



Oral History of John and Bill Ritchie

Interviewed by:
David C. Brock

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Brock: Well, thank you again for having me here and working with the collection and having this interview. I thought actually it might be nice to capture a little bit of discussion, first, about just where we are today and its place in your family and in your brother's life because it seems kind of an appropriate setting to be collecting his materials.

B. Ritchie: The Poconos?

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Right. Well, here we are at the family summer house, the family summer camp, we call it, at Pocono Lake Preserve. It's a place that came into our family in the 1920s through our grandparents who promptly in the early 1930s died and left my mom and her two sisters, our mom and her two sisters, owning it as young women. They kept it for a generation and each of them raised families and so we as a generation all grew up here from, you know, infant, babies onwards. And Dennis was the first one in our family. He grew up in the forties. He came into the world in 1941.

Brock: Wow.

J. Ritchie: And he, he really loved it. We all loved the place, but I think it was a really particularly special place to him. I read a lot of interviews with him, with interviews with his colleagues. Typically, they say when asked, "Well, we didn't really know him that well personally, but we knew that he had a place in the Poconos that he loved."

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: And loved to be with family.

J. Ritchie: And loved to be with family, so.

B. Ritchie: Mmm.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, no. It's a beautiful, bucolic setting in the Pocono Mountains which has, obviously, amazing memories for all of us.

B. Ritchie: Right.

J. Ritchie: And I can vividly remember him sitting right there--

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Sunday afternoon as we all gathered around, working on *The New York Times* crossword and occasionally, someone would say, "What's the capital of Mongolia?" And he'd say, "Oh."

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: "Ulaanbaatar," or something.

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Yeah.

J. Ritchie: He didn't study the thing himself but he was always ready with an answer.

<laughter>

Brock: Oh, yeah. <laughs>

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Legendary. But more than that. John and I are substantially younger than Dennis, but the older cousins have recollections of him. Our Aunt Kay and Uncle Nick used to drive an old Mercedes.

J. Ritchie: A Chrysler.

B. Ritchie: No, a Chrysler. That's right. They later had a Mercedes. A Chrysler with push buttons, I guess, for--

J. Ritchie: Push button drive. Remember that?

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Juke box drive? Remember those cars?

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: And Dennis would take the kids for rides in his spaceship.

Brock: <laughs>

B. Ritchie: "Get into the car."

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Well, and Lisa talks about seeing him sitting right out there silently behind the wheel of this Chrysler. And she said, "What are you doing?" And he said, "Quiet. I'm in suspended animation."

<laughter>

Brock: Well, maybe we could also talk a bit about your parents and their family background.

J. Ritchie: Sure. Our father's family background was directly from Northern Ireland. In fact-- so his mother and father came to the States in-- early 1900s. But those were the days when women often would return home to have a baby. So his mother took the Queen Elizabeth, I think it was back--

B. Ritchie: The Queen Mary.

J. Ritchie: Queen Mary back to Belfast for him to be born.

Brock: Really?

J. Ritchie: And stay with the family there for whatever, a month, and then returned here. His name was Alistair Ritchie. And the famous story there is that she was returning on the Queen Mary and some nice older gentleman said, they had named him Alexander, said, "So what's your baby's name?" And she said, "Alexander." And he said, "Oh, the Scottish version of that is Alistair." And she liked it so much she changed it on the ship.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: And then Mom's family, the McGee family, who were the grandparents who built this house, he-- I think probably originally they were from Scotland or Ireland, but much more distant. And he was in the power and light business. So as Bill said, he's the one, the maternal grandfather, Daniel McGee whom we never met, who spent ten years meticulously building this camp and we have all the designs and blueprints and everything he ordered. And finally in the summer of 1932, he achieved his greatest goal which was to have electricity delivered, which it was. But then as Bill said, <laughs> he promptly died just as the house was completed. Which is a sad story, but he was so distant from us that it's a--

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: It's a story, not a--

Brock: Right and not a memory.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, right.

Brock: And he was, when we were talking earlier in the day, he was an executive with power production firms or--

J. Ritchie: Yeah, the--

Brock: The power industry.

J. Ritchie: And actually, it was called Electric Bond and Share.

Brock: Huh.

J. Ritchie: And they were a power-- Somehow managed and owned a lot of different power plants.

Brock: Maybe like a holding company or something.

J. Ritchie: It was a holding company.

Brock: Okay.

J. Ritchie: Which still exists. In fact, is the owner of the Fukushima Power Plant in Japan. <laughs>

Brock: Really? <laughs>

J. Ritchie: And I think was majorly busted in the thirties for price fixing, as many of those electric companies were.

Brock: Oh, sure. How about that.

J. Ritchie: But he had-- he wasn't, to our knowledge, involved in that.

B. Ritchie: Mm-hmm.

Brock: And they lived in New Jersey or--?

J. Ritchie: Mount Vernon, New York.

Brock: In Mount Vernon, New York.

J. Ritchie: Right. Which is where both of our parents met. They were both, they both went to school there.

B. Ritchie: Right. And his wife, on Mom's-- mother's side, traces back to the 1650s coming over to America.

Brock: Wow.

B. Ritchie: Which I discovered when I was in fourth grade, growing up in Summit, New Jersey and the fourth grade class play was a history of early New Jersey. And I came back and said, "Mom, I'm playing the part of Richard Stout in this New Jersey play." And she said, "Oh. Well, that's your great-great-great-great Grandfather."

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: And I said, "Wow." Anyway, that's an aside, but.

Brock: So both families were in the Mount Vernon area.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, that's where they met. My mother's story-- But, so my father's name was Alistair Ritchie. And my mother talks about how she met him as a fairly young girl and would come home and talk about this nice friend she met named Alistair Ritchie and they all thought it was Alice Da Ricci: That she had a nice girlfriend.

<laughter>

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: They later found out it was-- It was Alistair.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But Dennis was born in, there, in Mount Vernon.

Brock: Okay. And they, did they go to the public high schools there in Mount Vernon or--?

J. Ritchie: My father did.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And my mother, whose parents, as I say, they died in 1932 when she was I think 16.

Brock: Oh, gosh.

J. Ritchie: So she lived with one of her sisters. Spent a year at a junior college in Massachusetts, I can't remember the name of it, and then went to Vassar.

Brock: Okay.

J. Ritchie: After that.

Brock: But they had met; your parents met in their high school years or something like that?

J. Ritchie: Yeah, right.

Brock: And then your father went to, did he study physics or electrical engineering?

J. Ritchie: I think electrical engineering.

Brock: Okay. At Dartmouth College.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. And may have spent a year at the-- spent the graduate year somewhere. Then came to Bell Labs fairly quickly, but he had spent a year teaching at MIT, at least a year.

B. Ritchie: I think that was later.

J. Ritchie: Maybe it was later.

Brock: Did he do graduate work or--?

J. Ritchie: Yeah, what's the school at Dartmouth that's the engineering? Is it Tuck? That's the business school.

Brock: I'm not sure.

J. Ritchie: Anyway, I'm pretty sure. I don't think he had a master's degree.

B. Ritchie: I think that's what he did have.

J. Ritchie: Maybe. But I think a year of graduate school.

Brock: Maybe stayed on and got a master's degree there or something.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. Thayer School.

Brock: Ah.

J. Ritchie: I think it's the Thayer School of Engineering.

Brock: I think you're right. And then was-- Took a job with Bell Labs which must have been fairly early on?

J. Ritchie: Yeah, in '39?

Brock: Right. So within a--

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: He graduated in '35.

J. Ritchie: Right.

B. Ritchie: So.

Brock: Okay.

J. Ritchie: And I have actually a letter from Bell Labs, a personal letter to him offering him a job. I have it-- I should find it somewhere. It's an amazing letter with an offer of, I don't know, \$18 dollars a week?

Brock: <laughs> That's great.

B. Ritchie: I think it was \$26. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Something like that.

Brock: Yeah.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: But, but he absolutely loved it. He spent an entire career at Bell Labs and loved it, just thought it was the greatest place in the world. As did Dennis.

Brock: And your father worked there straight through until his retirement.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: And did your parents marry right after they both graduated, something like that?

J. Ritchie: Yeah. She graduated in '37 and I think they might have been married in '39-- '38 or '39.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. I don't know.

J. Ritchie: But soon after.

Brock: What was her interest?

J. Ritchie: Well, we, it was an interesting-- I'll explain further-- but he was a very-- he was a wonderful guy. Very sweet, very sincere, very genuine man who I don't think ever uttered a nasty word in his life, but very rigorous and scientific in his view of life. You know, I've often thought about this. He and Dennis were the same way, but there are certain people, I suspect you may be one of them, who simply can't stand not knowing how something works.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Even if not down to the exact detail.

Brock: Mm-hmm.

J. Ritchie: Really, being able to at least have a mental image of how anything works. Whereas my mother was much more like me which is, "I don't care how it works."

<laughter>

Brock: As long as it works.

J. Ritchie: Is it interesting and does it work. In fact, one of the great abiding legends in our family is the time that Dad came-- and they both told the story-- Dad came down and found Mom in the kitchen. She had dropped a fork into the toaster and was so panicked about getting electrocuted that when he found her she was standing there in rubber boots with wooden tongs and an unplugged toaster fishing it out.

<laughter>

Brock: Safety first.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. I always thought that the toaster was plugged in, she hadn't, like, figured that part of it out. <laughs>

Brock: Oh, yeah. As a part of the solution rather than the tongs and the boots.

J. Ritchie: So she was very-- she had a great sense of irony, a great sense of humor in life, saw everything that was sort of funny about the world. Not in a mean way, but just-- He had a sense of humor but it was not like hers. So she was kind of a really terrific, funny woman. Very loved. Very much loved by all of her nieces and nephews. As was he, but she had a very engaging, outgoing kind of personality.

Brock: Did they have many siblings? Did you grow up in the context of a big kind of close knit extended family sort of a--?

B. Ritchie: Sure did. As a matter of fact, the Poconos played a big part in that. Both sides of the family, father and mother. So this Pocono place has come to us through my mom's side. But on my father's side, our father's side, our grandmother was the matriarch and she had this vision of having all the cousins getting together in a big family reunion once every two years. We had an uncle who was in foreign service and when they got their summer vacation, it was like, let's have a week with family.

Brock: Oh, I think I saw some materials.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: From-- a little card from an ambassador.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: But it didn't say-- The ambassador of the United States, but it didn't say to where, you know, but it was--

<laughter>

Brock: It must have been your uncle.

B. Ritchie: Maybe that could have been. Could have been.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. He was the ambassador to Lebanon.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: Oh, wow.

B. Ritchie: So starting, the big event, it started around 1963, but by '67, it was rocking and in a big way. And even to this day, every two years we get together and have a week-long celebration that the cousins all stay at, you know, and basically they rent places, so.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, they rent houses.

B. Ritchie: A lake or two away and just come for the big parties. But there is between 50 or 60 people here.

Brock: Wow.

B. Ritchie: A great feeling. And on our mother's side were all the owners of this. It's a smaller group, but it can get big and every five years our cousin Kitty will have a birthday celebration, 40 or 50 people will show up in the family on that side. So certainly we had the experience in our generation and our kids also had the experience of connectedness like nobody's business with the cousins. Not, you know, you don't see them every day but you know that you're going to see them and you know it's going to be a beautiful, memorable place. And the Poconos is kind of like, well, for Dennis it was really always ground-central for him. He was happy here. He was around family here. He knew this place from growing up.

J. Ritchie: And oddly, in some ways, and Bill was talking about this when you arrived, but when Dennis was a teenager here, there's a big teenage community as you can imagine of kids and, you know.

Brock: Oh, yeah, of everybody up here in the summer. Sure, yeah.

J. Ritchie: At the lake for the summer. He was really a sort of a center of the community, a very popular guy. One summer he had the position of Head of Activities, which is the job sort of planning all the games for little kids and Bill showed you the award he won that summer.

Brock: Right.

J. Ritchie: But it's sort of hard to compute now because he, in later years after that, really wasn't terribly social. I mean, he had friends but he wasn't-- He wasn't as outgoing as he obviously was then as he, I guess, as he focused his energies or changed or whatever, but.

B. Ritchie: There were a lot of years in his-- when he was, you know, in his thirties and forties and just working flat out, full-time, that's, you know, no questions, either working, working, working, where for vacation, he would come and spend a week up here in the Poconos. And there was one famous year where--

J. Ritchie: Just on his own, you mean.

B. Ritchie: On his own. Yeah. He'd just come and be alone and wander around. So this place is built on piers. It's above ground and big, big camps. But when it gets cold and it gets to be freezing, if you have water in your pipes, bang, you know, that's it.

Brock: Right. Yeah.

B. Ritchie: So it's just a summer community. And he came up in the fall after the plumbers had already come and drained all the water and pulled the pipes apart and winterized the place. But he wanted to the week, so he actually went under the house and screwed all the pipes back in and got all the plumbing working again. <laughs>

Brock: And then undid it all?

B. Ritchie: And then I guess he undid it at the end of it.

Brock: <laughs> Wow.

B. Ritchie: <laughs> For somebody who was not known to do housework or to do anything in terms of maintenance, he could turn it on when he wanted to.

Brock: Yeah, when there was an objective.

<laughter>

Brock: And so when your, so your parents moved to New Jersey then for the Bell Labs position eventually. Or they were living in New York for a while and--

J. Ritchie: Yeah, he was-- They were living in Mount Vernon and he was working at Bell Labs when it was at West Street.

Brock: Right.

J. Ritchie: And then the year of my birth, which was 1949, they moved to Summit and he began working at Murray Hill.

B. Ritchie: Did he?

J. Ritchie: You think he still stayed on at West Street for a while?

B. Ritchie: I know he went and moved to Holmdel but I never knew he--?

J. Ritchie: Oh, no. He didn't go to Murray Hill. I'm sorry.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. Holmdel.

J. Ritchie: But he must have continued at West Street and was commuting from Summit for a number of years, because Holmdel didn't open until--

B. Ritchie: Built in the sixties, yeah.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: Yeah. I forget when that facility was constructed. Or perhaps there had been an operation there before--

J. Ritchie: Right.

Brock: And then they built that big modernist building.

J. Ritchie: Whether he ended up working at all for any period of time at Murray Hill I just can't remember.

B. Ritchie: I think he wanted to but didn't. You know, that just the--

J. Ritchie: But it was a very, as I told you, I've been working on this memoir about Dennis and our family, and it was an amazingly cool household because we had my mother with her humor and my father with his-- he wasn't really a nerd, but he was, you know, very precise and rigorous and scientific. He fixed everything in the house himself.

B. Ritchie: He was quiet.

J. Ritchie: So Dennis obviously as the first born, and for whatever reason gravitated more towards the scientific and some of us are in between and some of us, like me, are--

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: The outliers. I have this piece I'm writing. I start with a description of this old 8-millimeter movie from Christmas of 1955 or I think it's '56 in our living room. Christmases were always a big deal. But it's very carefully staged by our scientifically oriented father, you know, opening with the classic, that little blackboard with the letters.

Brock: Oh, the-- Yeah. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: "Ritchie Family Christmas," the colored letters. And then there's a shot of the Christmas tree and then a slow pan of all of us sitting with our presents and there's Bill-- it must have been later than '55-- Bill with a rocket ship that fills with water. Then me, I was into guns, so I had these cap guns and I'm shooting at the camera and then Lynn with this beautiful dress on and a doll. And then we pan finally to Dennis who's sitting there wearing a like stiff tweed sport jacket in a chair with a table in front of him and his thick glasses and he's very meticulously playing with his chemistry set and occasionally looking at the camera and putting things together.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: And I'm shooting and-- I mean, it was just that was--

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: That was the family.

<laughter>

Brock: And so he was the-- He was born in '41 did you say?

J. Ritchie: '41.

Brock: Okay. And then your sister, Lynn, was--?

B. Ritchie: '43.

Brock: '43.

J. Ritchie: '43. I was '49.

B. Ritchie: And I was '55.

Brock: Okay. And did you all go through the same, well, at different times, did you all go through the same local school system then in Summit?

J. Ritchie: Yeah. They must have started in Mount Vernon.

Brock: Right. Maybe kindergarten or something, you know, and--

J. Ritchie: Then when Dennis was eight, I guess, they moved to Summit.

Brock: Oh, okay.

J. Ritchie: So, yeah, they went through the Summit school system. I don't know what it was like for Bill, but for me, who was an indifferent student in elementary school, but my trail had been blazed by this brother who was very good at school and a sister who was immensely popular. And so I had sort of this pick set for me that I could just follow through and--

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Even though I didn't do any work, people figured, "Well, you must be smart."

Brock: Yeah. <laughs>

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Oh, that's funny. I had kind of the opposite. <laughs> Because of John, I sailed through.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Like, wow, you were like something, kid.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: But I remember Dennis, you know, again, in the thing I'm writing, I still think this is the best description I can come up with because I thought a lot about the word "genius." You know, people refer to him as a genius, and I don't know what a genius is or means. But what I thought of him as a little kid is sort of still what I think of him, which is a term that's not used anymore, but he was a "brain." Remember the days when somebody was "a brain?"

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: It doesn't have the same connotations as nerd or-- It was just kind of, "Oh, my brother is a brain." Clearly, did very well in school and won all these mathematical awards and stuff and--

Brock: While he was in high school or something like that?

J. Ritchie: While he was in high school, right. And I remember even though I was much younger and not really tuned into the college application process, but being-- either later I was told I should have been astounded or I was at the time that he only applied to one college. And even then I thought, "Geez, don't you think you should cover your bets a little?"

Brock: <laughs> Yeah. Had some sort of a hedge.

J. Ritchie: I think it was a pretty-- I think he had been told by his counselors, "You already got into Harvard."

Brock: Wow.

J. Ritchie: Which he did.

Brock: Did he do sports or anything like that or any--

J. Ritchie: No. No.

Brock: Yeah. He was pretty devoted to science and mathematics.

J. Ritchie: Never played a sport. Never physically active.

B. Ritchie: A couple of exceptions. He in grad school, I think, did two canoe trips down Maine rivers. One of them was down the Allagash.

J. Ritchie: Right.

B. Ritchie: And they might have both been down the Allagash. But he had these friends in grad school that he would do these adventures with. And the two canoe trips and then he also did a bicycle trip.

J. Ritchie: A motorcycle.

B. Ritchie: Sorry, not bicycle trip, a motorcycle trip around Europe.

J. Ritchie: In Europe.

B. Ritchie: So he was on a bike, you know.

Brock: Wow.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, he was on a motorcycle.

B. Ritchie: And you've got to be-- On a motorcycle. Was it a Triumph?

J. Ritchie: No, a BSA.

B. Ritchie: A BSA, yeah.

J. Ritchie: BSA 650. I remember it.

B. Ritchie: Mm-hmm.

J. Ritchie: But no, not-- Didn't play sports at all.

B. Ritchie: Didn't walk. Didn't exercise. Didn't think of himself as a physical <laughs> being.

Brock: Mm-hmm. <laughs> Yeah, that's right. A pure brain. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: He was, I mean, essentially.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: I mean, that's all I did while I was busy being an indifferent student, all I did was play sports as a little kid. Which felt-- Nobody was told what they had to be. I mean, our parents were great, I think, at just whatever you are, you are.

Brock: Letting people follow their interests.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. And I don't even have the impression that, you know, sort of Dennis was turned into a scientist by our father or, you know, directed that way. I think just that's-- We all were who we were.

B. Ritchie: The sort of underlying pressure that you are something amazing, so.

J. Ritchie: Right.

B. Ritchie: That, you know, you'll-- that's what you're going to find yourself is something special.

Brock: There was that expectation in your household.

J. Ritchie: It was an unstated expectation.

Brock: But it was there, the League of Extraordinary Children.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Yeah. But it's one that I think was burdensome to me later in life. It was like I grew up knowing that I was somehow special and we had a special family and knowing that I was loved but never really being told what it is to be special.

Brock: Yeah. Isn't that interesting.

J. Ritchie: And it's not that our parents didn't love us, but it wasn't a huggy kind of a household.

B. Ritchie: Right. I mean, I remember out of college, certainly after having had a fantastic teen years and early twenties, reaching this point where I was realizing that I had no idea what my future was going to be and getting kind of scared about it. And going to Dad to ask him and <laughs> it was like he was sort of annoyed and peevisish and standoff-- I mean, he just didn't want to-- And he was like, "I don't have any answers for you. I'm sorry."

<laughter>

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: It's like, "Dude, I just want to talk, man."

Brock: Yeah.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Just make something up.

<laughter>

Brock: Huh.

B. Ritchie: But he just didn't have it-- You know, he was there, but it wasn't, like John said, a steering of us. But and it was incredibly liberating. You know, the other thing about our family is there was this really a huge amount of energy, sort of silent energy that was unspoken and unstated that nobody was going to get the goods on us. It was there was just--

Brock: What do you mean?

B. Ritchie: Like, as a little kid, like, you know, the Shelbys' father was out of work for a while and Billy Piers' father worked for a brewery and Billy Coppenhall's mother was a bitch and but nobody had anything bad to say about our family.

J. Ritchie: No.

B. Ritchie: Because we just never-- there was never any blowup, never any anger, never any--

J. Ritchie: Right.

B. Ritchie: Thing that anybody could sort of get the goods on us and kind of go, "I got their number."

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't have thought of it that way but I see what you mean. Yeah. It was a very nice, very well respected family of modest means. I mean, I don't know what Dad was making at Bell Labs, but we didn't live in a fancy house. And we didn't really spend money on things.

B. Ritchie: They were cheap.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: It was like-- <laughs> Going out to dinner, you know, like, when my grandmother-- when our grandmother took us, we'd get to go out to dinner, but not-- <laughs> Not-- There was no parents.

J. Ritchie: Even this house to me demonstrates that, because all growing up now, as you'd imagine, there's always stuff that needs fixing.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And that's what my father did. He'd kind of, he'd spend countless hours fixing all the screens and-- And then when we took over because we weren't, we didn't have the time or the inclination, we realized that if you pay somebody to do this stuff it gets done like that.

Brock: Yeah.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: It's amazing.

Brock: Rather than you doing it your-- I have-- I have relatives who do exactly the same thing at this place in Wisconsin. You know, their vacation is coming out and then working on this place the entirety of their vacation. I guess it's relaxing after a fashion, but, boy, yeah.

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Right.

J. Ritchie: And not only when we paid somebody to do it did it get fixed, but the place got upgraded.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Because, you know, no matter how many months you spend working on screens--

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: There's still holes in them.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: But if you order all new screens--

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Oh, yeah. That's funny.

Brock: Was, clearly, sort of verbal engagement with one another and family was a theme of your household and it sounds like engagement with, like, reading and--

J. Ritchie: Humor.

Brock: Humor was a big theme.

J. Ritchie: Bob and Ray. Do you remember Bob and Ray, the radio personalities?

Brock: Yeah. In fact, your brother had an audio tape of Bob and Ray he used to watch.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I took the rest of them. But Bob and Ray and just sort of sophisticated humor just pervaded the household. And we all had a different take on it. That was a real-- That was a kind of glue, I think.

Brock: Was politics or religion-- sometimes those are big themes in people's households. Were either of those in your household?

B. Ritchie: No.

J. Ritchie: Not themes. I mean, our parents, I didn't know the term then, but they were very liberal and very areligious.

B. Ritchie: And it was everybody hated Nixon.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: I asked them.

Brock: Another glue.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: But no, not these.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And also, you know, maybe this is just sort of unstated-- maybe it goes without saying, but and this is another thing I paid a price for and I think we all have in our different ways, never any conflict and conflict was sort of something to be avoided. Which is good in a lot of ways, but if you never experience conflict you never learn as a kid sort of where you stop and the other person begins and-- I think a healthy amount of conflict is really an important defining event and just we, nobody ever argued. And it was kind of like you, what you didn't do.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Which as I say, is good in some ways, but I think--

Brock: Did people just defer to someone then to, you know, not have the conflict by resolving it by just deferring to--

J. Ritchie: Deferring or not talking about it.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: Not raising-- I mean, I told you last night about--

Brock: Just let it go or whatever.

J. Ritchie: Our grandmother who would burst through the veil and say things to Dennis that nobody else would, like, "When are you going to get a girlfriend?"

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Or, "You should shave that beard. I bet you'd be a handsome man." Which we didn't say that. So.

B. Ritchie: But, you know, I mean, I'm more of a fiery personality I think than probably any of the rest of us. And also as the youngest and--

Brock: Right.

B. Ritchie: So, I mean, John and I would have these drag down, knockout battles, screaming and everything, and <laughs> you know, putting that back in a bottle.

J. Ritchie: I think you and I sort of expressed a lot of the conflict that was hidden in the rest of the family.

B. Ritchie: Mm-hmm.

J. Ritchie: I mean, we beat the shit out of each other.

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: Mm-hmm.

J. Ritchie: I broke his leg playing-- As a little kid playing football, I tackled him and broke his femur.

Brock: <laughs> Oh, man.

B. Ritchie: <laughs> It was--

Brock: Ouch.

J. Ritchie: Which--

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: I really don't think was my intent, but it was to play rough.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: But yeah, we were the--

<laughter>

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: We were Dennis's voice. <laughs>

Brock: The exhaust valve or whatever.

J. Ritchie: Exactly.

Brock: The safety valve or something, yeah.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. Yeah.

B. Ritchie: So, you know, I was 13 years younger so there's a lot about his early days that I have no, you know, consciousness of. I vaguely kind of remember him going off to college. I have sort of a memory of wanting more of his attention whenever he would come home from vacations and that was hard. There was this one period that I got his attention in a big way and it was incredible. I'll tell that story.

Brock: Please.

B. Ritchie: So, we-- This is the one that I told on the Bell Labs thing. But John and Lynn and I on Christmas 1964 came up with this wonderful idea for the Legion of Super Diseases. And it was just this idea where our family would, you know, morph into this secret, you know, identity and--

J. Ritchie: Well, wait a minute. We got it because you developed a huge boil on the back of your neck.

B. Ritchie: Well, there was that.

Brock: <laughs>

B. Ritchie: I did do that.

J. Ritchie: And I know you were fascinated by it.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And we got into the idea of diseases.

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And the boil fell off.

B. Ritchie: It didn't fall off, <laughs> but--

J. Ritchie: It was lanced.

B. Ritchie: It was drained, yeah. I mean, it was, it had to be drained and there was a huge amount of pus.

J. Ritchie: So that was the inspiration for it, you becoming Boil Boy.

B. Ritchie: Well, that's true.

Brock: <laughs>

B. Ritchie: But don't-- The real inspiration was we were sitting there and they used to have a bunch of bowl games but it was more-- football games that, you know, at the bowl season. And most of them were right at Christmas-- I mean, at New Year's.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: But there was--

J. Ritchie: This Bowl, that Bowl, yeah.

B. Ritchie: The first of the outliers was the Gator Bowl. And so we were watching the Gator Bowl which became the Goiter Bowl.

Brock: <laughs>

B. Ritchie: And somehow Goiter Bowl became Goiter Gal.

J. Ritchie: I don't know. I think the Boil Story. But anyway--

B. Ritchie: Well, yeah, the boil was right there. The boild had already happened. But anyway, so Dennis got in on this. Now, Dennis never got in on any of these things, but Dennis got in on this, and he drew these incredible cartoons that we just went wild about and so finally we had a way of pressuring him to do stuff. "You got to do more," dada-da, and then he started doing an actual, literal cartoon that he got about halfway through and then bored with and didn't want to do anymore, but--

J. Ritchie: He's good artist.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. So we bugged him through the spring, and finally, I guess, you know, by summer he actually produced the entire cartoon for us, which was incredible. It's beautiful. It's just so funny. It's so, so witty, and then I convinced him to, the following Thanksgiving when he came home, to sit with me in Mom's old, funky keyboard-- typewriter. Just clack away while I fed him these storylines about, you know, Boil Boy, then, you know, took it out, his bus thing ended, such and such, and he would faithfully type these stories and, you know, not try and correct me but just be there and wonderful and encouraging. I'm climbing all over him and talking to him, and then he would illustrate these and he turned out to be like a world-class illustrator and, you know, my life now, I, for my adult life, basically, have run a game company or I'm working with illustrators and coming up with-- and Dennis was, he was right there with the caliber of the best pros that I've ever worked with. It was incredible, and, you know, just out of nowhere. Suddenly he's got this ability. But it was just such a gift to get his attention long enough where you could just sit and do a whole project and have him do the whole thing. Incredible.

Brock: Would he be sort of more self-absorbed or something like that? Was that the hard part about engaging him? Like, he would-- your story about him sitting here while other people were working on the crossword and being a resource to--

J. Ritchie: Right. That was his sort of stance, but-- and my recollection is just things came alive when it was Christmas. Particularly when he had gone off to college then when Lynn did, because everybody would come home. You know, we'd have a week or two together and we would do-- play games and it was just this magic time, and then it always felt like after that he did, he sort of retreated to just not engaging as much and not being as funny.

B. Ritchie: I used to say, "Dennis, Dennis, can we do--" he said, "We can do it in a sec." "Dennis, what does a sec even mean? What a-- tell me what, a second?" "It's an indeterminate period of time between one second and a day."

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: And somehow he came up, which we still quote, that "You should never eat eggshells, because if you eat an eggshell, you'll have to have your zorch removed and you'll never troddle again." Which, as a little kid, I was freaking terrified.

<laughter>

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: Because we got soft boiled eggs in the morning and it was like--

B. Ritchie: That was from Dennis?

J. Ritchie: --the scariest thing I'd ever heard.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: "You have to have your zorch removed and you'll never troddle again."

B. Ritchie: That was just family lore by the time I came along. <laughs>

Brock: Did he have in-- obviously he, you know, excelled in his studies in high school. Did he, do you know if he had-- was work a part of his life in those years or just very focused on the classroom?

J. Ritchie: Right. What do you mean work?

Brock: Like summer jobs and things like that.

J. Ritchie: Summer jobs? Nah. No. No. He, to my knowledge, never had a summer job of any kind. Which wasn't as typical, I think, back then, as it is now. Maybe I'm wrong.

B. Ritchie: He probably was coming up to the Poconos through high school.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: Oh, yeah.

B. Ritchie: And when-- would have summer activities up here in the--

J. Ritchie: Right.

Brock: And how was his-- what do you know of his experience as an undergraduate? He applied to one place, got in, thankfully, went to Harvard. Was studying Applied Mathematics--

B. Ritchie: Went to Harvard.

Brock: --at that time?

J. Ritchie: He ended up studying Applied Mathematics. I should get these to you, if I didn't, but I have all of his transcripts from Harvard, and he did not blaze his way through with straight A's by any means, which sort of gets back to the thing I was saying before. I mean, it's-- I think it's kind of an arbitrary term and not that helpful to talk about whether he was a genius, but my impression even now is that whatever genius is, he was a really, really smart guy who happened to hit just at the sweet spot where he found a thing that-- where his genius could be expressed, if you know what I mean. But he was someone you'd say "Unquestionably a genius." But it was the match of his getting into the world of computers with his particular brain that just, "pow," blossomed. But, you know, he didn't get straight A's at Harvard and he got, even in some of the mathematical courses, in mathematics courses, got B-minuses. So what that means, I don't know.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But, you know, I mean, it's not all about your college grades, and throughout his life, his reading was--

J. Ritchie: Prodigious.

B. Ritchie: Prodigious.

Brock: Oh.

B. Ritchie: Fast, and immense and-- you know.

Brock: Was he a big library user then when he was a youth? Did he just--

J. Ritchie: He must've been.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: We had books all over the house.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: But yeah. His-- just a great library and extremely widely read. But his favorite authors were like P.G. Wodehouse. Humorous. S. J. Perelman. Those were the people he just ate up and still had them-- has lots of their books.

B. Ritchie: But you could-- you'd engage him on any subject. You know, just talking to him about X, Y or Z and he, you know, all of a sudden you discover that he had this depth of understanding and authority in-

Brock: Hm.

J. Ritchie: Unlike my father, he was not a-- didn't fix things. Like Bill was saying on earlier. You know, he had a deep knowledge of the world and how things worked but didn't spend time other than with stuff like chemistry sets. Didn't fix stuff around the house or anything like that.

Brock: Right. Wasn't tinkering necessarily.

J. Ritchie: Not that I recall.

B. Ritchie: Well, yeah. But so we'll talk about his coming home after-- because after he finished grad school he came home in 1967 and moved back into the family house and went to work at Bell Labs. But among the things that he did, and maybe he even did this before, but he was very interested in, I mean, you know, first of all the, you know, cultural things were going on. You know, huge, you know, every-- the '60s was happening, and he got into-- he first made a Heathkit receiver, which was, you know, a really big, fancy one. He got AR speakers and he set this stereo up in the attic and, you know, home built, and this is where we would listen to, like, the Beatles' White album and *Abbey Road* and he was really up on hip stuff of the day back in the '60s.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. He moved into-- he had a home that we grew up in where he remained from 1967 until 1989?

B. Ritchie: Yeah, not sure.

J. Ritchie: When Mom died, and Father moved out, but he stayed living in the family home. He lived in the attic and he worked in the basement so that he didn't intersect with people all that much. But yeah. I remember it was like, you could go up to his room in the attic when he was at work and he wasn't around and the two things I remember was his amazing sound system, and then he had a huge stack of *Playboys*, which was like the only reason--

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: --to live. But it was puzzling, because he never had any relationships with women that we were aware of. Ever. I'm not sure. He may have had a date in high school.

Brock: In high school, or a camp or something?

J. Ritchie: Yeah. But no, I don't think so, and the reason I mentioned the *Playboys* is not just being facetious about it but with a person like that you never, you just don't know. "Is he gay? Is he not gay?" and the only evidence I have that he wasn't gay is that he collected all these *Playboys*, which is really no particular evidence at all, but it was always a bit of a mystery, because he never really did have-- he related really well to everybody. He loved relating to women. Really would kind of come to life with various of our spouses or girlfriends, but never was in a relationship himself.

B. Ritchie: I think he had intimacy issues and with a--

Brock: It sounds like it. I mean, if it was always a retreat or something, I mean, that would be so hard.

B. Ritchie: We had this one strange, I mean, this is the span of life and this gets to his later years when he was, say, in his mid-sixties. So, you know, he was old but he was still cranking along, but somehow a group of us family right out here got into a thing and Dennis was sort of on the outside of the circle but got into a thing where it was maybe we were playing cards or something and we all happened to reach into the center at the same time and then we got into a thing where our fingers were interlocking and then all of a sudden sort of playing, sort of dancing like snakes where we were all kind of interweaving, and maybe Dennis was sitting there and got up in horror and sort of recoiled and left the room rather than have to be--

J. Ritchie: I don't remember that.

B. Ritchie: --part of this, you know, sort of writhing of hum-- I don't know. It was funny.

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: He just--

J. Ritchie: Yeah, intimacy issues for sure.

Brock: Yeah, must be. Huh.

J. Ritchie: Intimacy issues but clearly loved us. I mean, just wanted to be with us and spend time with us.

Brock: Yeah. But at the side--

J. Ritchie: But at the side or-- exactly.

Brock: --you know, but still wanted to be right there at the side.

J. Ritchie: Mm-hm.

B. Ritchie: Sure did. Yeah.

Brock: Yeah. Huh. Did he have, you know, like, nonromantic friendships with people outside of work, people that he would see, you know, I don't know, in just other, you know, people from high school, since he was still in the same area, or anything like that?

J. Ritchie: Not really.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: He was-- and you hear folks at Bell Labs that he worked with talk about this, that he was a great colleague and a great guy and funny and well read but they didn't really know him, and I'm not aware of any, you know, buddies that he would get together with at all.

Brock: Yeah. Have a drink or to go hiking with or something like that.

B. Ritchie: Right. No. When I came home from college in 1978, he set me up to do a carpentry job. I was looking for work, with a woman named Marian Harris, who worked at the labs and is a colleague of his, and she was fascinated by him. She had a crush on him, and so he was friendly to her but, you know, she would basically be all over him.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: You know. "So Dennis, how's your life going?" "Oh, your little brother's come back. Let me hire him," and so Marian got a hold of me because she wanted to get all the gossip she could on Dennis, and her, you know, her thing with me was, "Nobody at the Labs knows anything about Dennis's personal life, so I want to ask you from the family perspective, what can you tell us about his personal life?"

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: And I was like, "The only thing we know in the family is whatever might happen at the Labs." So--

J. Ritchie: That was an interesting fact, because I remember this fascination with "What this guy's really like?" Of being at a USENIX conference in Boston where he was speaking, and I didn't go to-- this was maybe the only one I went to, and I was there and when people there found out that I was his brother they just leapt on, "What's he really like? Where did he go to elementary school?" It was this--

Brock: Well, you could imagine it would be almost kind of like an oracle. You know, all of this amazing work coming out of this, this nothingness and you don't know, you know, "Who is this guy?" <laughs> You know, "Where is this stuff coming from?"

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: So I could definitely, especially if you are, you know, using his language or using his operating system and--

J. Ritchie: Yeah, and that's really one of the, I think, conclusions. As I say, working on his memoir, which is like a huge, long draft but it's a kind of in search of "Who was Dennis? Who was my brother?" and I know all this stuff about him, and have all these anecdotes about him, but at the end I sort of am left like everybody else, not really knowing what was inside there.

B. Ritchie: So he moved back in the summer of 1967, and so the way that our house was set up is that there were four bedrooms on the second floor and then an attic, which was the sort of bedroom suite, kind of.

Brock: Right.

B. Ritchie: And that's where John had lived, and the way I remember it, you actually started the *Playboy* collection and Dennis just kept it going. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Dennis had it out in the open. Mine was like under the mattress.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Yeah, I know. But I knew where to find yours.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Anyway, so, I was due to move up into the third floor. I was moving into seventh grade and it was going to be my turn, you know, upstairs, but all of a sudden Dennis took a job at Bell Labs and came home and he got the upstairs room instead of me. You know, which, I mean, "What am I going to do?" He's an adult. He's not like, you know, it's like, "What?" But what I did get was Dennis for six years, when I went through 7th through 12th grade, living in the same house with him while he was, you know, joining Bell Labs, building the whole thing, which was really an amazing experience.

Brock: Did he have meals with you guys or...

B. Ritchie: What would--

J. Ritchie: Sunday.

B. Ritchie: What would happen would be my mother learned to cook enough at family dinner so that he could have leftovers. He was an extraordinary cook. I mean, he was amazing. He both-- well, whatever. We'll talk about that in a second. But he-- so he would enhance the-- my mother's leftovers.

Brock: Oh, just-- yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. So--

Brock: Add to it as he reheats it and...

B. Ritchie: That's right, yeah, exactly. One of the big things was he was into, like, Chinese hot oil to fry things and, you know, so...

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: The kitchen gradually became coated with grease.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: But so he would not-- no. He would eat generally, like, at 11 or 12 when he came home, and then he'd work until 4 or 5 in the morning and then he'd take a shower and, you know, be in bed by 5:30 and wake up and go to work at somewhere between 1 and 4 in the afternoon.

Brock: Oh, interesting. So he was a nocturnal-- was he always nocturnal?

J. Ritchie: Certainly after he moved back to Summit he was.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. I don't know. I mean, seemed like his clock was that way.

Brock: Maybe.

J. Ritchie: And I wondered about-- I think he was kind of that way, but I think, weren't they all, at Bell Labs, tended to be nocturnal, because that's where you get the best time on the computer?

Brock: Well, maybe they became habituated to do that as students, because probably at Harvard or wherever he was using computers, you know, that you could have the most time at night.

J. Ritchie: That's when it was available, night.

Brock: When--

J. Ritchie: Yeah. <laughs> Like, it seemed like he was a natural for it too.

Brock: Yeah.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: But so one vivid memory I have was one time when I was in eighth grade, and, I mean, we-- I loved Dennis. We all were-- we were very close family, so this was a wonderful thing but, you know, he was an odd guy and he was, by this time, you know, doing world famous work, you know, in real-time, this work, as I know, but in eighth grade I was studying for some algebra test that was due, you know, the next day and there was some concept I didn't quite understand, so at about ten o'clock he was home and he was eating and I came down and said, "Can you just explain this thing to me?" and <laughs> I got stuck with him for like three hours and finally <laughs> at one o'clock in the morning as he's finishing explaining complex and <laughs> imaginary numbers to me, <laughs> it's like, "That's really great, but <laughs> I got to go to bed."

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: "I got to get some-- I got to work in the morning."

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: But, you know, he just went into it and by the time, I mean, I-- to this day, I have a pretty good understanding of complex and infinite numbers.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: I'm not sure I did well on the test but... He was just so into it. You know, once you got him going on a topic.

Brock: I noticed several volumes about astronomy in his books. I wondered if that was-- I wondered if he was into astronomy. I mean, or maybe it was just part of him being avid at--

B. Ritchie: He was into astronomy.

Brock: Okay.

B. Ritchie: They, at the Labs, they did tables and watched the satellites come over and things like that, so he would go out and watch the constellations and there were things that went up. It may be that it came originally from Ken [Thompson].

Brock: Oh.

B. Ritchie: Ken-- okay. So one of the things, there was this game called Spacewar!

Brock: Yeah. Yeah.

B. Ritchie: You probably know Spacewar!

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: I think it came out of MIT.

Brock: It did.

B. Ritchie: He played it on an oscilloscope and they had a version at the Labs and it was incredible. There were couple-- there were one with two suns and, you know, it's just amazing. One, two things, you're fighting each other. So that was the one, you know, everybody knows. But Ken built a game called Space Travel, which was basically you have a spaceship and you go out and you fly from planet to planet and then you try to land on the planets, and it was a scaling game and you had to sort of figure out how to decelerate and that kind of stuff, and that was, you know, back in the paper tape era of probably '68, '69, and whether that started them--

Brock: Oh, maybe.

B. Ritchie: --looking in sort of, "How do you think about celestial bodies?"

J. Ritchie: It might've-- I thought that it was something, it was something like space travel that they needed to write UNIX for. There was some game they were playing, a serious game, but something like that, which was the origin of developing UNIX, because they needed a new operating system to play the game, right.

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: Oh, I haven't heard that.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I think we could find it, but it was something like that, and they didn't set out to create UNIX to create UNIX. It was to solve a particular problem that they wanted to solve, which I think was pretty typical of Bell Labs, just these people working on little--

B. Ritchie: Yeah. Well, was to get out of MULTICS too, but I think there's something to what you're saying. Yeah. That's worth--

Brock: We'll track that down.

B. Ritchie: --tracking down. Yeah.

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: But he did go through a phase where he was quite involved in doing astronomy related stuff, looking at constellations and trying--

J. Ritchie: Yeah, he did. He had these strange-- you know, he was very interested in geology too. One of his favorite trips is he drove out to see Mount St. Helens, soon after it exploded.

Brock: It erupted, yeah.

J. Ritchie: Just a kind of inquisitive mind about what do things look like?

B. Ritchie: Well, now, was that-- did he drive there? Because that was-- there was a USENIX convention.

J. Ritchie: So maybe it was--

B. Ritchie: There was a USENIX conference, and there are people out there who will talk about renting a private plane with Dennis and going flying over the cone and looking in.

Brock: <laughs> Wow.

B. Ritchie: Oh. So yeah.

J. Ritchie: Also into weird and exotic foods.

Brock: Oh, we were talking about him as a cook.

J. Ritchie: Yeah, he would cook.

B. Ritchie: Maybe chef would be a better term.

Brock: Chef, yeah. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: But he would eat weird stuff too. There was one Christmas, again, part of the sort of family humor, you could order from magazines like tins of hummingbird tongues and swallows wings and things like that.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: That he would get, and whether anybody ate them or not, I don't know.

B. Ritchie: Oh, that's funny. I don't remember that. Ah. But--

J. Ritchie: In fact, he talked about once he-- one of his trips to China he got really into the food and came back and described a meal that he had that was delicious. It was "lion and dragon," which turned out to be cat and snake.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: But he ate it.

B. Ritchie: He ate it. <laughs> So our grandmother, my father's mother, Nanny -- Mabel English Ritchie - she, when she was 80 and her husband died, we moved her to an apartment in Summit. Walking-- it was like-- actually, right between the junior high and home, so I would frequently stop in and visit with Nanny walking on the way home, and she would come over every summer, every Sunday, for Sunday dinner, and John has lots of stories about all kinds of things, but one I'll tell now is she came in one time and said, "Can you believe this?" and she'd clipped a recipe from *The New York Times*, which was an Indian curry that took 24 hours to make, and, you know, just who would ever spend 24 hours making this? And Dennis took it from her and a week later he went ahead and he made the 24-hour--

J. Ritchie: God, I never heard that story. That's great.

B. Ritchie: Which turned out to be very hot.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: It was beyond me, but it was kind of delicious. Lots of chickpeas and things. But, you know, that way, I mean, he-- was no problem for him to, you know, a recipe that was elaborate enough that you had to keep working on it for 24 hours.

Brock: Right.

<laughter>

Brock: And what was-- do you think he chose to set up his office in the basement just to, you know, for privacy reason? He couldn't put it up in the attic where he was--

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I mean, it was not just space.

Brock: --too uncomfortable or something, yeah.

J. Ritchie: And the basement was kind of a natural-- oh, yeah. He could work undisturbed, and, you know, my-- who knows. But my take was so he came home and just didn't have the inclination or energy to do what you might say a normal person would do, which was to find an apartment. It was just easy to live here and it remained easy, and it went on longer and longer, but again, in this strange family of ours, I think it was really puzzling and probably somewhat disturbing to our parents to have this guy continuing to

live with them. But nobody ever said anything about it. It just wasn't... But then, as I said, last night when the house was-- when they sold the house, he bought a terrific house and took great pride in this house, decorating it and really loved it. So it wasn't that he was incapable of doing it. Just sort of he didn't have the--

Brock: That impulse to do it or something.

J. Ritchie: The impulse or the time because he was working on other stuff and years pass and you find you're doing the same thing.

Brock: And what was his setup like in the basement? He had a, I mean, 1967, would he have had, like, a video terminal or a teletype or a teleprinter down there or...

B. Ritchie: It would be a modem. He would've had a modem that connected directly to the Labs. He had a printer that had one of the balls, those big balls that spin around. It was fascinating, and he kept getting new ones of those as the technology kept going, "dudl-dudl-dudl..." It was this incredible spinning thing, and--

J. Ritchie: On a terminal, right, or is that what--

B. Ritchie: He did have a terminal. Yeah. He did have a terminal. So if he, I mean, Dennis, he was very comfortable to be, like, live in squalor basically, and he wasn't a hoarder quite but he was, you know, he just-- he lived in a mess.

Brock: Okay.

B. Ritchie: And the upstairs was a mess of clothing and I mean, it's-- <laughs> and, you know stuff, *National Geographic* piled around and stuff. But the downstairs was-- our dad had refitted, refinished it a couple of years before, putting in--

Brock: The basement?

B. Ritchie: Yeah. Putting in sheet rock ceilings and making it slightly better. But it was still kind of a dark, dank place, and the tile was still this linoleum square tile that was kind of cracked and fractured in places, so it was-- kind of had feeling of busted-upness, and Dennis went down there and started piling his manuals and books and things like that. So there would be like his seat and his terminal and the printer was over here and then just all around would be piled.

Brock: Was an ocean of paper.

B. Ritchie: An ocean of paper, yeah.

Brock: Oh, yeah.

J. Ritchie: We've seen the type.

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: Yeah. Well, I can just, I mean, I've seen offices like that, of technical people, who are doing incredibly precise, detailed stuff and then you cannot believe they're in, like, a cave of materials--

J. Ritchie: Right. Paper.

Brock: --or boards and parts, so it's--

B. Ritchie: Right. Yeah, and so--

Brock: --I think the--

B. Ritchie: --there wasn't much else going on in that basement. There had been an old TV there that we all used to go down and watch, but that was kind of, mm, the TV moved upstairs. So he kind of had both the attic and the basement as his own. My father's workroom was down there, so you've got-- I mean, it wasn't like he guarded it jealously or anything.

J. Ritchie: But it was sort of the same force of-- invisible force that-- it wasn't you couldn't go down there, but it was clearly his space.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, so-- yeah.

Brock: But it is interesting to think about, I mean, do you think he had exposure to computers before he went to Harvard? Did he know that that was, you know, did he go there interested in computers or...

J. Ritchie: I don't think so.

Brock: But he seems to have really gotten into it quickly.

B. Ritchie: Well, I mean, we talked a little bit about this--

Brock: If not--

B. Ritchie: --last evening, but let's get it on tape.

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: The influence of our-- so Dad went, was a Bell Labs-- joined Bell Labs, you say, in 1939, thereabouts, and stayed until he retired in around '70, something like that, and he, his older colleague,

was this guy named Bill Keister, who was his boss for a while and then his colleague, and they wrote a book together--

Brock: Switching circuits.

B. Ritchie: --and went through and Mr. Keister ended up being head of the computational center at Holmdel, Bell Labs Center.

Brock: Okay. I didn't remember that.

B. Ritchie: So he, he, you know, knew his computers from an early on age. Dad probably, but wasn't as technical. But Mr. Keister was just really on the cutting edge of everything all the time, and I think we just established that Dennis did an internship over the summer--

Brock: In '63, I think.

B. Ritchie: In '63.

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: And didn't you say that--

Brock: Yeah. It was about using computers to automate this process of designing switching circuitry of different kinds or something.

B. Ritchie: Right. Which I'd never heard that, but I'd always heard that it was Mr. Keister who gave him that job.

Brock: Well, that would fit perfectly with--

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But even if it wasn't, I mean, you're saying in '63 he was playing around with computer programs.

Brock: Yeah. Because when did he go to school? '60?

J. Ritchie: He was in--

B. Ritchie: Well, you're right. He must've been in college.

J. Ritchie: He was in-- he was class of '63, I think. Wasn't he? At Harvard?

B. Ritchie: Maybe he was. That's right. Maybe he was. So that means that by the time he was a senior at Harvard, and of course, that's-- yeah.

Brock: Yeah. Or maybe right after he graduated he did that between going back and continuing his studies.

B. Ritchie: Right. But earlier--

J. Ritchie: But he-- he has something on his homepage, I think, where he says in college he faced a decision and he realized that he wasn't great at applied math and if he stayed with applied math it was--

B. Ritchie: It had to do with physics as well.

J. Ritchie: And physics. It was something about how he realized that he might get sucked into the military industrial conflicts and he didn't want to do that, so...

B. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: Mm-hm. Well, it is, I mean, that, the NSA and that sort of activity, is a big, big employer of PhD's in Applied Mathematics.

J. Ritchie: And sort of had developed an interest in computers and thought he'd be better at that. I think it's on his homepage. I'll check. But I don't know. I don't know what he knew about computer before he went off to college. But I don't have the sense that that was an innate part of the draw. I think it was math and...

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. You know, it's funny, because in our family, the sort of hero character was Martin Gardner.

Brock: Oh. Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Who's the "Mathematical Games" columnist in *Scientific American* for many years, but I never heard the name Claude Shannon growing up, and, you know, Shannon was at the Labs, right, and doing these crazy games and mice running mazes and all kinds of things. So you'd think that if they were thinking computers, they'd be talking about him and other strains of things at the Lab, so, I mean, I wouldn't have gotten it contemporaneously-- I was too young, but, you know, I would've heard about it later that, you know, the family lore. So--

Brock: But you were then pretty young when he was in the basement with the-- so you had a computer in your household, you know, or at least, you know, a terminal to a computer at a very early stage.

J. Ritchie: Sure did.

B. Ritchie: Well, sure. That was in '67, when I was probably 12, and going in, and Summit, you know, Summit, New Jersey, was, you know, lot of Bell Labs guys, because, I mean, it was this community where -- you know, I hung out with all the super-- <laughs> I hung out with my generation of the brains, which were these super-smart kids, not-- everybody wasn't a Bell Labs kid but, you know, Ham Boyle's father ended up winning a Nobel Prize at the labs and, you know, was that-- he was just hanging out with kids like that.

Brock: Yeah. Right.

B. Ritchie: And there was actually an early computer that came in in our high school that you could do BASIC on. Some of my friends did it. I'd trot around it a little bit. But yeah, no. As I mentioned, it was all set up and ready to go except Dennis was militantly jealous about guarding his password, so, you know, I mean, I think he had me figured as a, you know, a conniving little kid.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: I had my ways of conniving and he was-- so he was on the lookout. He wasn't going to let me into his system ever.

Brock: I suppose that's, you know, going directly into the Bell Labs system, so it's--

J. Ritchie: <laughs>

Brock: And, you know, it's not like--

B. Ritchie: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Brock: --you know, crashing my PC, my Dell or something, you know.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Right. Yeah

Brock: It's-- yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, and so-- and well, I never expected it, but, you know, okay, I'm a kid but, umm, some sort of-- so I did have, I mean, I had, you know, the most amazing setup one could possibly imagine in my home and it wasn't going to be available to me. But I could, I mean, I ogled it. It was incredible, and I remember, you know, he would get bigger terminals and then one time he came home with a three-button mouse that was-- had been built in Switzerland, because that's where they--

Brock: Oh, we were talking about that, yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. That's where you got the good mice.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: And it's curious looking back, because I don't remember our father particularly expressing interest in what he was doing.

Brock: <laughs> What Dennis was doing?

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I mean, I'm sure he was proud of him, but it's not as if he was down there talking to him about, "What are you working on?" You know what I mean?

B. Ritchie: Yeah, that is interesting.

J. Ritchie: Was like they were on, each on a scientific track, but parallel.

Brock: Mm, and working in different parts of the organization, I guess, different facilities.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. But when you think of your oldest child as this, like, really smart computer person and you're a scientist, you'd just be... You would-- families are--

Brock: Yeah. But I could also see two people like that it could then be awkward, you know, like, if we bring that technical thing into our relationship then, I don't know, it would somehow change things.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. So anyway, that's the way it was.

Brock: And he-- so you would then, after you both left the household, it would be when you would return for the holidays or something or seeing people up here in the Poconos in the summer. That's just where you would encounter.

J. Ritchie: Right.

Brock: You know, if you went to visit your parents you would have necessity or by definition also be seeing your brother or...

J. Ritchie: Yeah, and my-- I think this is actually accurate, but my impression was that when we'd gather, like, we were off from college, and Lynn by then was living in England, so her trips home were sporadic, but it was like this really special thing to come back together. My impression was the Dennis sort of, having spent the rest of the year either in the basement or the attic or at Bell Labs, would kind of come out of his shell and we'd all do fun games together and funny gifts. Christmas was a great time for humorous gifts. My mother and her sister would exchange hilarious gifts and one year the gift that her sister came up with was an amazing, exact replica of the head of Richard Nixon, but it was a candle. But was just-- this was in, you know, '68, so it was like, "Well..."

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: That. And we never lit the candle, but we put it on the mantelpiece every year and as the years passed, you know...

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: But later on, when we had children, like when my kids were really young, and I think the same thing happened with Bill's kids. They loved Dennis. I mean, Dennis was like-- he was great with kids, little kids, and the best Christmas presents in the world were things like we found this-- I think they-- this doesn't happen as much but it was like a <laughs> plastic replica of a human body with organs inside in this kind of slime.

B. Ritchie: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, I do.

J. Ritchie: Remember those kind of gruesome, grotesque things?

B. Ritchie: I do, yeah.

J. Ritchie: And they loved that and they'd bring it home. We have videos of Dennis carefully pulling out the liver from this gooey stuff and just everybody's like...

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: I mean, you couldn't think of a good Christmas present for Dennis, a real Christmas present, but this stuff was just exactly what he loved.

Brock: Yeah. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Slime worms.

B. Ritchie: Mm-hm. Yeah, so, I mean, he did have a sense. He would give great books and he always had a really good touch with it. It was-- he never went to too much effort, but his stuff was always brilliant and wonderful. But one of the great things was to create opportunities for Dennis to engage, so--

Brock: You were doing that consciously, you think, or--

B. Ritchie: Well, yeah. Like, for example, we just saw one of the "Lord of the Rings" books. So when I was 14 I was mad about "Lord of the Rings" and I read it, you know, three times over the course of a year and a half, and having done that I got really pretty good at the trivia, and this was back before most people were caring about the trivia. You know, I... Fatty Bolger's name was Fredegar and, you know, all kinds of stuff like that, and I-- this was, by this time, I was into a wanderlust phase. Dennis shared that wanderlust. He loved traveling. But I was like 15, 16 years old and ready to get out and go places in the

world and so when was it? Maybe I was 17 at this time. As I convinced Dennis to give me a “Lord of the Rings” trivia quiz, where he would make up all the “Lord of the Rings” questions and, you know, I’d have to-- and whatever he came up with, I’d have to answer it on the spot, and we developed a sliding scale where depending on how well I did would be how much he would fund my trip to Alaska that I was going to take the next summer.

Brock: <laughs>

B. Ritchie: And I got him to, you know, write up all the questions and administer the test to me and, you know, I mean, I ended up making enough money to get to Alaska, so, you know.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: I didn’t realize you were that old when it..

B. Ritchie: I hadn’t thought about it that way either but it was, he did fund the trip, up to the Yukon, and--

J. Ritchie: It was-- this gets to a different time frame, but he was also very generous, and every Christmas, this is in later years, he would send everybody a really nice check for Christmas but, you know, siblings, spouses. He wouldn’t forget anybody, and always with a book, like, some interesting book. It was like, you know, 5,000 bucks that he’d send.

Brock: Oh.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, this was towards the end. It was amazing. <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Toward-- yeah. I mean, not really towards the end but for the last I don’t know how many years. I mean, it was always-- it was, first of all, it was generous. Secondly, it kind of basically funded Christmas. <laughs>

Brock: Right.

J. Ritchie: So...

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: But I always remember being kind of surprised that he was able to think ahead of time and get the checks written and the address--

Brock: And get it all out and...

J. Ritchie: --and mail them, not forget anybody. Was really sweet, and it reminds me of when he won the Japan Prize, he and Ken, which was a big deal, and he was really proud of that and we were all going to

fly to Japan, first class. Amazing events planned for us. I think the prize was going to be given by the emperor and this was like the trip of a lifetime for us, and then the tsunami happened--

Brock: Oh, gosh.

J. Ritchie: --just before and whoever the body in Japan that administers the prize had to send a letter, which I think was very painful to them, saying, "We've had to cancel."

Brock: All of these events.

J. Ritchie: "We just can't do it."

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: And it was a significant cash prize for each of them, 500 grand maybe.

B. Ritchie: Think 600 total.

J. Ritchie: Six hundred. Anyway, he thought that he wanted to donate his prize to--

Brock: Oh. To the relief effort--

J. Ritchie: Right. So he told them he wanted to do that and they just couldn't-- it didn't compute to them. I think there was a special emperor's fund set up with a special tax status, and it just didn't-- I think they were appreciative but it didn't--

Brock: Didn't work. <laughs> Yeah.

B. Ritchie: They refused it.

J. Ritchie: So they refused, and instead he paid for the building of a new kitchen here in this house.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: And they later, that fall, they came, they sent a delegation to the Murray Hill Bell Labs to present the Japan Prize.

Brock: Oh, I did see material about that there.

J. Ritchie: Which was really great ceremony. It was so cool. He was just at the top of his game. So happy.

B. Ritchie: And that was the spring before he died.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: Had he been sick for a while or-- and, I mean, I don't--

J. Ritchie: Oh, my God.

Brock: We can not talk about it if it's uncomfortable, but I don't--

J. Ritchie: I mean, I-- it's not uncomfortable. I don't know how deeply into his latter years we should get.

Brock: Well, I would, I mean, I would love to hear about his life.

J. Ritchie: In brief, yes. He did-- he never took care of himself, as we said. Exercise, and just became frailer and frailer, and traveled less and less, and then really did-- he had one night where he fell and broke his leg in his home, and--

B. Ritchie: Shattered.

J. Ritchie: Shattered, and unclear how long he <laughs> sat around before he called 911.

B. Ritchie: It was just a few hours. I ended up figuring that out.

J. Ritchie: But he did. The ambulance came and he--

Brock: To get to the phone or something was perilous for him after the fall or...

B. Ritchie: No. He hoped that it would get better, so he went to bed.

<laughter>

Brock: Oh. Yeah. Well, I mean, who hasn't had that reaction. <laughs> You know, but...

B. Ritchie: But in this case, it was as he would try and shift to make himself comfortable he could hear the grinding and crushing of bones.

Brock: <laughs> Okay. Yeah.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: And finally--

J. Ritchie: So he did get taken to the hospital, which turns out really to be a blessing. It was a major operation, but that sort of resulted in a whole physical reexamination and he had a lot of problems. A lot of problems with his bladder and...

B. Ritchie: He had prostate cancer.

J. Ritchie: Prostate.

B. Ritchie: And he'd chosen to treat it with radiation, and--

Brock: Previous to--

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: To this injury?

J. Ritchie: I think so.

B. Ritchie: Maybe.

Brock: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Or maybe not. But all, you know, in his, you know, moving into his later sixties. You know, I mean, there's a way of thinking about it that says the guy was destined to have a 70-year life and he sort of, you know, soft landed himself from age 65 to 70 and--

J. Ritchie: He ended up-- so in the hospital after this broken leg, which led a series of events, but he ended up spending a number of, a lot of, a bunch of surgeries, and then he had to go to a rehab, physical rehab place, in Berkeley Heights near where he lived, New Providence. For a long time. Months, and the reason I say it was a blessing is we all got much closer to him during that period. It was Lynn, Bill and I all were on top of it, worked with his doctors and visited him and suddenly all the kind of barriers lessened and he was much more available. I mean, he couldn't help it. He's lying around in a hospital johnny and needing help and at the same time we realized his house had fallen into sort of a mirror of him. His house had really fallen to disrepair. So while he was in this rehab place, we got a contractor to completely redo his house. A major-- couple hundred grand, because--

B. Ritchie: Holes in the roof, fixing and--

J. Ritchie: So it was this--

Brock: Making him maybe more-- did you make it a little more accessible for when he would come back?

J. Ritchie: It was a pretty accessible house.

B. Ritchie: It was pretty accessible already.

Brock: Okay. Yeah. You didn't have to deal with that.

J. Ritchie: But it really, it had really-- it was a scary way to kind of a, so he sort of-- we all got closer. He got physically much stronger. His house got fixed.

B. Ritchie: Lighter atmosphere in his home or something, yeah.

J. Ritchie: His house-- he could return to a house that was really livable again.

B. Ritchie: Right.

J. Ritchie: They really did a great job, so-- and so it was this series of events that actually turned out to be wonderful. I mean, was tough for him to go through but it was a-- was kind of saving him from the jaws of defeat there.

B. Ritchie: But back to the prostate cancer, which he treated with radiation, and, you know, who knows in these situations, but he went alone to the appointments and he didn't have an advocate with him and the doctor later who had to perform an operation said that his-- basically the radiation had kind of indiscriminately scarred all through his, you know, intestinal tissues and things--

Brock: Oh. His whole lower abdomen had been irradiated and had been damaged.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, and, you know, I mean--

Brock: Oh, poor guy.

B. Ritchie: Right. Exactly, and, you know, I mean, but he was so stoic and he, I think he ended, I mean, you know, you just ended up saying I think the guy had an amazingly high pain threshold just because of all the things--

Brock: Well, if he would go to sleep with a shattered femur, I mean--

B. Ritchie: Right. You know.

Brock: --<laughs> yeah, I would think.

B. Ritchie: I mean, he would sit--

<laughter>

Brock: I couldn't go a second.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But he would talk about, "Oh, there's this strange thing that I'm experiencing, which is a certain fizziness in my urine. I can't seem to understand this," and so, you know, and he sort of saw it as this medical, scientific curiosity. But what it actually was was there's this thing called a fistula, which is a hole that develops between your bladder and your intestines.

Brock: Oh, God.

B. Ritchie: So that your E. coli passes, you know, from your intestines into your bladder and so you get, yeah, I guess it's yeast infections and things like that, and he had like years of this going on undiagnosed and, you know, with radiation having messed up other parts and all interlinked and--

Brock: Ah, jeez.

B. Ritchie: --so, you know, I mean, he-- it was sort of like his late sixties were, having never exercised, having sort of beleaguered health, having prostate cancer. He had some heart issues. Having side effects from the radiation, having, you know, that'll wear you out.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: Certainly maintained this incredible sense of humor through the whole thing. I remember we'd visit him in this rehab place in New Providence and remember it was at Christmastime, and walking in on the deck you could see all the, a lot of, elderly people there, but you could see all the windows are decorated with candy canes and stuff like that.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Snowflakes.

J. Ritchie: And in Dennis's window is his... What'd he pee into? It's a urinal or some-- you know, the bottle?

Brock: <laughs> Oh, yeah, the... <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Was just sitting there.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: "Ah, here's Dennis's place."

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: The Yule bottle.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: But you could say to him, "Dennis, could you get a little Christmas tree going here?"

B. Ritchie: <laughs> Yeah.

Brock: And so was it a period of time then that he, without even just the occasional stuff of your parents being around and everybody coming back, you know, after your mother's death, he was kind of much more separate from anyone in his new home? Was that kind of a period, it sounds like, or maybe I'm not...

J. Ritchie: Well, I suppose just physically it was, but on the other hand, he was really proud of it. So he was-- I think he must've been on some level kind of embarrassed about living still in his boyhood home. But he was-- he loved having this new house that he could entertain and...

B. Ritchie: And it was when he was a manager, so he had a few times when he had people from the labs over.

J. Ritchie: And that was the time when he was really at the height of his-- not at the height, just-- so he was like "the man." He was traveling all over the world and giving speeches and getting awards. It was really, I think, a great period in his life. He had his own house now.

B. Ritchie: And it was during this period that my wife Andrea and I were starting and just getting our toy and game business going and the big thing was in New York, the Toy Fair and then the Gift Fair, and the Gift Fair happened in the summer and the winter and we were always too cheap to stay in a New York apartment or in a New York hotel, so often-- first the two of us would go up and then when it got to the point where Andrea was doing these shows and I wasn't, she would go up and stay with Dennis and she has wonderful memories of him cooking her dinner and them spending a couple hours together in the evening. When he decided that it was time and he wanted to turn it on, he could be a wonderful host.

J. Ritchie: <laughs> Just remembered this. The day of the Japan Prize awarding at Bell Labs was a great day, as I said, and they filled the auditorium and he had only recently gotten out of this rehab place and back after all these surgeries. Remember, he was sitting down near that room that they have with all the exhibits, and he was being interviewed. I think by a reporter from the *Newark Star-Ledger*. There's a bunch of people gathered around and this guy's talking to him and this friend John Bentley who was so helpful to him, or somebody like that, came and said, "Dennis, you're out of the hospital. How are you feeling?" and there's like a huge crowd of people. He says, "Great. I got a new asshole."

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Right. Which was not the kind of thing he would say in his life, but it was a great comment. Reporters.

<laughter>

Brock: What was your sense of his relationships with his co-workers, in particular the people involved with the whole development of C and UNIX and that whole crowd at Bell Labs? What are your impressions there? I mean, we've, I've heard you say, you know, all of his colleagues said he was a great colleague, but I don't know if there's any...

J. Ritchie: Didn't really know that much about him.

Brock: Yeah.

J. Ritchie: I don't know. I mean...

Brock: Did he ever talk about his Bell Labs colleagues with you all?

J. Ritchie: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Brock: What sorts of things would he describe?

J. Ritchie: He didn't really talk so much about them or their personalities, just their work together. I mean, they clearly were close. I mean, they were together so much of the time. I remember-- did you ever read Ken's account of flying a MiG airplane in Moscow?

Brock: <laughs> No. No.

J. Ritchie: It was terrifying. Ken's a pilot.

Brock: <laughs> Okay.

J. Ritchie: And he was fascinated by flying a MiG, so he's got this great-- it's worth reading-- a flying-- he found some program. He went and you could pay a lot of money and his description of going out and seeing this rusty old thing on a runway and getting in it and...

B. Ritchie: Well, he wasn't alone.

J. Ritchie: No, he wasn't alone. He didn't pilot it, but... But anyway, Dennis would talk about that. It was great hilarity. You know, so he appreciated what it was about these people, but what kind of friends they were, I just don't know.

B. Ritchie: He did-- who was it? There was a-- Rob Morris was the kid who put out the first big computer virus, and his dad was Bob Morris.

Brock: Who was a member of the Labs, right?

B. Ritchie: Who was one of Dennis's colleagues at the labs. Before he went to, I think, run the NSA or something like that.

Brock: Oh, yeah. You're right about that.

B. Ritchie: And he would talk a lot about Bob Morris. Was Bob the one that had the place on the Passaic River where he would raise--

J. Ritchie: Oh, I don't know.

B. Ritchie: --honeybees and things?

J. Ritchie: I don't know.

B. Ritchie: You know, you just get these really interesting anecdotal stories about people. I don't know you can-- I have a snippet of memory of them silk screening an image. There was some iconic image of one of his colleagues that sort of is seen through slats and you get this silhouette profile, and I think on the water tower they made this enormous image of this guy.

<laughter>

Brock: Oh, yeah.

B. Ritchie: So he liked talking about sort of, you know, peculiar or unusual occurrences that-- fun stories.

Brock: And what about Ken Thompson, the, you know, his work colleague he's most associated with? What are your impressions of how he spoke about him or their collaborations?

J. Ritchie: I mean, it's similar to what we said, but I know with Ken, every Fourth of July he, Ken, would have a big party. He had a house in the country and I don't remember what town Ken lived in, but they'd have a big, big party and serve ice cream. There's that picture. You must've seen the picture of Dennis and Ken scooping--

Brock: Oh, scooping ice cream.

J. Ritchie: --ice cream?

Brock: Yeah, I think I have seen that.

J. Ritchie: Think Ken has a funny shirt about--

B. Ritchie: The cat catcher.

J. Ritchie: And it's a great picture of the two of them. Dennis, I think, really liked Ken and his wife Bonnie, who is a normal person.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: A civilian, yeah.

J. Ritchie: She's a total civilian.

B. Ritchie: Now, I thought that that picture was at Bob Morris's house, because we went to Ken-- maybe I went to Ken's house with Andrea once, because, man, I thought they lived like in Springfield or somewhere.

J. Ritchie: I don't think so.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, I don't know.

J. Ritchie: No, I think-- I'm pretty sure Ken hosted this party every year. So I would say Ken is the one Dennis seemed most connected to and I wouldn't say actively social with but sort of. Knew Bonnie and would go to his house and stuff like that.

B. Ritchie: Well, the other thing is that Ken was always doing these amazing things, and so Dennis would love to talk about that. It was good stories. Ken was the World Chess Championship, won the World Chess Championship one time.

J. Ritchie: You mean the Computer Chess. Yeah.

B. Ritchie: Computer Chess, yeah. With Bell, which he built--

Brock: Oh, a special purpose chess computer or something like that. I've heard about this thing.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, he built hardware. Yeah.

Brock: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

J. Ritchie: But then he worked on Deep Blue, didn't he?

B. Ritchie: No that was IBM.

J. Ritchie: Anyway.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But he was before-- yeah, exactly. And Dennis would love to talk about that, you know, just these really cool things that Ken was doing. Ken was always doing this cool stuff. So you heard a lot about Ken, and it was all-- and, you know, admiring, wonderful stories. Ken was doing such cool stuff. So you heard more about Ken than anybody else, but he had friends. When I was working and doing this carpentry, there was Steve Johnson, who I think has moved on. You might--

Brock: I don't know. I don't know him.

B. Ritchie: --know the name, but he was some-- another guy at the center, was a great guy.

Brock: Okay.

B. Ritchie: They lived in the Great Swamp, basically. But so-- and I had dinner must've been with Dennis at their house a couple times, so... But I think Dennis was considered an enigma by everybody at the Labs.

Brock: It really sounds like it from--

J. Ritchie: And to be an enigma among that crowd.

<laughter>

Brock: Yes. Like a unique status. Yeah.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: I know. I mean, do you know any other enigmas at that level? I don't think that it was like, "Dennis and this other guy are both enigmas." I think it was kind of Dennis was, and it was just, you know, everybody else, you know, if you're married you can't be an enigma. You've got to, you know, you've got to be social in some way, and Dennis, he would just, when-- John used the term force field. You know, Dennis had this ability, you put up the force field and then you didn't even-- it was like otherworldly how he just-- you were not--

Brock: You just had a sense of, "Leave this guy alone." You know, with his affect or his bearing and...

J. Ritchie: Yeah. I mean, there was that period where I think it was every Sunday he'd get in his car and take off on a drive somewhere and we just always wondered, "Where is he? Is he meeting a woman? Is he meeting a man? What is this guy doing?" But that would be the last question.

Brock: <laughs>

J. Ritchie: Whereas in a normal relationship you'd say something. "Hey, where'd you go?"

Brock: Yeah. "Where do you go on Sundays?"

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

<laughter>

Brock: Yeah. Hm. Well, and those were kind of all the kind of topics I was hoping that we could discuss. I was just, you know, if there are any other, I don't know, telling stories about him or anecdotes. There are probably so many that just to produce them on demand is a little artificial, but if--

J. Ritchie: It is. But I feel like I've thought about-- I think we've all thought about it so much that without planning it I think the stuff we just said are the top, the things that stand out.

Brock: Great.

J. Ritchie: Great guy.

Brock: Well, this is all-- this is--

B. Ritchie: Yeah. What-- do you remember when our mom died in 1988, in the summer, and, you know, people do this, but in our family we had not had a really good tradition of understanding how to say goodbye to someone?

J. Ritchie: We hadn't had an experience.

B. Ritchie: Except our grandmother that was-- were, our parents' generation, <laughs> basically said, "We don't want to bother you children with the news that your grandmother has died, so we'll just ignore it," kind of. Wasn't quite that, but--

J. Ritchie: Yeah. She was talking to Lynn and we loved our grandmother. Adored her. She lived to 100-

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B. Ritchie: Hundred and one.

J. Ritchie: Hundred and one. But she finally died and after a couple of days mom called Lynn in England to say Nanny had died and Lynn just was very emotional. Starts sobbing. A, "Why didn't you tell me when she died?" But <laughs> Mom's response, which has become the family mantra, is, "Just watch something cheerful on TV."

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: So whenever there's a huge tragedy...

Brock: <laughs> Yeah. Watch something cheerful on TV.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: I think I said that to Lynn the day after Chris, her husband, died.

B. Ritchie: Yeah. But so when our mother died, we gathered our friends and family around in the backyard of the family house and basically said, you know, "Anyone who wants to, just get up and say what you want to say," and it was amazingly cathartic and just really incredible, and Dennis, he got up and did his part.

J. Ritchie: He did. He was pretty-- he was-- we were all devastated. But he really was. I wouldn't say more than the rest of us, but he wasn't hiding his emotions then. When she was in the hospital, he'd visit her I think every single day. He was really devotee. A sort of devotion came out that you didn't really know whether it was there or not. But...

B. Ritchie: She talked-- he talked about the-- Mom and the-- what was her group? The So-and-So Girls?

J. Ritchie: Ah, yeah.

B. Ritchie: At any rate, I mean, when the time sort of called for it he was always there in spades.

J. Ritchie: And that reminds me, and I should've thought of this earlier, you really got the impression at times like that, or in my own life, or certainly with you, despite his reserve and the difficulty getting through to him, we realized he had been paying really, really close attention to all of us and what we were doing. He was really interested in it, knew all about it. So it wasn't like he was distant and aloof.

Brock: Yeah. Sometimes I think--

J. Ritchie: He couldn't express it but he--

Brock: --it's like a hypersensitivity sometimes, I think, that, you know, you have people who are putting up that barrier because they're so aware of what's going on for other people. I've met--

J. Ritchie: But he knew, you know, he knew our kids well, knew all about them. So it wasn't like he wasn't paying attention, which was so sweet.

B. Ritchie: It was so sweet, and I'll tell you what. I mean, in-- he really, he made it pretty clear who was on the inside and who was on the outside, and generation down, our kids were kind of on the outside. I

mean, he loved them dearly, but he didn't invite them in to have intimate conversations or, you know, teach them-- he just-- the barrier was sort of there. But Lynn, John and I, and our respective spouses, were on the in and it just, I mean, he made you aware that it was family and, you know. I mean, he really was kind of the leader of the family in a funny way.

J. Ritchie: Yeah. Yeah. That's true. When we went through various rocky times or difficult times, Dennis was the sort of sage that you would either turn to not directly to ask advice but he just-- he was very wise. He was very wise, had a quiet way about things. You could kind of count on him just to be there and give some good advice.

B. Ritchie: Including zapping you if you needed it, you know. There was some story I had and Andrea and I were always bad about me having gone out and met some guy and then failed to-- I had a meeting that went way long and I failed to call her back and tell her where I was, and I kind of blew it off and was like, "Hey," you know, "I'm an independent..." and this story came up with Dennis at the table one time and he just, he said, you know, <impersonates> "You shouldn't have done that," you know.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Like, "Woow."

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: I had one of the worst nights of my life happen here. I was-- we were all here and I was in the middle of a blazing argument with my now ex-wife. It was night and we were out there sort of just arguing and arguing and arguing. Finally I walked away and walked around and came back and went walking down towards the hall and there's a set of steps on the outside.

Brock: Mm-hm. Oh, on the far end of-- yeah.

J. Ritchie: In the back.

B. Ritchie: In the middle.

Brock: Oh, oh.

J. Ritchie: And I saw this figure sitting there which I thought was Jane and came up and said, "Okay. Look, I'm really fucking sorry that I said that. I shouldn't have, but you shouldn't have," and I go on and on and <laughs> find that it's Dennis sitting there smoking a pipe.

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Looking at me like...

<laughter>

J. Ritchie: Really embarrassing.

<laughter>

B. Ritchie: Ah.

J. Ritchie: And then we never mentioned it.

Brock: Yes. The-- <laughs> yeah. Yeah, of course.

J. Ritchie: The whole thing, you know.

B. Ritchie: And this is sort of random, but I'll just mention it just because why not? Dennis had a-- he had quite a relationship with tobacco.

Brock: Oh. Pipes. You were mentioning before he had that collection of pipes.

B. Ritchie: He had a collection of pipes and he would use them, and so with never thought-- John's talking about him smoking his pipe reminded me. I mean, so Dennis smoked a pipe, fine, you know, no big deal. But when it came time for-- when Dennis broke his leg, went into the hospital and we rehabbed the place, one of the things about the place is that, like, his entire study was, like, gray with--

J. Ritchie: Reeked.

B. Ritchie: --cigarette, you know, just--

J. Ritchie: With tobacco, pipe, whatever it was.

B. Ritchie: Yeah, tobacco smoke. I mean, the whole house was infected. It was-- ah, I mean, he was major league.

B. Ritchie: So that couldn't have been a very good health influence.

J. Ritchie: Yeah.

Brock: No.

B. Ritchie: But it was just, you know, fingerprints. Was kind of everywhere. It was sort of crazy.

Brock: Wow.

J. Ritchie: Anyway, I'm moving on.

B. Ritchie: You're done with Dennis?

Brock: Well-- <laughs> well, thank you. Yeah. <laughs>

B. Ritchie: Sure.

END OF THE INTERVIEW