

David Brock Interviews with John and Bill Ritchie and separately with Lynn Ritchie - Summer 2018 (Paragraph blocks pulled out and excerpted from interview transcripts)

B. Ritchie: 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 Chrysler.

J. Ritchie: A Chrysler with push buttons. Push button drive. Remember that? Juke box drive? Remember those cars?

B. Ritchie: And Dennis would take the kids for rides in his spaceship... "Get into the car."

J. Ritchie: Well, and cousin Liza 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."

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. 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.

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...

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J. Ritchie: But I remember Dennis, you know, 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?" It doesn't have the same connotations as nerd or-- It was just kind of, "Oh, my brother is a brain."

Brock: Did he do sports or anything like that?

J. Ritchie: No. No. 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. 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 motorcycle trip around Europe.

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. Deferring or not talking about it. Not raising-- I mean, I

told you last night about 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?" or "You should shave that beard. I bet you'd be a handsome man."

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J. Ritchie: 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."

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J. Ritchie: 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 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.

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-

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.

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

Brock: Like many of us, I think, yeah. And what do you make of his-- his long-term colleagues kind of finding him to be a personal enigma, in a way? I mean is that-- Is it easy to make too much of that? Was

that his characteristic that he was an extremely private person? I don't know. I guess I'm wondering what kind of sense or meaning you give to how private he was?

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B. Ritchie: I think Dennis was considered an enigma by everybody at the Labs.

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

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—

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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.

L. Ritchie: I didn't used to come back for Christmas much just because of one thing and another. But started coming back more in the eighties. And both of my daughters by then, by the late eighties, had actually moved to the States. They had finished school over here so that was a good reason to come over. And my father was, by then, on his own. And we typically would go to John's house in Boston. And Dennis would always come. And Dennis would often be the chef. He would be cooking a particular meal. But then, as the years went on, we would alternate and sometimes he would stay at home and usually when we did Dennis would actually come over to us for Christmas. And it was just-- my husband Chris has a sister and a nephew. So it would just be the five of us, a little group, which was always lovely. But, actually, it was Dennis who said, "We do miss the children," because that's right the other top place we would go would be my daughter Gill who lived down in Virginia who, by then, had little children. And we would sometimes go with Dennis. So he would often come over here whether every other year or every year for Christmas, often arriving Christmas Eve and not staying all that long. But it was lovely. So I think the family connections really did mean a lot to him whether or not he was into articulating that. But his actions certainly spoke louder than words.

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L. Ritchie: In high school and college, Dennis hadn't withdrawn in the way he sort of did later. And when I say "withdrawn" I mean, and again, I think that if you wanted to talk to him about something, he was very capable of putting up a complete brick wall. And you always knew it. I mean, there was just no-- you couldn't get through to that if he wasn't in the mood to. A lot of body language. I mean, a lot of the times you would just know by the body language not to even try.

B. Ritchie: ...and Dennis, he would just, -- 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: And your impressions of Dennis as a young man, you know, maybe through his undergraduate years...

L. Ritchie: I think Dennis was just was a very unique person. The instinct maybe is to want to slot people into some hole that says they're introvert or extrovert or this or that. And I think-- but what led to him being like that because really of the rest of us-- maybe the reason the rest of us haven't done what he's done is because we're not like that. I mean part of it does feel that-- but it's the chicken and egg thing. Who knows? And it certainly is the case that we weren't brought up to express real deep emotions or difficult emotions or even recognize them. And, again, I think the rest of us have kind of coped with that in our own way. And realized probably to get on with our nearest and dearest you do need to face up to a lot of these things. And whether the fact that Dennis didn't have a life partner meant that he didn't need to do. I don't know. It's interesting. I feel quite defensive about Dennis. I think he was a very unique human being with really wonderful human characteristics and whether you can call it shyness. I don't think it was really was-- it's not shy. Just privacy. Yeah.

Dennis was never interested in just doing things for show or to fit in with conventional things from being a little kid. So he always was sort of on his own path. But willing to-- not imposing that on anybody else or, I think understanding other people who weren't doing it that way he was.

I mean, we were, because we were only two years apart, we did do a lot of playing together. And he was I guess it was starting later than that when we got into maybe junior high or high school, but that he was a real pal. And there was one of my closest friends still, who is from Summit who now lives in Washington, but we often talk about how that we would bug Dennis when he was driving and we were like 16 or whatever, to take us out. Every Sunday we would, he'd take us out to a parking lot and we'd-- And, you know, he was really sweet about it and did it, but it did take us nagging him.

Brock: What was your impression of how your brother fit into the middle school and the high school and how did that compare to-- was that similar to the way that you were fitting in both academically and socially and in terms of extracurriculars?

L. Ritchie: He was always very bright. I mean, I can remember the stage when we were still in just elementary school, you know, with arithmetic and he would be doing things and I would think, there's no way I could ever do this, whether it was multiplication or, you know, whatever. And then that wonderful feeling when you can do it.

But he, he was always-- I mean, I can remember, to my shame, really, feeling that I wish Dennis was more like the "All American Boy." I mean, he was never athletic. And he was a little bit goofy and nerdy. But, you know, really the sweetest person on Earth. And as I said, I can remember thinking in that period of one's life where you want everything to be whether it's super conventional, "Oh, I wish he were more like the high school quarterback," or something like that. But it never, you know, he just wasn't, and he wasn't ever going to be.

So I think I followed much more of a conventional path. I was certainly in elementary school, I don't think there was that much difference, but once I got to junior high, I was applying or, you know, running to be class vice president or whatever. Although our extracurricular activities were sort of similar. We both were in, like, Latin Club and although Dennis would have been in a lot of the science clubs. So let me think. I mean, he was always-- He was always somebody who was certainly on many notches ahead of me, even though I was doing very well at school, but, you know, it wasn't really comparable to Dennis. He just was much more imaginative, I think, and yeah.

Brock: Do you think, did he have a circle of friends?

L. Ritchie: Yeah, he did. There were a couple of friends in particular who lived nearby and again, I can remember seeing quite a lot of them. And so he did. He didn't-- I don't-- I guess he didn't hang out with them in the same way that maybe I would have been hanging out with my friends or John or Bill. But he definitely did. I mean, it wasn't like he was a loner by any means.

Because again, the talk about girlfriends. And I-- One thing, I might have started Dennis off on this path. He had gone to Harvard and I would have been a junior in high school, so it was our high school prom. And there was a new girl in my class who I'd gotten really friendly with who must have met Dennis already who had a big crush on Dennis. And she, I really liked her. She was very, you know-- So I fixed them up for our junior prom. And of course, being the little sister, I probably overdid it. And they went to the junior prom but then I would follow it up by nagging him about, "Have you been in touch with Kim?" And I probably ruined any possibility of any relationship, who knows. And certainly, in the summer in the Poconos where we would all spend the summer-- He, again, John and Bill did mention this. He was really very, very active and he did have summer jobs there working on the activities. And he, every Friday night there was a square dance and there were a number of people who are still around because it's this community where people go back for years and years. And then when I went to college near Boston, too, and my close friends from the dorm and I would go into to Dennis-- to Lowell House, where Dennis was. I think he was there the whole of the four years. And we would often sort of all get together. I don't know, there were three or four of his roommates. You know, they had a, like, a suite. And we would quite regularly go in there. And I know at least one of my friends certainly if Dennis had made a move, she would have too. But it was sort of a group of, I mean, it was really lovely friends and they would cook for us and things. But so it was sort of a group gathering rather-- Rather than having dates or anything like that. But I continued-- So, I'm two years younger, so, like, for me, yeah, well, Dennis had gone to-- was in graduate school, that's right, the last two years of my-- So I don't think we saw quite as much of each other as once he got into graduate school because he moved. He was no longer in Lowell House. He had an apartment or something. But we still did, you know, we'd still meet up.

Another thing, when I was in fifth or sixth grade and Dennis had gone to the junior high, that's the way, it was one through six in elementary school and then junior high and then senior high. And for the first, because the elementary school we had all gone to was in a part of town, there were probably eight altogether in Summit, where really it was very, very middle class. And suddenly, he was encountering kids who weren't, you know, were black kids or Italian kids, "the hoods" as we would call them.

And we were just fascinated by his stories of the hoods. And this was in the mid- to late-fifties. And again, the same friend who we'd bug him later to take us driving, we would sort of, you know, just when he'd come home from school, get us to tell us stories about the hoods, you know. And he, so he had an interest, I mean, he was always really observant. I think that might have come through with-- I think it

did come through with the John and Bill interview. Even though he I think was shy in many ways, and, you know, various people have said did I think he was on the Autistic Spectrum? I really, honestly, don't -- because I think he always was very engaged with people.

Brock: I was wondering, I had after, you know, it was such an interesting conversation that I had with your brothers and just like reflecting on what I had heard, it almost sounds-- I wondered if there was, if the period of change where he became let's just say more of a private person or an extremely private person. Did that happen do you think when he was in-- while he was at Harvard, maybe, in his graduate studies days? Or was that after?

L. Ritchie: I don't think-- I think it was after.

J. Ritchie: 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 that 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..."