. Justify such a stupid statement."

I said, "Well, how about Josef Mattauch; he killed himself up here on the Ridge Route, coming around those curves picking wild flowers off the side as he drove along."

"Mattauch, Mattauch, he was a congenital idiot before his grandmother was born. Leave him out."

I mentioned somebody else, and he was a congenital idiot even further back. "All right," I said, "What about Epstein?"

"Oh, my God! Must you bring Eppy into the argument?"

"Yes."

"Then I am lost. Only one thing is making me believe in divine providence, and that is the conjunction of Eppy and the automobile lasting for more than 40 seconds. This cannot possibly happen by chance, only by divine interference. Am I ever telling you about the time Eppy and Mattauch — before he killed himself, before you ask a stupid question — is driving back from Azusa in the old days when the road is winding?"

And I said, "No, you didn't tell me."

So Fritz brought his fist down on the table and broke a couple of coffee cups and said, "Shut up everybody, I am talking. In the old days, when the road is winding, we are driving back in the dark, in this ancient Buick Eppy has. This Buick comes from the tomb of Tutankhamen. In about the Middle Ages is the top disintegrating so there is no more top. Comes a big wind blows across, blows the glasses off Eppy, smashing on the road. Well, you know Eppy sees about 80 feet with the glasses on, and not a damn thing with the glasses off.

So I am saying, 'Eppy, better let me drive.'

Very proud fellow. Eppy; he says, 'No it is not necessary."

I say, 'Eppy, you can see nothing.'

Eppy says, 'That is a vast exaggeration. I can see the tail-light on the car ahead. And when this tail-light has an apparent luminosity of a star of the fourth mag-

Winchester Jones

...continued

dropout who wanted to go to Stanford to study economics, doesn't have to go to Stanford to study economics now. We lost him, where we wouldn't now. But I wouldn't count him as a failure.

MT: Were there many people who did transfer away from Caltech?

WJ: Well, there weren't many. I've forgotten my figures now on how many actually graduated. Not nearly as many as we wanted to have graduate. We would admit 180 in those days and, as I recall, our senior graduation used to run about 125 or 130. We figured that we wasted our time on an awful lot of people. Now, not all those are failures. Some of them had just transferred to other areas. And we were concerned about it. So then there was a good deal of agitation to enlarge our transfer admission, from the junior colleges particularly, to fill up these ranks.

But that was not so easy. We were beginning to outpace the junior colleges in the demands that would be made of their students as juniors. However, most of the students that we did take in did very well.

What we needed was a recruiting program in the junior colleges, and we just didn't have it. I said I was not fitted to recruit in the junior colleges because by that level they had gone way beyond any math or physics discussion that I could have with them. I couldn't hold my own there at all. So it had to be done by faculty members, and they had already given enough time on their freshman interviews. The Upperclass Admissions Committee never had the same enthusiasm for that kind of thing. Now, I understand, they even have a high school relations fellow, Lee Browne, who does a lot of recruiting. This is what they should have had a while ago.

MT: To go back to the fifties, what was the effect on Caltech of the McCarthy hearings?

WJ: It was just a horror to people, you can imagine. No scientist would have any sympathy with a thing like that.

MT: Was it discussed or was it ignored?

WJ: It was not much discussed, but if the subject ever came up, why — everybody hated McCarthy of course. It was considered a very serious matter. And it did come home to us every so often, when we would find that someone was denied access to certain kinds of information on some hearsay business, that an agency that was giving some research money — scared of the McCarthy attitude — was trembling on the verge of withdrawing it. And it created, of course, a tremendous amount of indignation. Government agencies were terrified.

I think the worst case we had was that of Hsui-Shen Tsien, the excellent aeronautical and jet propulsion engineer. Tsien was a very smart man. The whole McCarthy business was stirred up against Tsien, who was a Chinese — and this was after the Communist takeover, of course.
He was no more Communist than I am and he didn't want to go back to China, but they deported the man. They actually kicked him into the van, by the way, with a foot, and sent him off. You can imagine what he felt like when he got back to China. Of course, he went to work for a different place.

WJ: They certainly were — everybody, whether they knew Tsien or not. Tsien was not the most agreeable character I ever ran across, but there was certainly no reason to suspect him of being a Communist just because he was a Chinese.

MT: I guess not too many people at Cal-tech really felt threatened by the scare.

WJ: No, I don't think so, not directly, but every so often something would crop up about some friend of theirs who was in trouble, and there was a lot of indignation about it.

MT: What about the changes that took place in the humanities division over the years? By the sixties, it was really quite a different place.

WJ: Yes, very different. It changed from a service division to more of a research and scholarly division. As I say, Rod Paul was one of the first who ever claimed to be a research man among all of us. But more and more under Hallett Smith, and later, we began to get real scholars, and we also got built up in numbers. When I stopped teaching, there certainly weren't more than a dozen people in the humanities division. Now, there are 50 or 60 people. Something like that. That was the change. It became a major division instead of a service division.

MT: You were saying that everybody knew everybody, and it was very common to have friendships with people in different divisions. Has that changed?

WJ: I would think so. The new people came in so fast that I lost track of a lot of them. I knew all of the faculty at one time; I knew them fairly well. By the time I left, I don't suppose I knew half of them. I might know their faces and vaguely who they were, but I didn't really know them. How many does the Athenaeum hold at lunch time? In the old days, it held all the faculty that wanted to eat lunch. Now even the private dining rooms to the west are always filled at lunch, and the faculty has spread out to Chandler. We used to have about three big round faculty tables that we sat around — at one one day and one another, and you were friends with everyone. More and more, there came to be a table that you usually sat at — and at lunch was where you really had your social contact, of course. There was the physics table and a chemistry table and a geology table, and there wasn't nearly as much mixing. Then it just got too big. This happened about ten years before I retired. By the mid-fifties, it was getting beyond me, at least, to keep track of them.