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The Princeton Mathematics Community in the 1930s
Transcript Number 19 (PMC19)
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LEON HENKIN and ALBERT TUCKER

This is an interview of Leon Henkin and Albert Tucker on 18 May 1984 in Berkeley, California. The interviewer is William Aspray. [This was a pre-interview conversation (just prior to Interview 14) not originally intended to be part of the oral-history project.]

William Aspray: Professor Tucker, you had a story to tell.

Albert Tucker: Yes. A story indirectly about Alonzo Church and directly about the student who later became his son-in-law, John Addison. I was John Addison's advisor when he entered Princeton. He came in with top scores in everything, and he had very good freshman and sophomore years. He was taking courses in creative writing and mathematics, and he was doing well. But when it came time to choose his major—he had to file a choice by a certain date at the end of his sophomore year—he could not make the choice, and after a certain point there was a daily fine.

Well, he ran up quite a score in fines before finally, in desperation, choosing to major in mathematics. I can say exactly when this was because I went off on a leave of absence in '49-'50, which was his junior year. I came back and found that he had done very badly that year. He wished very much that he had not chosen to major in mathematics. I was, of course, no longer his advisor, but I discovered these things when I came back because I asked questions about how he had done. As a matter of fact, he almost lost credit for his junior year, he did so badly. So I talked to him and gave him what encouragement I could to stick it out and try to find something he was interested in.

He took Alonzo Church's logic course in the fall term of his senior year, and suddenly he was polarized. You have seen those experiments

where iron filings lie around and you bring in a magnet and they all line up. Well, it just seemed with John that all these things that had been tugging him in every direction were gone. There was just this one goal. He admired Church and wanted to be with him as much as possible. He would walk home with Church, and Mrs. Church would invite him to have dinner with the family. That is the way he met his wife.

Henkin: Well, it is interesting that some stories go on and on. You were talking about his difficulty in making up his mind about a major. Many years later, after he had been at Berkeley for some time, he became the chairman of our math department. One of the notable features of his chairmanship was that every decision that was made was always made at the last possible moment. He always had trouble coming to a decision.

The other part of the story that has a continuation is the fact that two of John's four sons are now Princeton undergraduates, and the older one has had some problems, such as you describe in John's case, of finding just what his niche is. I hope he has the fortune his father had in finding the right teacher.

Tucker: I was also the one who helped John make connections with Steve Kleene. Due to the bad junior year he had had, he didn't graduate with honors. He had wanted to work with [W.V.O.] Quine, but Harvard turned him down. He came to see me everytime as his problem solver, and so I said that Steve Kleene at Wisconsin would be at least as good as Quine. By this time it was too late for a normal application, because he had just assumed that he would be admitted by Harvard. So I got in touch with Steve Kleene, and Steve was able, at my urging, to work out some assistantship which would get him admitted to the graduate school at Wisconsin. So I feel I can claim John Addison, in some slight way, as a protege.

Henkin: I really should notify him about today's session. I am not sure he knows about it. I will call him up and ask him to drop in. Listening to your story about graduate admission brings to mind the fact that Quine was, of course, located in the philosophy department at Harvard, so that John might have had a career as a philosopher instead of a mathematician if he had gone to Harvard.