Winchester Jones

—How It Was

Louis Winchester Jones, dean of admissions, emeritus, came to Caltech in 1925 as an instructor in English and became a member of the freshman admissions committee a couple of years later. He became dean of admissions in 1937 and associate professor of English in 1943 – and he retired in 1968. Sandwiched in among those posts and dates were a variety of other services to the Institute: registrar, assistant dean of upperclassmen, director of admissions, and director of undergraduate scholarships, for example. Appropriately enough, he was also a trustee of the national College Entrance Examination Board, membership chairman of that board, and president of its West Coast section.

At the time of his retirement, E&S *noted that "for nearly 40 years, Winch Jones has had a hand in the selection of Caltech's freshman class – and thus, a hand in shaping the kind of school Caltech has become." The truth of this observation made him a natural for early participation in the oral history project being conducted by the Institute Archives.* E&S *has made a shortened version of the original transcript of the interviews conducted by Mary Terrall and presents here Part One (of two parts).*

Winchester Jones: I was born on the Eastern shore in Maryland, but I left there when I was three or four years old, and we were abroad for a year or so. I don't remember much about it, obviously. And then we came back. My mother died when I was three. My father married again when I was about five, and came back to California where he had ranched before he married the first time — right back of the mountains here in the Santa Ynez Valley. When he came back, we lived in Montecito, and also he had a ranch over the mountains where I spent a lot of time.

There were about four or five big ranches in the Santa Ynez in those days. Now they're all cut up into smaller ranches, 100 and 200 acres, but in those days nobody knew how far they went back toward the desert. I lived there a good deal of the time and also over here in Montecito, of course — until I went East to school when I was fifteen.

Mary Terrall: What decided you to go East to school?

WJ: My father died in an accident, and nobody seemed to be very much interested in me or what I did. And I had a friend, who had gone to St. Paul's in Concord, New Hampshire, and thought highly of it. I didn't have a very good school record, but they had no boys from California in those days because it was a long way to go. People out here pretty much stayed out here. I guess St. Paul's wanted to spread their geographical distribution; anyway, they took me, and I had a wonderful time there for three years. And then I went into the Army, and then to Princeton, after World War I.

MT: What decided you to go to Princeton?

WJ: Mostly my friends at St. Paul's who were going. We got scattered a bit in 1918, and went into various branches of the service as soon as we got out of school. But I knew a lot of them would end up there, so I went there. There were some 70 or 80 of us from St. Paul's in that freshman class, which made it very nice. And then I got married five days after I graduated from Princeton — because it took five days to get out here. My wife lived in Pasadena.

MT: Had you met your wife back east?

WJ: No, I met her in Santa Barbara. In those days, it was considered cruelty to females to leave your wife or children in Pasadena over the summer. You had to send them to the beach; it was too hot in Pasadena — they couldn't possibly survive. So she used to come up here with her family every summer, and I was here on vacation from school. And we met here when I was in, I guess, about the third or fourth form. (I never can remember the equivalent to grades. The sixth form is the twelfth grade.)

MT: So this would be just after you went back East then?

WJ: That's right. In fact, we were engaged when I went back East to join the Army. Then, after four years of college, we got married and I went back East to work in a brokerage house.

MT: How did you get that job?

WJ: Well, I knew the head of the firm. He had a son who was my age, and the son got into a little trouble in school. The headmaster asked me if I could straighten the kid out — he was several forms below

me — and I did, temporarily anyway. He ended up in Leavenworth, as a matter of fact, some years later. I don't think that was my influence. But, anyway, the father was very grateful for the whole thing, and said that he wanted me to come work for the firm. Well, in those days, if you wore button-down collars and a Brooks Brothers suit, you sold bonds. That was just fate.

MT: Had you taken a degree in English at Princeton?

WJ: No, I didn't, and this is something that doesn't really weigh on my conscience because it was an honest mistake. I was persuaded I had graduated in English literature. I took an awful lot of it. My diploma says I graduated in economics. I didn't find that out until years after I had worked for Caltech as an English teacher, and the diploma appeared from some drawer or other, and I looked at it out of curiosity, and found I graduated in economics. I think it's an error. I hope so.

MT: So once you got into the brokerage firm . . . .

WJ: I found that it was definitely not for me. And so we came back to California. My wife was pretty homesick for it anyway. I worked in a bank in Pasadena for two years, and we built a house there and settled down. I didn't care much for banking, and I'd always wanted to teach — I'd done a lot of tutoring in college — so I applied for a job at Caltech in the English department. I went out to interview with Clinton Judy, and he said, "Well, there isn't anything open, but I'll keep you in mind." That didn't sound very encouraging, but about a month later, he called up and said a member of the staff was ill, and would I want to take the first term. The man never came back, actually. So I stayed on as a member of the English department.

MT: When you went to apply, were you familiar with Caltech?

WJ: Not very. It happened to be in Pasadena, and that's where I wanted to live, and I didn't want to teach in public institutions. I wanted smaller classes and the kind of thing that Caltech had to offer. Also, it struck me as a very interesting kind of teaching to do. In those days at Caltech — the early twenties — you had for the most part a group of youngsters who had conscientiously avoided humanities in high school. It was a waste of time as far as they were concerned. And you had to do something to show them that it *wasn't* a waste of time, that a different type of intellectual activity could be interesting.

Well, it wasn't so difficult as it might seem, because you did what came naturally; that is, you gave an assignment, and the assignment would usually involve writing something. You would ask, "What was your idea of this thing that you read?" And you would get back fairly well-written themes; even in those days the Caltech kids were pretty smart, and they knew how to write, more or less. If they didn't, it didn't take them long to catch on. They did realize that they ought to at least be able to write; they had to write reports and things like that. They would hand these papers in without too many errors in them, and you would give the paper a "C," because it didn't have a single idea in it that was interesting. They parroted everything they had read and remembered it as though it was a mathematics text. And they gave it right back to you. I would give them a "C" for this, and they would come in, indignant, or weeping, or whatever, because they had never seen a "C" on their record — they wouldn't be at Caltech if they had.

"I don't understand, sir. What is wrong? You didn't put any marks on it."

"Well," I said, "no, there is nothing mechanically wrong with the thing."

"Then why didn't I get a better grade?"

"Well, frankly, because it bored the dickens out of me."

"Are we supposed to interest you?"

"You certainly are, if you want a decent grade."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"You aren't *supposed* to say anything. I want you to tell me what you want to say. What did you think of that thing you just finished reading for this class?"

"Well, I didn't like it very much. Seemed kind of dull."

"Fine. All I want to know is why didn't you like it?"

After they caught on to this, you couldn't hold them, because it was the first thing they had studied at Caltech to which they were entitled to their own opinion. They had good, original, creative minds, but they weren't entitled to their own opinion of Boyle's Law or the Second Law of Thermodynamics. All of a sudden, here was something they could get their teeth into and throw it back at you. Well, after that, I don't think we ever finished a morning's assignment actually, because we got to arguing, fighting about this and that. Of course, I always took the opposite side from what they took. And this turned out to be a lot of fun. Strenuous as anything, because they were smart young minds, you know, and it was risky to take the opposite side where often there wasn't much to sustain it. But I could talk faster than they could — that was my advantage.

MT: These were freshmen that you were teaching?

WJ: I taught freshmen and juniors for the first three or four years, and then I had one senior class. As I remember, in those years there was no English in the second year. That's where history came. Sophomores didn't take English, I'm sure. Just freshmen, juniors, and seniors.

MT: You came in 1925, and Munro came along about then too, didn't he?

WJ: A little later, I think.

MT: He came as chairman?

WJ: No, he was a professor of history. But he had the biggest office in Dabney Hall with an outer office for his secretary. Clinton Judy, who was the chairman, just had an office like all the rest of us, up on the top floor. Of course, poor Clinton was kind of in the shadow there.

MT: How did Munro happen to get himself the biggest office?

WJ: Well, in the first place he was a big shot. It was quite a feather in Caltech's cap to get him from Harvard, where he was the head of the history department. And he was on the Caltech Executive Council. Of course, he also was a scholar and had done a good deal of writing; he needed a secretary, and he needed that space. None of us at that time on the humanities faculty were scholars. We were teachers. We knew a reasonable amount about our subject, but I don't recall that any of us ever published anything. Roger Stanton and Harvey Eagleson and George MacMinn — no, we all had a jolly good time and enjoyed our teaching, but we didn't take writing very seriously. I don't think Clinton Judy ever published anything, but he was a true scholar of the Oxford type. He actually was, of course, a Rhodes Scholar and went to Oxford. Publication didn't mean anything to him, but knowing everything did. He had a magnificent library — I don't know how many hundred books he had, and he knew everything in every one of them.

We were, in those days — this goes for history and languages as well — a service division. We were not a scholarly division, or one in which any degree was going to be granted. That didn't come until a few years ago. So teaching was what counted. And those who were chosen to teach there were pretty much more interested in teaching. Later on, we did get some good scholars; Wallace Sterling and Rodman Paul, I think, were the first. They were both publishing, and that was new in the division.

MT: I was going to ask you about personal friendships with people in the science and engineering divisions.

WJ: Oh, there were plenty of them. There was no distinction between humanities and the other divisions. Everybody got along pretty well together, and some of your best friends might be mathematics or physics or chemistry people.

MT: What did the people in the other divisions think of the humanities? Did they think it was important?

With Lee A. DuBridge, who was president of Caltech at that time, at a General Motors scholarship committee meeting in 1960

WJ: They thought it was important. This attitude had been drilled into Caltech from the very beginning by George Ellery Hale and Noyes. Both Hale and Noyes were convinced that engineers and scientists had to know something besides engineering and science. They needed literature and history and language. So the faculty was definitely sympathetic toward it. The only antagonism I ever noticed, and it was very noticeable, was when Munro wanted to enlarge the humanities to become a scholarly division. He had some money that he could get for this purpose and he claimed he couldn't get it for any other purpose.

There was a rather bitter faculty meeting on this. Munro was there, and E. T. Bell, who was quite a character, got up and denounced the whole scheme, and Munro, and everything else. He said they were diverting funds that were necessary for science and that they didn't have enough as it was, which was true in those days. And there was quite a to-do over that. (There was another Bell, Jimmy Bell. They were known as Wild Bell and Tame Bell, and Eric Bell was Wild Bell.)

MT: So this idea didn't have support among other humanities people either?

WJ: Well, most of us couldn't have cared less whether they did that or not. We were enjoying what we were doing, and we knew we were doing a lot of good. We knew we were reaching those kids. I don't mean all of them, 100 percent, but we had a pretty high degree of success, and we knew in later years, when they came back and talked to us, how much it had meant to them. Well, this was fine with us. We weren't interested in having a big division that was going to turn out degrees.

In fact, we wondered a little bit whether people who were really scholars were going to have the patience to work with those youngsters. They took a lot of time. They were interested, but you had to bring them in and go over their papers and their ideas and their attitudes with them, and discuss; it was almost a tutorial arrangement in those days in the humanities. You called one or two students in and said, "You're not really envisaging what happens, or you're not thinking what's behind this sort of thing. Let's go over that and see what you get out of that paragraph. What does it really mean to you?" Or, "How do you think the man said this in a dialogue? What was his tone, what was his expression?" And finally, they'd learn to *read.* But this took a lot of time, a lot of energy, and I'm not sure today, with

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Directing the band at Freshman Camp

publication, that the students get that much time and energy devoted to them.

All right. That's why I went there and why I enjoyed it and why I stayed on teaching until I went into administration. And I did that for one simple reason — money. I had no doctor's degree, and the attitude in the division was changing. After Clinton Judy retired (and he died shortly after), it began to build up as a more scholarly division. I could see that I wasn't going to get any promotion or salary increases to amount to anything, but I knew I could do some pretty good administration, and I went into it for that reason. I taught part-time for quite a while afterward.

MT: I believe you were on the Freshman Admissions Committee back in the twenties, right?

WJ: I was on the Admissions Committee from about '26 or '27, and I was fascinated by it. We weren't as thorough as we got to be later, but we did our best. We gave our own examinations for a number of years before we went to the College Boards. We went to them for the very obvious reason that it got to be more and more difficult to find people to proctor our examinations back in New York and Boston and wherever. By that time we were getting more people from farther away. In the early years they were mostly Californians.

MT: Was the Admissions Committee actively recruiting students in the twenties, or was it just waiting for people to apply?

WJ: It pretty well just waited for them to come in. Jimmy Bell, who was chairman at that time, did go out and do some recruiting in the local high schools. I think our freshman class then was around 120, and we might have 300 applications or something like that. Our applications were pretty good though, so even though we picked from that few, they were pretty smart fellows. When Phil Fogg took over, he combined the jobs of registrar and director of admissions, which had been split, with Harry van Buskirk as registrar and Jimmy Bell as chairman of the Admissions Committee. Then after that, I took Phil's place.

MT: And you did both also?

WJ: I did both for a while, and then it got to be too much. We were getting applications from all over the country, and they were numerous, and I just couldn't handle both jobs and do them well. So I gave up being the registrar, which was far less interesting to me than the admissions.

We didn't have interviews at the beginning. We just said that there was no sense in it. But the difference between a score of 780 and a score of 800 on a College Board doesn't mean a thing, and in the sciences and mathematics we were getting all in the 700s. So we decided that we'd try for the interview, which meant we had to try to get some money. And we got it. Millikan was persuaded of the value of it. And it was then that we started sending out the members of the committee on interview trips.

I was always amazed and enormously pleased that very busy science and engineering faculty members — publishing, teaching, doing research — were willing to take a week or two off and travel around the country, poking into little high schools and big ones, to talk to people. Now, the interview has often been misunderstood, or misinterpreted. People think of the interview as being with the student. And they ask, "What can you find out from a shy, scared little kid?" You don't find out much from him. Even after a long session, you can't tell much about him. You get the information from his teachers. You can sit down with his math teacher, or his physics teacher, or his chemistry teacher, and say, "What did this fellow do that he didn't have to do to get a good grade? Sure, he got all his homework in; so did a lot of other people. So he didn't make any trouble in class; neither did a lot of other people. Did he ever come in with the urge to go further with something? In other words, how about his curiosity — has he really got it?"

That's where we got our information. Sometimes we got bad information — not infrequently the teachers didn't know enough to know whether he was that good. But by and large the interview paid off; it wouldn't still be there, obviously, if it hadn't.

MT: What about scholarships? Was there a separate committee for scholarships in those days?

WJ: Yes. As far as I remember, there have always been separate committees for admissions and scholarships. For a time, as I recall, I was chairman of both. Then I was given the title of Director of Scholarships. The last few years I was there, they had a chairman of the scholarship committee. The faculty was beginning to feel that they wanted more direction of the administrative positions. You see, for years, Earnest Watson, who was Dean of the Faculty, and Frederic Hinrichs (and later Paul Eaton), who was Dean of Upperclassmen — and Foster Strong, Dean of Freshman; and I — used to meet and appoint all the faculty committees. Now, of course, the faculty has an election system, all very elaborate and very democratic. It wasn't democratic in those days at all. Well, the faculty finally began to feel that they wanted to get in on this process. There began to creep in, in the last two or three years I was there, some kind of feeling between the administration and the faculty, as exists in a good many other colleges and universities. But for most of the years I was there, there wasn't any feeling at all of, "Well, that's the administration," because we were *all* faculty members. Every one of us was teaching. Now you've got a number of administrators who don't teach

at all, and who didn't grow up there, and there's a very different attitude. I think it's too bad that this has occurred.

MT: Back in the twenties and thirties, were there many students on scholarships?

WJ: Not very many. We didn't have very much money. The biggest scholarship we had was tuition. So these poor fellows had to scramble up board and lodging some way or other. I don't remember now when we first struck out and determined that we were going to get more scholarship money out of the budget.

Remember that a lot of that time we are talking about was the Depression. The Fleming money just vanished. And all of a sudden, there we were, $5,000,000 short. Salaries were cut, everything. That Depression lasted, you know, until the forties. For a long time, things were pretty tight. There just wasn't any money for scholarships. But as soon as things began to loosen up a little bit, and we could approach individuals, then we began getting scholarships for more than full tuition, and many more scholarships.

MT: Were scholarships awarded on the basis of scholarship or need?

WJ: At first it was on the basis of scholarship, and that was true for a number of years. Then we got more and more into the basis of need. People began to say, "Wait a minute, these kids are all good. We're losing too many fine boys because they didn't stand 2½ points higher here or there and they can't come without money." We had been on the need basis for some time when the College Scholarship Service was started, and with them you had to be on a need basis. Now that's breaking down again, I'm sorry to say. They're starting to buy students again, the way they used to, with more and more of these so-called "honors scholarships."

There used to be tough competition buying students, you know, taking them away from another college. MIT and Caltech have always gotten along pretty well, and we've had a big overlap list. I used to go back every year between the time we made up our mind on scholarships and the time we had to notify the boys. I'd dash back for three days, and go over what we were offering with schools like MIT and Cornell and Carnegie Tech, who had many duplicate applications. We'd finally get down to the same comparable figure — depending on how much tuition difference there was, and the travel allowance from the East or from the West — so the applicants could take their choice.

On the steps of Throop Hall in 1968

MT: I wanted to ask you a few more things about the social atmosphere in the early days, before the war. I've heard that, for example, there were regular discussion meetings of some sort at Clinton Judy's house. Did you go to those?

WJ: Oh, yes. Once a week, Clinton would have us down at his house, and I suppose there would be as many as a dozen faculty members.

MT: From different fields, different divisions?

WJ: Anybody who wanted to come. And generally somebody was asked if he would prepare a short paper. And he'd give it, and the others had read — or tried to read — in the area he was talking on, and then we just sat and argued and had a fine time discussing.

MT: What were the topics like?

WJ: Well, for instance, I did one on Eugene O'Neill, and somebody else might do one on Victorian poetry. As I recall, I did one on the appearance of myth in Byron and Shelley, something of that sort, and I did one on Conrad. We were all amazed at Charles Richter, of the Richter Scale, you know — the seismologist. That man had read about everything ever written in English literature, I think. I never saw such a mind; and he retained everything he'd ever read. He gave some eloquent papers on rather abstruse poets that very few of us could recollect at all — and other times on things that were well known. He was amazing.

MT: And the other scientists gave papers on literature topics also?

WJ: Yes. It was all on literature, there wasn't any science in it. They were glad to get away from science for a change and do a little something else.

MT: How long did that go on?

WJ: It went on until Clinton began to fail, just about the time he retired. It started, as I recall, in the late thirties — somewhere around there. There was also a smaller group of seven or eight of us, including Clinton — I guess Clinton and I were the only ones from Caltech — who met every Monday night at each others' houses and had general discussions of everything. That went on right up to the time that too many of them died, shortly before I retired. That began back in 1925 or '26.

MT: You said that you were the only people from Caltech; where were the other people from?

WJ: There were two lawyers, two doctors, a book publisher, and the head of the California division, or whatever you call it, of Price Waterhouse. We were all from Pasadena.

MT: Was there any contact with the trustees back in those days?

WJ: There was very little in the early days. When Jim Page became chairman of

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death, he told me that he needed to do some major surgery on one of the chapters and a small amount of rewriting. Perhaps Jenijoy La Belle or I can finish it. From the point of view of his colleagues and his students, however, the publication of his Faulkner studies was irrelevant. We got the benefit of his wisdom on Faulkner and other literary and non-literary themes. I suppose that a few lines from Shakespeare, Milton, and Browning, delivered in Georgia accent, are still echoing in 301 Dabney.

Naturally, Beach's professional life spilled over into his private life (if *private* is the right word), and students, colleagues and friends were apt to find themselves co-opted into his family. People who were not totally depraved were apt to find themselves honorary Langstons — almost as much a part of the family as the Langston daughters Kitty, Lewise, and Dottie. (Beach used to say that like King Lear he had three daughters but on the whole his were better behaved.) Of these honorary Langstons there were certainly dozens and perhaps hundreds, and we all benefitted from a certain warmth and informality and from a level of manners that Yankee families simply cannot achieve. Perhaps it should be added, while we are on the subject, that if Beach's social and political views would have appalled his ancestors, even Jefferson Davis would have loved his manners. In a sense, the odd combination of radical thought with conservative decorum helps to define his character.

Integer vitae, says the poet, and if we want to use two words to describe Beach, those two will do as well as any, although they suggest more stoicism and less fun than he actually had. As for Beach's friends and Caltech in general, we can be described with one word, *lucky*. We had Beach as a pure gift; and as with all great gifts we did not have to do a thing to deserve him. □

Kent Clark is professor of English at Caltech. His affectionate memories of Beach Langston quite properly are not concerned with dates, but for the record, Dr. Langston died on April 10.

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the board, he sought a much closer relationship, but as long as Allan Balch was chairman, the trustees and the faculty just didn't have much to do with each other. We were represented — Earnest Watson, as far as I know, and of course Millikan, sat in. The rest of us just didn't bother much with the trustees, and they didn't bother us, and it was no loss to us or to them. The much closer relationship now, where they have division representatives to the trustees and so on, is new since my retirement.

MT: But socially you didn't see them either? They didn't move in the same circles?

WJ: No, not at all, unless you happened to know them in a different way. The only time we ever mingled socially was at the Associates' dinners, where the members of the faculty who didn't feel too awkward in black tie were asked to come and be nice.

MT: Did any faculty members do fund raising?

WJ: Not as far as I know. The Executive Council, perhaps, although the Executive Council as such, I believe, met only about four times in Millikan's entire career. I don't think it ever had anything to say about anything. Millikan ran the show, you know, though I think Munro had a good deal of influence on him. You see, Millikan was a great believer in democracy, provided it didn't interfere with getting what he wanted done. He never would take the title of president, because he said, "All right, we will do this in a democratic way. We'll have an Executive Council, and we will decide things in that. No one man's going to dominate." But, as I say, I don't think the Executive Council met very often. Max Mason, who was on it, told me he'd been on it for four years and he had never been to a meeting, so for sure it hadn't met in that length of time.

One thing I do have to say for Millikan. Sure, he was a dictator, in spite of all his talk about democracy. But we needed one then; we had to have one. Times were tough, and he was the greatest moneyraiser that ever came down the pike. But he gave you a job and he let you alone. He never interfered. He'd gather it indirectly if you were not doing a good job, or if it were in academic administration, he knew darn well the faculty would take care of you if you weren't doing a good job. You'd come in to lunch at the faculty club and they'd say, "What the heck were you doing when you admitted this class, for heaven's sake?" So there wasn't any way you could backslide very much. And nobody wanted to.

Millikan knew that he had dedicated people there, people who wanted to do their jobs and who were good at it. He didn't need to interfere — although there were occasions, particularly in admissions, when a good deal of pressure was brought on him. I'll never forget when we turned down the son of one of the members of the United States cabinet. The cabinet member got hold of Giannini, who was head of the Bank of America, and Giannini said, "Well, I know all those trustees; your boy is as good as in." And said to Millikan, "Let that boy in." And Millikan said, "You go to Jones; I have nothing to do with it." And I think we lost some money. But Millikan wasn't going to interfere. He knew it was wrong to let that boy in when he didn't deserve it. He knew the committee knew what it was doing. No, we never had any trouble that way.

MT: Do you think things would have been different if Millikan had been president, instead of having the Executive Council?

WJ: No. There wouldn't have been any difference at all. I don't mean the members of the council and Millikan didn't talk to each other, but there wasn't any formal meeting where they voted on this or that. Sure, Millikan would ask Mason what he thought about this and he'd ask Munro, and Munro would go to Millikan and see about this or that, but it wasn't a formal meeting once a month where somebody made a motion and kept minutes. That just didn't happen. □