



The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: Richard Borshay Lee

Interview conducted by
Bernard Wood
In 2025

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Lee, Richard Borshay. Interview by Bernard Wood. 07/10/2025. The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: Richard Borshay Lee. The Leakey Foundation.

Retrieved from: <https://www.leakeyfoundation.org/learn/oral-history>

Interview: 07/10/2025

Bernard Wood (00:00:07):

Richard Lee, let me begin by thanking you for taking part in the Leakey Foundation Oral History Series. Could you for the record let us know your name and your last appointment?

Richard Lee (00:00:31):

Richard Borshay Lee. I retired as a University Professor in 2007 from the University of Toronto. I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto and took my master's, my four-field master's there. But then in between, I spent a number of years in the field, teaching at Harvard, Columbia, various other spots, Rutgers.

Bernard Wood (00:01:21):

Something that interests me is your middle name, Borshay.

Richard Lee (00:01:27):

That was my mother's maiden name. I'm Jewish. My birth name was Richard Lieberman. My father and mother, who had experienced anti-semitism in the workplace, decided to anglicize our surname. And so, in the course of events, I grew up as Richard Lee. But then when I became an adult, I regretted I had this rather generic name so I brought back into my name my mother's maiden name, Borshay.

Bernard Wood (00:02:17):

Where did you spend your childhood? And did you have brothers and sisters?

Richard Lee (00:02:27):

I was born in New York. My family moved to Canada in the middle of the Second World War. And so, I grew up from kindergarten to high school to university in Toronto.

Bernard Wood (00:02:47):

What was the master's degree and what was your undergraduate major?

Richard Lee (00:03:03):

I had gone to university with the intention of going to law school. But I had a wonderful experience as a first-year student with a professor named Robert C. Daley, who was a brilliant teacher and who had done work in the Canadian Arctic as a cultural anthropologist, but was also extremely competent in archeology and physical anthropology. So, I decided then and there to major in anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:03:47):
And the Master's degree?

Richard Lee (00:03:50):
Was in anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:03:54):
Just paint a picture of the University of Toronto at that time. This was in the late-

Richard Lee (00:03:59):
1950s.

Richard Lee (00:04:01):
The University of Toronto was, and has continued to be, a very distinguished, internationally recognized university. For kids growing up in Toronto, like myself, it was the go-to place. A very small minority of my classmates went to Amherst or Dartmouth, or McGill. But the U of T was considered a very good destination.

Bernard Wood (00:04:46):
You went to day school in Toronto?

Richard Lee (00:04:47):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:04:47):
Do you have brothers and sisters?

Richard Lee (00:04:56):
Yes. My late sister, Rhea Shulman, was quite a bit older than me. She was a social worker who specialized in geriatric work with seniors and had a very successful career. She died in her late nineties, about five years ago.

Bernard Wood (00:05:27):
She was your only sibling?

Richard Lee (00:05:30):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:05:31):

How far apart were you in years?

Richard Lee (00:05:37):

We were quite far apart, because we share the same mother and different fathers. She was 16 years older than me.

Bernard Wood (00:05:49):

What did your parents do? What was their work?

Richard Lee (00:05:58):

My father was a certified public accountant. I was born, as I said, in the US. He had worked for the Longshoremen's Union, or maybe it was the Seafarers Union. He then trained as an accountant and had a reasonably successful career as an accountant while I was growing up.

Bernard Wood (00:06:37):

And your mother?

Richard Lee (00:06:39):

My mother was an office worker. After I was born and my dad became successful as an accountant she switched to being a housewife.

Bernard Wood (00:06:56):

You've told us that your professor, Professor Daley, was influential in your interest in anthropology.

Richard Lee (00:07:11):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:07:15):

When you finished your Master's degree, what was in your mind? What did you want to do and how did you get to Berkeley?

Richard Lee (00:07:23):

That's a story I love to tell! Nowadays I feel I'm somewhat unique or somewhat unusual in that there are very few four-field people who maintain an interest in four fields. For me, it's been one of the joys of my life, to be able to have a conversation with somebody working in the Highlands of New Guinea or on paleolithic sites in the Dordogne, or on some

interesting biological question, like climatic adaptation in the Peruvian Andes, for example. I just found I enjoyed spreading oneself this way. It's been my joy to be able to have conversations across a wide range of sub-disciplines.

Bernard Wood (00:08:38):

You seem to have lived the life of the description on the tin! A truly four-field career really does exist. You can do this!

Richard Lee (00:08:49):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:08:50):

You started graduate school at the University of Toronto. When did you decide that you wanted to do a PhD, and which programs were you interested in?

Richard Lee (00:09:04):

Well, this is the story of how I got to Berkeley. Evolutionary anthropology was one of my courses in the two-year MA at Toronto, and while doing that I had what I thought was a brilliant idea on the origin of incest. I had a kind of demographic epidemiological take on the origin of incest. So, I submitted an abstract to the AAA and went to my first meeting. It was in Minneapolis and I believe it was 1960. At the end of my paper a guy came up to me and said, "My name is Irv DeVore, and I'm here with my colleague and former advisor, Sherwood Washburn. We both think you're completely wrong about your theory of the origin of incest, but you do show some promise and we'd like to invite you to become a graduate student at University of California, Berkeley."

Bernard Wood (00:10:35):

I thought that sort of thing never happened!

Richard Lee (00:10:43):

I felt like the proverbial starlet who gets discovered at the soda fountain!

Bernard Wood (00:10:53):

What was your first impression of Irv DeVore?

Richard Lee (00:11:02):

Tall, extremely articulate, with a great sense of humor. Soon after, I met his lovely wife, Nancy, and became very fond of her, too. Washburn was, of course, legendary even then. He was elected President of the AAA a couple of years later. He was somewhat aloof, but when you went to talk to him, he was very attentive and very thoughtful. I was truly lucky to be there.

Bernard Wood (00:11:54):
So, you went to Berkeley?

Richard Lee (00:12:00):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:12:00):
Congratulations. Even after all these years, that's a pretty impressive story. Who were in and around your cohort at Berkeley?

Richard Lee (00:12:13):
I should mention one other thing. The year before I went to Berkeley in 1961, Desmond Clark, who had been a particular target of Washburn, moved to Berkeley from being the Director of the Rhodes Livingstone Museum in Livingstone, in what is now Zambia. One of the laundry list of projects he brought with him involved [Maxine Kleindienst](#) at Kalambo Falls at the south end of Lake Tanganyika. He explained to the Department that "we've got to get this site excavated and that site excavated" he also said "we've got to find somebody who can go to what was then called Bechuanaland to see if there are any Bushmen left in the Kalahari, who were still hunting and gathering. I'm in the back row and put my hand up!

Bernard Wood (00:13:43):
I'm just trying to reconstruct this, When I first went to Berkeley Clark Howell, Sherry Washburn and Desmond were still there, but Irv DeVore had moved to Harvard. So Desmond literally came with this list of things that he wanted to get done. And you just put your hand up and said, "I'm your hunter-gatherer guy?"

Richard Lee (00:14:23):
It's worth mentioning that I was then a student of Washburn's. He was technically my advisor. But in his many years of advising graduate students, he had never had a social anthropologist. So, the question was since John Ellefson is going to study gibbons, since Suzanne Chevalier is going to do this other primate study, and Jane Lancaster was going to study vervet monkeys. Sherry's response was "so where are you heading, Mr. Lee?" My response was "I really appreciate being here, but I don't think I have a future as a primatologist." Washburn's response was "Well, no problem, because Desmond Clark has got plenty of good ideas that you'll be interested in."

Bernard Wood (00:15:33):
They were very different times, when people like Sherry Washburn could just say, "Well, there's something over there." Where did your funding come from?

Richard Lee (00:15:56):

Washburn and DeVore's first approach was to the NSF, who gave them a grant. The plan was for Irv DeVore to go back to Nairobi and have another look at the baboons. And then the two of them were going to go to Bechuanaland and look for existing hunters and gatherers. They got that grant in the July of 1963.

Bernard Wood (00:17:04):

That's also my understanding. Had you been to Africa before?

Richard Lee (00:17:11):

No. But I had a cultural anthropology professor at the University of Toronto, Ronald Cohen, who said, "You've got to go ... Africa is the happening place." He had been in both in Florida and at Northwestern. He inspired me to go to Africa.

Bernard Wood (00:17:35):

Had you been out of North America before?

Richard Lee (00:17:44):

When I graduated from high school, I went on a summer student trip to Europe, which was a lot of fun. That was it.

Bernard Wood (00:18:00):

So, you arrived in Nairobi with Irv DeVore and Sherry Washburn, or just Irv?

Richard Lee (00:18:09):

Just Irv, and Nancy, and their two kids, Greg and Claire, who were quite young at that point. We spent the first six weeks or so in Nairobi National Park, which was south of the city and also in Amboseli revisiting Irv's baboon troops.

Bernard Wood (00:18:38):

Did that reinforce your decision that you weren't a primatologist?

Richard Lee (00:18:46):

Right. I found it interesting because I did have this four fields interest. And certainly, at Berkeley, most of the people in my cohort were primatologists, and so I was happy to put in my hours counting baboons.

Bernard Wood (00:19:18):

When did you first go to the Kalahari? And when did you first spend an extended period there?

Richard Lee (00:19:28):

Well, we did have a plan. We were going to drive from Nairobi to Livingstone. And en route, because Irv and Sherry had been in close contact with the Leakey family, we were going to spend four or five days with Mary at Olduvai. This is how I first met members of the Leakey family, and later I got to know Richard quite well; we made a film together! Mary hosted us, and we walked round the sites where Mary's field assistants were working. It was a wonderful experience for me, and I guess for Irv and Nancy, too. We also went to Olorgesailie where Glynn Isaac was working. We already had primatology, paleoanthropology and cultural anthropology in our kit bag.

Bernard Wood (00:21:00):

A 'four-field' introduction to Africa?

Richard Lee (00:21:04):

Yes. Loved it.

Bernard Wood (00:21:06):

And all at a pretty high level!

Richard Lee (00:21:10):

One of the conversations that Irv and Mary and I had was, you really should go to Botswana or to Bechuanaland and have a look at living hunter-gatherers, because this is your life's work. Mary was keen to do it, and among my papers at the University of Toronto I found a correspondence between Mary and myself. I'm in Botswana, she's back in Tanzania. And we're writing back and forth. And she's saying, "Well, I'm going to come this month. No, I can't come this month. Maybe I'll come in October." At the end of the day, she never came, but we did have an interesting correspondence!

Bernard Wood (00:22:12):

Can you take us through how did you identified where to go and what group to work with?

Richard Lee (00:22:25):

Desmond had a number of contacts in what was still then the Bechuanaland Protectorate. So, he had his letters out, "Where are some places where my student could go and find people still hunting and gathering?" One of the places Desmond's contacts recommended was west of the Okavango Delta, just east of the border with what was then Southwest Africa. Another one was in the Ghanzi District, which is about 200 kilometers south. So,

Nancy, and the kids stayed in Livingstone, while Irv and I and a young South African Cambridge graduate student, Adam Kuper, were going to make this trip into what is now Botswana. Adam's aunt, Hilda Kuper, was at UCLA and she had written to Sherry along the lines of "My nephew from Cambridge is on a 'shoestring grant', is there any way you could help him out?" So we picked him up in Livingston, and the three of us toured Bechuanaland for about three weeks looking for suitable locations. Adam Kuper is now a very distinguished anthropologist.

Bernard Wood (00:24:45):

And his son Simon Kuper writes! So Irv DeVore, you and Adam Kuper spent three weeks researching locations?

Richard Lee (00:25:17):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:25:23):

This is a long time ago, and sensitivities were very different then. But how did you arrange with the local people what you were going to do? How was all this organized?

Richard Lee (00:25:43):

We are still in the August of 1963. We looked at other places, but decided on what became known as the Dobe area. We camped on the road to Dobe; it was terrible 4x4 'low range' terrain. We're camped there, when we see a vehicle coming out from our destination. In it is a junior district officer whose name escapes me, and he asks, "What are you up to?" He's British, of course!. And we explain that we have a permit to go to this line of villages.

He said, "Well, I'm sorry you can't go. You can't go because there's social unrest." As you can imagine, this just whetted our appetite even more. But at the end of the day we had to turn back. At that point, Irv and Nancy and the kids went back to the US. But then in October, I was cleared to go, and I was given instructions to meet the Tswana headman, who spoke not a word of English. I didn't speak any Setswana, but I had a competent interpreter. The headman interviewed me for several hours and decided I was okay. After that he became an ally and a friend for many years following. He was in his sixties; I was in my twenties. But he had three sons, and said "I'm going to assign one of my sons to be your interpreter." That son was a very thoughtful, intelligent guy about my age named Hakakoshi Isaka. He spoke no English, and I spoke no Setswana, but he had an intuitive understanding of what my project was. We worked together for 20 or so years after that.

Bernard Wood (00:29:00):

So you went into the field, seriously into the field, in October 1963?

Richard Lee (00:29:13):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:29:14):

And you stayed there until when?

Richard Lee (00:29:18):

DeVore had been given the semester off from Harvard, so he and his family came back to Dobe. We worked together for four months until we all returned to the US in January 1965.

Bernard Wood (00:29:52):

So, you were there on your own from October 1963 until Irv came back in September 1964? Had you made a plan with Irv about what you were going to do, or did you just sort of make this up as you were going on? And I don't mean that in a disparaging way.

Richard Lee (00:30:22):

We had. He had worked as cultural anthropologist with the Sauk and Fox Nation in Iowa, for example, where he spent a summer doing ethnographic field work. So he was definitely interested in both sides of it. We had definitely brainstormed what sort of information would be useful to collect. We had generated topics, some were classic Malinowski social anthropology (e.g., kinship, collecting genealogies, etc.). Some of them were much more oriented towards demography, birth rates, death rates, etc. I was very interested in dependency ratios. How many adults are there to support children and old people? How much work do people over 60 do? How early are children and adolescents recruited into food getting? Those were some of the questions we were interested in. One of the innovations I'm still using is to do with their names. Their naming system was intricate. There were only 30 men's and 30 women's names, and they did not have surnames. So it was very hard when people said, "Oh, my Uncle Kuma came to visit." There could have been 5, 7, 8, or 12 Kumas. So we decided, or I decided, to assign everybody a unique master number.

Bernard Wood (00:33:12):

What strikes me is that there is an extraordinary amount of what I would understand to be sociology and economics in your study. Where did this grand view come from?

Richard Lee (00:33:50):

Although I never met him in person, I was very influenced by the work of Julian Steward, who had been at Columbia for years and then moved to the University of Illinois. He developed the theory of cultural ecology, which definitely straddled the border between energetics and economics and cultural factors. He was the one who developed schemes like bands and tribal societies, chiefdoms, and states. In the fifties when I started anthropology, evolutionary theory was out of fashion in cultural anthropology. Julian Stewart and Leslie White were fighting, shall we say, an uphill battle to insist we have to think in terms of evolution. In the 1960s the field began to shift towards thinking in evolutionary terms. I rode that wave.

Bernard Wood (00:35:38):

You very modestly suggested that the trail had been blazed, but it strikes me that it needed a pretty special person to implement that in the middle of Africa with presumably a pencil and a notebook!

Richard Lee (00:36:04):

I asked the question. How much work do these people actually do? That's an interesting question, but how do you even measure work? I used a methodology from an Australian study by Mountford and McCarthy in Arnhem land. Consider this example. On November 11th in a village of 30 people (14 adults and 16 children) four adults go out, three adults stay home, one adult goes visiting. They kept a work diary. So I said "I'm going to do that". It turned out to be harder than I thought it was going to be, but I did it for the month of July in 1964. When I summed everything up, I said, "They're not working very hard." Yet life was supposed to be nasty, brutish, and short, and yet the women are working less than 20 hours a week, with their men working slightly harder, maybe 27 hours a week.

Bernard Wood (00:38:01):

But would the word 'work' have meant anything? 'Work' has very Victorian connotations. How did you translate your inevitably North American notions of what work meant to these people who maybe you didn't were working hard, but nonetheless, they were surviving presumably. How did that work?

Richard Lee (00:38:44):

That's a very reasonable question. I obviously had to define what do I mean by work? My first take was if you leave the village and go out, you're either going visiting and you're going to just schmooze with somebody in another village, or you're going to hunt or gather. So, I would ask anyone who left the village, are you going hunting, gathering, or visiting? And I would write it down. My first assumption was that if you're in the village, you're not working. But of course, if you are in the village, you may well be working because there's housework to do, homes to be built or repaired, tools to be made or repaired and so on. I had a little fisherman scale, which I used with limited success. For example, women come back with enormous bags of mongongo, nuts. And I'd try to weigh them as best I could, or the men had killed and butchered an animal and would come back with a haunch. So, I had to figure out how am I going to assign values to all of these various commodities? I was lucky to have a colleague, Reay Smithers at what was then the Museum of Science in what was then in Rhodesia.. So he and his team weighed the kills, and then we carefully studied the kills together. What parts were discarded? What parts were consumed? We decided that 50% of the dead weight of an animal was consumed, and the other 50% was discarded. So, that's how my methodology evolved.

Bernard Wood (00:41:51):

What was the title of your thesis?

Richard Lee (00:41:55):
'Subsistence Ecology of !Kung Bushmen'.

Bernard Wood (00:42:00):
When did you defend it?

Richard Lee (00:42:03):
June 1965.

Bernard Wood (00:42:08):
That was pretty short work!

Richard Lee (00:42:13):
I was very pleased with myself and tried not to be too obnoxious about it with my friends who took longer!

Bernard Wood (00:42:24):
Who was your examiner?

Richard Lee (00:42:29):
My committee was Sherry Washburn, Desmond Clark, and a guy named James Anderson, who was a cultural ecology professor at the time. I stayed in contact with Washburn and Clark, but I lost touch with Jim Anderson, although I believe that if you look at the list of people who attended The Man, The Hunter Conference, I'm sure Jim Anderson was there.

Bernard Wood (00:43:03):
Who was Robert Heizer?

Richard Lee (00:43:08):
He was very influential in my thinking. He was an archeologist, specializing in California archeology, who had been a student of Kroeber in the 1930s. He was very happy to find someone from social anthropology and physical anthropology who was interested in his work. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the 50 or 60 different tribes of California Indians. He knew all the nitty-gritty details of different groups. And one of the things he said, this could be too much of a digression, but I'll tell it anyway! Heizer influenced my work because I hadn't gone to the field yet. I was still a graduate student doing my coursework. But I was thinking ahead. So, I asked "when you and your colleagues from Berkeley went to the various tribes up and down California, what sort of observations did you make on subsistence?". Heizer said some of them were still getting a good chunk of their calories from, for example, acorns. Oak trees were big, and you had to treat the

acorns to remove the tannic acid, but you could live on them. He told me something that stuck in my mind. When he asked Kroeber the same question, Kroeber replied, "Nah, that doesn't matter. You don't need to worry about that. Just bring me back the checklists." It was part of the folklore of California anthropology that Kroeber had these laundry lists. Twilled basketry, present or absent? Twined basketry, present or absent? Thunderbird mythology, present or absent? This was a bit of a joke in the department. Kroeber was much revered and respected, but he had died a couple of years earlier, and his colleagues and students were beginning to tell stories about his world view as an anthropologist.

Bernard Wood (00:46:38):

Sometimes it's important to understand how things should not be done, as well as understanding how they should be done. And I understand that you are never going to learn anything if you just keep to your list! So, you get your PhD in 1965. Is that the same year as the "Man, the Hunter" conference?

Richard Lee (00:47:08):

That was in 1966.

Bernard Wood (00:47:16):

What was your impression of the "Man, the Hunter" conference?

Richard Lee (00:47:22):

I should mention I was interviewed about a year, a year and a half, ago by Vivek Venkataraman a colleague at the University of Calgary about the upcoming 60th anniversary of the "Man, The Hunter" conference. The interview has been edited, and published in the Journal of Hunter Gatherer Research.

Bernard Wood (00:48:03):

Okay, but that's not quite what I'm asking you. What role did that conference play in your professional life?

Richard Lee (00:48:11):

Well, I think, it had quite a bit of impact on the field, and at least I'm hesitant to toot my horn, but ...

Bernard Wood (00:48:25):

This is 'horn tooting' time!

Richard Lee (00:48:30):

Vivek said, as far as he can see, as a junior colleague, you put ... that conference, put hunter-gatherer studies back on the agenda. The proof of it was that for the last 50 years,

we've had these CHAGS conferences, Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, that have been held all over the world at two or three-year intervals. And each conference produces a volume, or two, of papers.

Bernard Wood (00:49:09):

This is an expression of my ignorance, but could you define for me or explain the difference between gathering and foraging?

Richard Lee (00:49:24):

Foraging covers hunting and gathering.

Bernard Wood (00:49:40):

So, it's a more inclusive term?

Richard Lee (00:49:42):

Right.

May I pause for a moment?

Bernard Wood (00:49:49):

Yes, of course.

Richard Lee (00:51:14):

I'm back.

Bernard Wood (00:54:46):

Richard, you were awarded your PhD in 1965.

Richard Lee (00:54:55):

Right.

Bernard Wood (00:54:55):

How did you put food on the table? Did you have a job?

Richard Lee (00:55:03):

I finished my PhD in June of 1965. I wrote my dissertation in Cambridge, Massachusetts because I wanted to move close to Irv, who said, "If you finish it in good time, we can hire you as a lecturer at Harvard." That's a good challenge, so I finished it and was hired and I became a lecturer at Harvard. I was actually in the Department of Social Relations. In those days, the Anthropology Department was in the museum, and there was another building

where the sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists shared the building so that was where my office was.

Bernard Wood (00:56:11):

Did you publish your thesis?

Richard Lee (00:56:19):

I never published my thesis, but I started publishing papers from the thesis and building on some of the results in the thesis. Interestingly enough, and I like to tell this story because it sort of reinforces my four-field credentials. The first thing I published, and the first and second thing that I published from my field work was on the traditional healing dance of the Ju/'hoansi. And so, it was on the anthropology of religion, even though I went out as a cultural ecologist.

Bernard Wood (00:57:04):

Could we go back to Berkeley? Who were the other students who were working with Desmond at the time or with the other people in the department?

Richard Lee (00:57:19):

Well, there are a few names that stick in my mind that we stayed in touch with. Adrienne Zihlman is one. And so, I stayed in touch with her, and I believe she's still going strong ...

Bernard Wood (00:57:36):

She is, I think.

Richard Lee (00:57:36):

Jane Lancaster and I did a paper together because my second year as a graduate student at Berkeley was spent at the Center for Advanced Study in Palo Alto at Stanford, where Irv DeVore had put together a panel of primatologists. Jane and I wrote a paper on the reproductive cycles of primates. Chet Lancaster, her husband, was a social anthropologist and he co-authored with Washburn a famous paper on the evolution of hunting, in the "Man the Hunter" conference.

Bernard Wood (00:58:40):

And I think Ralph Holloway was...

Richard Lee (00:58:42):

Ralph was also a student. There was a guy called Ted McCown, who was a very inspiring teacher. And I think Clark Howell came around the same time from Chicago, but I thought that Ralph was more of a Ted McCown student.

Bernard Wood (00:59:11):

If you listen to my conversation with Ralph and as you know, with great sadness, he died not long ago. He wanted to work on the brain, and Sherry Washburn said, "If you want to work on the brain, you have to find another advisor."

Richard Lee (00:59:38):

So, he may have been Sherry's student.

Bernard Wood (00:59:42):

He started as Sherry's student, but his advisor was Ted McCown because Sherry said, "You either pick an animal and go and work on it, or you need to find another advisor."

Richard Lee (00:59:58):

Yes. Now it's coming back to me that he and Sherry had their differences.

Bernard Wood (01:00:07):

When and how did you get to Columbia?

Richard Lee (01:00:16):

I had been a junior lecturer at Harvard. Then, my first tenure-line position was at Rutgers. My then wife, Nancy Howell, was at Princeton. She had this great job at Princeton, so, I went shopping and said, any openings at Rutgers? And they hired me. But then, in 1972, both Nancy and I moved to Canada. In my case back to Canada and in her case to Canada. By 1980, I had a good run of years as a professor, and then Ralph, who was Chair at the time, said, "Would you like to come for a visiting position at Columbia?" And since New York is my birthplace and I had family there I thought that was a great idea and I had a wonderful time.

Bernard Wood (01:01:45):

When you went back to Canada with Nancy, did you go back to Toronto or did you go ...

Richard Lee (01:01:51):

Yes, to Toronto. And then, unfortunately, our marriage broke up soon after.

Bernard Wood (01:01:58):

You started at Columbia in 1980.

Richard Lee (01:02:08):

I was a visiting professor, and then about two-thirds of the way, or halfway through the semester, Ralph came into my office and said, "We've had a meeting and we'd like to invite you to join the department." And I said, "That's a great offer. Let me think about it." And then I thought about it and I realized that I was pretty comfortable in Canada, so I politely declined.

Bernard Wood (01:02:49):

Thank you, but no thank you!

Richard Lee (01:02:51):

Yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:02:55):

How long did you spend in Toronto? You retired in 2007?

Richard Lee (01:03:04):

I started in 1972. So, it was a good full career.

Bernard Wood (01:03:10):

It was a good run.

Richard Lee (01:03:11):

And in between, I had some memorable times. I was a visiting professor at ANU in Canberra for a while. And then, I was a visiting professor at the Center for African Studies at the University of Kyoto.

Bernard Wood (01:03:35):

Right. Back to your 1979 book, *Man, Woman, and Work in a Foraging Society*. That began with your thesis?

Richard Lee (01:03:52):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:03:52):

... but it had much more.

Richard Lee (01:03:54):

There was 14 or 15 years between that publication and my dissertation. So, I added a lot of material including stuff on birth spacing. Just to give you an example, both Nancy Howell and I were very interested in birth spacing and took great pains to establish birth spacing statistics as best we could for people who didn't actually care about calendars very much.

Bernard Wood (01:04:35):

When you were at Toronto, you were in the Anthropology Department?

Richard Lee (01:04:47):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:04:47):

What sort of courses were you teaching?

Richard Lee (01:04:53):

Well, I've often sort of reflected on this, that when I was in the department, you would assume that, well, you're a hunter-gatherer specialist, you should be teaching courses on hunters and gatherers. But I actually never did. Or if I did, it was once in 30 years. Instead, I got very interested in social evolution as a broad theory and I taught a course on social evolution that starts with hunter-gatherers and moves to chiefdoms and states. Then I got very interested in how states function. And so, for years, I taught a course on anthropology and state societies. I had a manuscript in the works that never came together on the origin of the state.

Bernard Wood (01:06:09):

Something else I'd like to talk to you about is the notion of the song as a sort of aboriginal community, essentially unaffected by the rest of the world. There were people who said, or my understanding is that, no, that's not right. They have much more connection with the rest of the world than you guys are claiming. Was that a debate that you were involved in?

Richard Lee (01:06:49):

Yes. The late Ed Wilmsen was the architect of what became known as the "Kalahari Debate". Unfortunately, his level of scholarship was either extremely incompetent or extremely disingenuous because he would make statements of historical 'fact' that were fabricated.

Bernard Wood (01:07:28):

Sounds as if that he was meant for the current period in United States politics, but ...

Richard Lee (01:07:36):

Yes. Someone asked me when I was asked to give a guest lecture on the "Kalahari Debate"; could you give us a takeaway? I hadn't even thought of it, but my takeaway was, I wish that I had had a more worthy opponent! Just to belabor the point a little bit, it is true people were remarkably unfamiliar with the larger world. But then, in the '70s and '80s, they became very familiar rapidly. And by the '80s, everyone had a transistor radio.

Bernard Wood (01:08:43):

What was the situation in 1963?

Richard Lee (01:08:47):

In November of 1963, I was listening to a shortwave radio and I hear a cortege is moving down Pennsylvania Avenue. And I'm saying, "the cortege is moving down Pennsylvania Avenue". What's this? What could this possibly be? And it gradually dawned on me that President Kennedy had been assassinated or gradually became evident that he had been assassinated. The Jun Quasi were saying, "You look upset. What are you upset about?" They were sympathetic because I was in shock. And I said, "Well, how am I going to explain this?" So, I said, "A great chief has died. A great chief has died." And they said, "Oh, what's his name?" And then I said, "His name is John F. Kennedy." Complete blank. Complete blank. No one. There was no recognition at all. And then I said, "Well, he was the chief of America." And no recognition at all. And what is America? So, I thought, these guys are living full lives, but they're not really plugged into the wider world. So, I did an experiment, which I've written up in more than one place. The experiment was this. I said, the Dobe area is about 500 miles due west to the Atlantic Ocean. So, I said, "Do you know of a body of water that is so wide that you cannot see the other side?" My informants were puzzled and was having an animated discussion, and they said, "We're not sure, but we think we might know of such." So, I said, "Well, could you point to the direction of where you think this body of water is?" They all pointed north. The body of water that they were referring to is the Okavango River, which is only about 100 meters wide. They had no idea of that the Atlantic Ocean existed. I thought this has got to be significant.

Bernard Wood (01:12:18):

You gathered a lot of information about this group of people? What did you learn other than the data? What was your experience of spending so much time with them? How did that affect Richard Lee?

Richard Lee (01:12:45):

The profound life lesson for me was the universality of being human. These people had the same depth of character, the same neuroses, the same quirks, the same sense of humor that people around the world have. One of my takeaways was, if you're human, you're human, and that's it. You have all the potential, and your language has all the potential for eloquence and poetry and insight any other language has. It was a very powerful affirmation of the universality of humanness. One of my dearest friends from the '60s, '70s and '80s was Carl Sagan. We had been junior professors at Harvard. He went to Cornell for

many years, but we stayed in touch, visiting each other in Toronto and Ithaca. In his book, *The Demon Haunted World*, his opening chapter is something I shared with him that when the hunters go out, and this is the opening paragraph of his book, when the hunters of the Bushmen of the Kalahari go out and read the tracks of animals they're tracking, they're using the same mental operations that scientists in laboratories are using. This demonstrates the universality of human intelligence. I've definitely dined out on that one!

Bernard Wood (01:15:06):

I can imagine. The other thing that was going on at the time, and I was just a consumer of these things, were Aboriginal modern humans intrinsically peaceful, or were they intrinsically violent?

Richard Lee (01:15:26):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:15:28):

There's the Robert Ardrey and the Shen Yun and all that sort of debate. What role did you play in that?

Richard Lee (01:15:42):

Well, it turns out that my thinking evolved. I went in to my initial field work with a basic sympathy towards the title of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's book, *The Harmless People*. I thought this is a very appealing image, the harmless people. Then during the course of my field work, since I was so interested in demography, and I would do a genealogy, and I would always ask, "So your father died? What did he die of?" Usually people would say, "A sickness," or "God took him," or "The spirits took him." But occasionally people would answer, "Well, he died in a fight," or "Someone shot an arrow into him." I said, "This is definitely not the harmless people that we're talking about." I made a pledge. I have to pursue this precisely because it's so at odds with my own prejudices. So, I started to systematically collect cases of homicide, and I found 22 cases. Then my colleagues, Mel Konner and Marjorie Shostak and Henry Harpending, added a few more so we had 25 cases. Then I analyzed the 25 cases. But it turns out you can look at these 25 cases in different ways. In some ways, they're comparable to homicide statistics in American cities, in other ways, they're on the low side.

I've written extensively about this, and most recently in a response to a book by Steven Pinker called *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, in which he postulates a ridiculously exaggerated hyperinflated homicide statistics for tribal people. I, among a number of others, have been critiquing his statistics and his cherry-picking of cases. I know for example, one of the favorite targets of the cherry-picking is Lake Turkana, for example. There's supposedly some late paleolithic sites where there's some evidence, but I'm a little vague on the details. On balance, human beings are not chimps. and do not have chimpanzee-like aggressive instincts. My main support for that now is the work of Sarah Hrdy, whose two books, *Mothers and Others*, and *Father Time*, thoroughly examine this

hypothesis. One of my favorite pieces is her thought experiment, where her thought experiment, which is entitled Chimpanzees on a Plane. Are you familiar with that one?

Bernard Wood (01:20:09):

Yes. I was on a plane for a very long time yesterday, and it crossed my mind, yes.

Richard Lee (01:20:22):

Just for the benefit of our viewers, her thought experiment goes like this, human beings pack two, three, 400 people in tight spaces and ride airplanes for eight to 10, or even 12 hours at a time. Rarely is there ever any violence. Just try to imagine 400 chimpanzees in the same setting. Could you even conceive that there could be eight hours without some nips, some altercations? She uses that as her jumping off point for saying, "We have to understand why human beings are basically so different from our primate ancestors."

Bernard Wood (01:21:18):

You have told us how the PhD part of your graduate career evolved. Could you tell us a little about your own students/ That's one thing I would like to ask you about. The other thing is the evolution of other work with your informants. You mentioned Henry Harpending and Mel Konner. When did that work begin? When did it begin to to get more biological rather than observational?

Richard Lee (01:22:02):

Irv DeVore was a brilliant organizer of research. That's his legacy. I would like to take credit for assembling the team that went to the Kalahari in the late 1960s and early '70s, but it was mostly Irv DeVore's work. That included John Yellen as an archaeologist, Mel Konner and Patricia Draper as infant and child behavior specialists, Henry Harpending as a geneticist, Marjorie Shostak, who wasn't a graduate student, but 'did a brilliant biography or autobiography of a woman. Those people came together and we had some degree of overlap with them, but the general trend of that cohort was more towards a biological or even sociobiological framework. Then some of them became very sort of hardcore sociobiologists, and others were, let's say, much more eclectic or self-reflective about sociobiology. I think it's fair to say that sociobiology had had its heyday. It maybe peaked about 20 years ago. Even E.O. Wilson acknowledged that some of their early enthusiasms were overdrawn, oversubscribed. Henry Harpending was someone who rode that particular hobby horse!

Bernard Wood (01:24:25):

Right. As far as your own students are concerned, were any of them working in that project?

Richard Lee (01:24:33):

Three students followed me into Botswana, one of whom I've lost touch with completely. Jacqueline Solway who worked not with the San people, but with the Kalahati

Bantu-speaking people. She and I have worked together and remained close friends. She edited a Festschrift in my honor about 25 years ago. Other students have done projects on completely unrelated topics. A couple that come to mind are a study of garage bands in Toronto, and a study on how homosexuality evolved in the Asian-Canadian community.

Bernard Wood (01:25:57):

So definitely a very broad range of interests!

Richard Lee (01:25:59):

Definitely broad interests. One of my last students was a guy who's now at the University of Manitoba who did research on AIDS in Namibia. Something we haven't talked about is that for the last 20 years, or so, I've shifted from the hunter gatherer studies, per se, to working on the AIDS in Africa research.

Bernard Wood (01:26:42):

Well, there is a link between us because my elder daughter is a physician, and she worked for most of a year in Namibia at one of the Bill and Melinda Gates clinics.

Richard Lee (01:27:03):

Wow.

Bernard Wood (01:27:05):

She came across you and your work, so that's-

Richard Lee (01:27:12):

What's her name? May I look her up?

Bernard Wood (01:27:18):

At that time, she was Penelope Wood, but I doubt whether you would know her, but certainly she was aware of what was going on.

Richard Lee (01:27:31):

Yes. I was fortunate to be recruited by the School of Public Health at Columbia that had a large Fogarty grant that I was included on. My specific assignment was to work in Botswana and Namibia on AIDS issues, whereas the main Fogarty project was in South Africa.

Bernard Wood (01:28:06):

We should be winding down, maybe not winding up.

Richard Lee (01:28:11):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:28:13):

You're obviously a very distinguished academic in Canada. You're a member of the Order of Canada. What is the attitude in Canada towards academia? Do you think there is a difference between that relationship in Canada and in the US?

Richard Lee (01:28:38):

I think that the US is going through a very tough patch now. I can't believe the US is going to throw away the decades of science that have made the US what it is today. But for the moment, we're getting some very nice people crossing the border and coming to Canada. But so I like to think that Canadians as well as French, Germans, the UK, the Irish, et cetera, et cetera, still have their priorities straight.

Bernard Wood (01:29:38):

If there was a fire and you could only rescue one of your publications, which would it be?

Richard Lee (01:29:47):

Probably the one, the last major publication I did, which is quite a few years ago, in the Annual Review of Anthropology. It was my critique of Steven Pinker, though it's not labeled as such. It's basically a critique of Robert Ardrey, Konrad Lorenz, and Steven Pinker. I'm passing the torch literally to Sarah Hrdy, who I think is about 10 years younger than I am.

Bernard Wood (01:30:34):

When did you first become aware of Sarah Hrdy?

Richard Lee (01:30:38):

Well, back in the day, she was a very loyal member of the Sociobiology Study group. Her first book was on langurs and langur males entering troops and killing the offspring sired by their predecessors. I was part of the Berkeley group that included Phyllis Dolhinow. Phyllis had studied langurs but hadn't picked up on that point. Much later, Sarah Hrdy began to drift away from the hardcore version of sociobiology to what I thought was a much more enlightened, broader, view.

Bernard Wood (01:31:45):

Is there anything, Richard, you would like to talk about at the end that we haven't covered? I mean, yours is a very rich career and there's no way we can cover all of it. ur conversation is inevitably focused on the areas I know best. Is there anything that you would like to cover before we wrap up?

Richard Lee (01:32:11):

Well, I look back on it, and I must say that my sense of the Leakey Foundation has changed over the years. When I first saw it, when it first emerged, they were not as centered in good theory and good work as they are now. I'm happy to be part of this, and to be one of your interviewees.

Bernard Wood (01:32:54):

We can't ask more than that! I want to thank you, Richard Lee, for your generosity and for giving us an insight into a period dominated by intellectual personalities, and especially for giving us an insight into Irv DeVore. It's been very helpful to me, and I hope it will be helpful for the people who will look at this interview.

Richard Lee (01:33:30):

I now feel, and Mel Konner shares this view with me, that because he didn't publish an awful lot, Irv DeVore doesn't get the recognition he deserves for being such an influential person in the boundaries between physical anthropology and cultural anthropology. I'm glad to give him a shout-out.

Bernard Wood (01:33:58):

I'm not quite sure what an "influencer" is, but I think he was probably an influencer in his time.

Richard Lee (01:34:10):

If I can, I'll finish off on this note. About 30 years ago, I made a film in the Kalahari with Yo-Yo Ma and that film, he comes out there, he studies their music, he plays the cello for them. I can't remember if he's asked this on camera or not, but I asked him, "Why are you of all people here in the Kalahari?" He said, "Well, I was a first year student at Harvard, and Irv DeVore absolutely captured my imagination by his brilliant teaching." I said to myself, "I was just starting my career in music." I said to myself, "Someday I want to go to the Kalahari."

Bernard Wood (01:35:10):

Wow. Wonderful story.

Richard Lee (01:35:13):

Good one.

Bernard Wood (01:35:13):

Richard, many, many thanks.

Richard Lee (01:35:18):
You're very welcome.

Bernard Wood (01:35:20):
It's been my privilege to talk to you.

Richard Lee (01:35:22):
When you see Alison and John next in DC, please give them my warmest regards.

Bernard Wood (01:35:29):
Yes, I will.

Richard Lee (01:35:30):
Bye for now.

Bernard Wood (01:35:32):
Bye-bye.