Sinclair: It’s June 26, 2008. My name is Bill Sinclair. I’m an associate at Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. I am at the law offices of Covington & Burling LLP at 1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C., and I’m speaking with David Isbell. We are going to begin recording his life biography for the Historical Society of the D.C. Circuit.

Please tell us your full name and the name of the firm in which you are senior counsel.

Isbell: My full name is David Bradford Isbell, and I am indeed senior counsel at Covington, a position I’ve been in for the last twelve years.

Sinclair: Very good. Let’s get on the record with a few essential facts about your immediate family.

Isbell: Sure.

Sinclair: Your wife’s name?

Isbell: It’s Florence Bachrach Isbell.

Sinclair: Your children’s names?

Isbell: I have three children. The oldest is Pascal. His full name is Christopher Pascal Isbell, but he’s generally just known as Pascal. He has just turned fifty. I also have a daughter, Virginia Isbell, who is forty-eight, and a son, Nicholas Isbell, who is forty-six.

Sinclair: Any grandchildren?

Isbell: I have seven of those. Pascal has three sons, one of whom, unfortunately, is autistic. The oldest of his sons is Mark Antonin Isbell, who is sixteen. The middle son is Alexander Bradford Isbell, who’s fifteen; it’s he who is autistic. The youngest one is Matthew Isbell, who’s fourteen.
Sinclair: The oldest was Mark Antonin?

Isbell: Yes. That second name is spelled A-n-t-o-n-i-n, and that’s a name he happens to share with Justice Scalia, though there is absolutely no other connection there. Then my daughter has a daughter, Alice Topaloff, who’s eighteen, and then twins who are seventeen, a girl and a boy, Lucy and Gabriel Topaloff. Finally, my son, Nicholas, has just one child, a daughter, Sophie, who’s eight.

Sinclair: Okay. Where does everyone live?

Isbell: Most of my descendants live in Europe, unfortunately for me. My son Pascal and his three kids live in London; my daughter and her three live in Paris; and only Nicholas is here. He lives in the District of Columbia. Florence has two children. We are both retreads, so we each brought children to the marriage. She’s got a daughter, Peggy, and a son, Richard, and each of them has two daughters; and happily for us they all—children and grandchildren—live in the District of Columbia, so we see them frequently.

Sinclair: What was your wife’s maiden name?

Isbell: It was Bachrach.

Sinclair: Okay, good. We’ll talk more about Florence later, but for now, let’s start in the beginning, learning about your parents, your childhood family, and your childhood.

Isbell: My father, whose name was Percy Ernest Isbell, generally known as Peter or Pete, was an architect. He went to Yale College and then the Yale School of Architecture. At the start of his career, he was quite successful and had a good job with a large architectural firm, James Gamble Rogers. The firm designed and supervised the building of a large number of new buildings at Yale, including residential colleges, the library, the graduate school, and the law
school. My father also was allowed to have a practice of his own, in which he designed several
private houses and a fraternity house at Yale.

However, in the early thirties the Depression hit architecture hard, and Dad’s practice
dried up and the large firm that he worked for could no longer keep him, so he went into private-
school teaching, as my mother did also. Initially he taught at a sort of a boys’ junior prep school
called Eaglebrook School, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and my mother taught at an elementary
school in the village of Deerfield also.

After a couple of years of that, my parents had an opportunity to be counselors in an
American children’s camp in the French Alps on Lake Annécy. They took it. They were
successful as counselors, and as a result, they were offered jobs as teachers in an American
school in Saint Cloud (pronounced in English as, roughly, “San Clue”), a suburb of Paris. Like
the camp, the American school was owned by and bore the name of a couple named MacJannet.
So, our parents sent for my sister and me, and we went over to France, and we were students at
the school while our parents taught there, and the whole family lived at the school.

We stayed there for two years, attending both the school and the camp in the intervening
summer, but then my parents saw the war clouds gathering in Europe, and decided we should all
return to the States. My father got a job with a smaller architecture firm in New York and
started all over again, right on the bottom rung of architecture, as a draftsman. He continued to
work as an architect until he finally retired, but my sense is that he had more or less lost his
nerve as a result of having had his career kicked out from under him by the Depression, so he
never reached as high a standing in the profession as his early career seemed to promise.

**Sinclair:** Now, tell us about your mother.
Isbell: Yes. Her maiden name was Dorothy Mae Crabb. She was the oldest of four children. In those days a common view was that it’s no use wasting money sending a girl to college because what are they going to do with the education? They’re just going to get married and have children. So, my mother had one year of college at Syracuse, but her father did not think it was worthwhile to spend the money for more education for her, so that was it.

Sinclair: Okay. Let’s go back to your father. Where was he born?

Isbell: He was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and so was my mother. And, for that matter, so was I, though my sister was born in New York. I might observe that it seems to me quite unusual in America for a middle-class family to have both parents and also a child born in the same city. We have such a mobile society.

Sinclair: Absolutely. And your father’s background, was he first generation, second generation?

Isbell: Not at all. The Isbells go back a fair number of generations. I understand that the first Isbell of the New England branch of the family, one Robert Isbell, arrived in Massachusetts from England in 1636 or 1637. The first of my mother’s family, the Crabbs, came here from England in the middle of the 19th century, so she and her siblings were third or fourth generation Americans so far as the Crabb line was concerned, but I don’t know how far back in this country Grandma Crabb’s family, the Nicolses, went.

Sinclair: Your father lived in New Haven for the first 30 years of his life?

Isbell: I’d guess it was closer to twenty-five years. In any event, he certainly lived all his early years in New Haven. I know my mother did, for the first 23 of her years, with the exception of that one year at Syracuse.

Sinclair: How did your parents meet?
Isbell: I don’t believe I was ever told exactly how my mother and father met. They were four years apart in age, and so four classes apart in the public schools that both of them attended, but they both were from middle-class families and both of their fathers were fairly prominent in New Haven, and I have the feeling that the middle-class population of New Haven pretty much knew, or at least knew of, everybody else in the middle class.

I think my father’s family was probably considered a notch above my mother’s family in the social scale because his father—my grandfather—was a very successful lawyer in New Haven. He had gone to Yale Law School, and graduated in the class of 1900, although at that time it wasn’t necessary to have a college degree in order to get into law school, and he never did go to college. He was also active in Republican politics, and at one time was majority leader in the Connecticut Senate, and at another time the founder and first commander of the Connecticut State Police. That grandfather had also been a colonel in the National Guard, and when the United States entered the First World War, he was the Commandant of the 102nd regiment, which came from Connecticut, and was part of the 26th Division, known as the Yankee Division.

Sinclair: Did he go to Europe in that war?

Isbell: Yes. He went to France as commandant of that regiment, although shortly after arriving in France, he was detailed to some sort of other assignment and relieved of the command of that regiment. Earlier, as a major, he had been involved in our problems with Pancho Villa in Mexico. Incidentally, after he died, sometime in the mid-thirties, he was buried in Arlington Cemetery.

My other grandfather—my mother’s father—had been a successful jeweler and active in local Democratic politics. He also had something of a military background, having been a major
in a local group called the New Haven Blues, which drilled and paraded, but I think had no formal governmental status. By the time I knew him, he had retired because of a heart problem, though was still a member of some municipal body, either the Board of Aldermen or the Finance Board. He had been a member of both at one time or another, and after retirement he continued as a member of one of them.

**Sinclair:** Do you know when your parents were married?

**Isbell:** Yes, in 1925.

**Sinclair:** Do you have a memory of any stories from your parents’ wedding or their early life together that you’d be willing to share with us? Anything that was passed down to you later—funny events, sad events? Anything from between the time they were married and when we get to you?

**Isbell:** Well, one family story of sorts relates to my parents’ marriage. It had been said by someone at the time of their marriage that the red-blooded Crabbs had married their daughter to one of the blue-blooded Isbells.

**Sinclair:** Okay. Let’s talk about your siblings. How many siblings do you have?

**Isbell:** Just one sister, an older sister.

**Sinclair:** And what’s her name?

**Isbell:** Her name was Michal Joan.

**Sinclair:** That’s spelled M-i-c-h-a-l?

**Isbell:** Yes, the male name Michael but without an E. That was not actually the name that she was christened with. She was christened, and listed on her birth certificate, as Vivian Joan. As I understood the family story, my mother liked the name Michal, and wanted to name her daughter Michal, but she felt social pressure of some kind against that because it was such an
unusual name for a girl. It’s biblical, you know—the wife, or perhaps one of the wives, of King David was named Michal. But my sister didn’t like the name Vivian, and like Mother she liked the name Michal. So there came a time that my parents and I started to call her Michal Joan or just plain Michal, though she continued to be called Joan by other family members and acquaintances. Sometime in her early teens she insisted on getting her first name changed legally from Vivian to Michal.

Sinclair: And she was born in 1926?

Isbell: Yes.

Sinclair: And there were no other siblings?

Isbell: No.

Sinclair: Earlier, you mentioned your grandfathers. What were their names?

Isbell: The Isbell grandfather’s name was Ernest Lockwood Isbell, and the Crabb grandfather’s was Frederick Gardner Crabb. I don’t think grandfather Isbell had any siblings; at least none who survived to adulthood. On the other hand, Grandpa Crabb was one of ten children, only five of whom survived to adulthood, and he was the only one of them who had children. He had had to retire because of cardiac problems by the time I knew him, in the early 1930’s, when he would have been in his sixties, but he lived to the age of 88.

Sinclair: What were your grandmothers’ names?

Isbell: My Isbell grandmother’s maiden name was Edith Hauschild Beers. My Crabb grandmother’s maiden name was Grace Mae Nichols.

Sinclair: Did you have aunts and uncles?

Isbell: Yes. Each of the grandparental couples had four children, in each case two boys and two girls, so I had six aunts and uncles—three of each. That count just includes the ones
who were blood relatives. Most of them got married, so we had some additional aunts and uncles by marriage.

My mother was the oldest child in her family, followed by two boys and then another girl thirteen years after my mother was born. That last-born girl, whose name was Jeanette, was closer in age to my sister than she was to my mother, and she was Michal’s and my favorite among those aunts and uncles.

The older of the two boys was Frederick Gardner Crabb, Jr., always known in the family as Gardner to distinguish him from his father, who of course was also Frederick Gardner, and addressed as Fred by friends and relatives of his generation, and by Grandma. However, I discovered later in life that Uncle Gardner actually preferred to be called Fred, and that was how he was known and addressed by his Army friends and his several successive wives.

The other son in that family, Richard, who was the third of the children in age, did not, unlike his older brother, get a chance to go to college. Gardner had gone to West Point—but Dick got married, and soon had a son, and so had to go to work to support his young family. That made starting serious life a lot rougher for him than it was for his brother. However, although he started out as a milkman, he worked his way up to a position as a pretty high executive in the National Dairy Company.

Sinclair: How about your father’s family?
Isbell: My father had two older sisters and a younger brother. Edith, the eldest, graduated from Vassar and became a school teacher; she never married but she wound up as head of the English department at New Haven’s main high school. Ethel, the younger sister, went to what was then the newly established Connecticut College for women; she was in the first class to graduate from that college. She married and had two sons (both of whom went to Yale
College, as had their father). She and her husband, Allen Hubbard senior, got divorced and she did not marry again. I must have seen the senior Allen Hubbard when I was small, but had no recollection of him before I met him one time in the sixties or seventies at a meeting of the Association of Yale Alumni in New Haven, at which my wife Florence asked me if I didn’t have a relative named Allen Hubbard, pointing out that a man whose nametag showed that name was sitting directly behind us. I turned around and introduced myself, and we both took pleasure in that highly coincidental meeting. Allen had married the widow of some distinguished professor at Yale, and we dined with them both on a couple of occasions.

My father came third in order of age in his family, and he had a younger brother named Roger, who seems to have been thought to be the more promising of the two brothers—or at least more sociable and outgoing; he was apparently very popular with members of both sexes. He, like my dad, went to Yale, but got his degree in engineering. Roger’s story, however, was a tragic one. There was a deadly epidemic of what was called Spanish Flu in 1918, which killed millions of people all over the world. Roger got that flu and survived it, but apparently because he’d been weakened by the flu, was felled by a disease—encephalitis—that in those days could not be effectively treated, and he gradually became ever more disabled, both physically and mentally.

Before that disease had developed very far, he married a remarkable, bright, and charming woman named Eleanor Collins, a magna cum laude graduate of Smith College. We were told that Aunt Ellie, as we knew her, had gone into that marriage knowing that Roger had that disease, that it was incurable and that it was going to become increasingly disabling. She evidently thought that somehow they would manage to beat the disease, which in fact couldn’t then be done.
She worked with several prominent sociologists, the most notable of whom was Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist who produced, with Ellie’s help among others, the monumental study of the American race problem titled *An American Dilemma*. She then went to work for the Social Science Research Council, a national organization headquartered in New York City, in an administrative capacity rather than a social scientific one. She stayed there throughout her working life and, I gather, wound up pretty much running the place in quite a high position in the organization, which was fortunate, for she had to support Roger, who had soon become unemployable, for most of his remaining but mercifully short life. He eventually died quite young—in his forties or fifties.

Ellie was another much-loved aunt, by Michal and me, and also by our children. She retired at age seventy or so and moved from New York to a small house in Columbia, a small town in eastern Connecticut, where she had been born and had a number of devoted nieces and nephews. She ultimately died at the age of ninety-four.

**Sinclair:** You discussed your relationships with your aunts and uncles, but I don’t think we discussed your relationship with your grandparents. Tell me about those relationships.

**Isbell:** Well, I never really knew my grandfather Isbell, though I must have seen him a couple of times in my early childhood. He died when I was six or eight; and so I didn’t have much of an impression of him except from pictures of him looking stern in his Army officer’s uniform. I really had no relationship—no personal connection—with him. My grandmother Isbell died when I was two or three, and there’s a photo of me as a baby on her lap, but I have no recollection of her at all. So I really didn’t know those grandparents. I heard from my father a fair amount about his father who was an avid outdoorsman, fisher and hunter, and a national
champion pistol shot. My sense was that he was also a martinet, and that my father really didn’t like his father—and probably that the feeling was returned.

**Sinclair:** A martinet in what sense?

**Isbell:** In the sense of probably treating his children as if they were soldiers under his command.

However, I was very fond of my other grandparents—particularly my grandmother, though I got along fine with Grandpa Crabb as well. They were still living in their familial house on Barnett Street, in the Westville area in New Haven, when I was a freshman at Yale and there were several occasions when I brought college friends to meet them. Regrettably, I was not yet mature enough to ever think of asking them questions about their families or their past lives. Grandma Crabb was very deaf, so you had to talk very loudly in communicating with her, and as children, we’d yell rather than talk when we communicated with her. She and Grandpa Crabb seemed to speak as little as they could to each other; I gathered that theirs was not a very happy marriage. They weren’t engaged in open warfare, but they really didn’t seem to have very much in common.

I was told that Grandma Crabb had been a very gifted keyboard player—on both organ and piano—but by the time I knew her, her deafness had progressed to a point where she really couldn’t hear the music the way she knew it should sound, so she’d given up playing music altogether. She was a lovely, warm person. When I was a kid, except for the two years when we were in France, we would have family gatherings twice a year, for Thanksgiving and for Christmas, at the Crabb grandparents’ house, which were just wonderful events. My memory of those events really presents my sense of an ideal, multi-generational family gathering.

**Sinclair:** Can you describe why it was ideal?
Isbell: It—well, it was a happy time to see our cousins and our aunts and uncles, and we—my sister Michal and I—were fond of them all, and it just imbued me with an ideal image of what should happen on occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas—there should above all be an assemblage of as many relatives as possible, especially if the relatives like each other. In my mind’s eye I saw those occasions as rather similar to the Normal Rockwell paintings of similar large family meals.

Sinclair: That’s a nice segue into your childhood. When were you born?

Isbell: I was born on February 18, 1929.

Sinclair: Where?

Isbell: In New Haven, Connecticut.

Sinclair: Okay, and what was the address of your first house? Do you remember?

Isbell: The first house I lived in was an old, small, oddly designed house on Edgewood Avenue in New Haven proper. The house is just a few blocks west of Davenport, the residential college at Yale where I lived in my college years—and, indeed, my last two years in law school—so I saw it fairly frequently. I last visited it in September of this year [2009], when I was in New Haven in connection with getting my granddaughter Lucy enrolled as a freshman at Yale, and noted both the street address, 61 Edgewood Avenue, and a historical marker saying the house was built in 1798. I have just one recollection of that house from the time when my family lived there: it’s a memory of being held in my mother’s arms as a parade went by. I told Mother about that memory on some occasion, and she remembered that parade, and told me that I had been just six months old at that time.
We moved from the Edgewood Avenue house to a neighborhood called Spring Glen in Hamden, a suburb of New Haven, where we had a substantially larger house on Haverford Street, which was also still there when I was last in New Haven.

Sinclair: When did you move? How old were you?

Isbell: I think I was no older than two—indeed, I may still have been a babe in arms—when we moved to the house on Haverford Street. And I think we lived there for three or four years. I remember we had a big metal tank that served as a wading pool. I don’t know where the tank came from, but it certainly wasn’t designed as a pool.

Sinclair: And that was your second home?

Isbell: Well, that’s correct in a temporal sense, but it wasn’t an additional home.

Our next move was from Spring Glen to Deerfield, Massachusetts, where my father had taken a job as a teacher at Eaglebrook School. There, we lived in the main school building of Eaglebrook School. After two years there, as I’ve already recounted, we moved to France, where again we lived at a school—this time MacJannet School—where my parents were teaching and Michal and I were students. When we came back to the States, two years later, we lived in New York City, in an apartment on 121st Street, which is near the Columbia University campus.

Sinclair: Let’s return for a moment to your early childhood. You already gave one very early childhood memory of the parade.

Isbell: Yes.

Sinclair: Do you have any other memories from before you started school?

Isbell: I have some memories of our time on Haverford Street in Spring Glen, which were probably before I had started school. I had an imaginary playmate, whose name I don’t
recall. In those days, grocery stores as well as milkmen delivered food to houses and often just left the deliveries on people’s front porches or steps, and for a short period, swiftly terminated by my parents, I took up appropriating edibles like carrots from other people’s grocery bags, and eating them. Also, I had a tricycle and on one occasion fell off it and suffered a major cut on one of my lips. Our family doctor, Dr. Wakefield, who was a prominent pediatrician, though I think he really hated children, but who like most physicians in those days made house calls, came to stitch the lip up, without even local anesthetic despite my screams.

I also remember family reunions centered around my Crabb grandparents and their home. Grandpa had two brothers who were still alive in my pre-school years. Both of them were lifelong bachelors, although one of them eventually married a nurse who cared for him during his final, fatal illness.

**Sinclair:** Grandfather Crabb?

**Isbell:** Yes. One of those brothers was Uncle Steve, who had a photography studio and was quite wealthy. All the formal family photographs of that time were made in his studio. He’s the one who married on his death bed. The other brother was Uncle John, and I don’t know what he’d done for a living, but he had a farm in Woodbridge, not far from New Haven, and there would occasionally be some sort of summer event at his farm, the main feature of which for me was that there was always a barrel full of ice cream. In those days, of course, ice cream was not as common or as readily available as it is today. So it was always a treat to go to Uncle John’s place.

Incidentally, one of my memories—probably from my pre-school days—is of one of those family gatherings where Uncle John lay down on a couch and just peacefully died—I assume of a heart attack. That was my first first-hand acquaintance with death.
Sinclair: Wow, that is certainly not something you hear every day. Okay, well those are some good recollections from before you started school. Now, let’s move on. What was the first school you attended?

Isbell: I may have attended a nursery school or kindergarten when we lived in Spring Glen, but the first school I remember was called the Bement School. It was a kindergarten and elementary school in Deerfield Village, which I attended, and which my sister attended also—and at which my mother taught art classes—during the time that my father was teaching at Eaglebrook School in Deerfield. I guess I probably did a year of kindergarten and then first grade there, and the next school was MacJannet School in Saint Cloud in France. We were there two years, and I must have done second, third, and fourth grade in those two years.

Sinclair: During your two years in France, at the MacJannet School and Camp, did you learn French?

Isbell: I did. And I became quite fluent—probably about as fluent as a French kid my age would have been. But then when I got back to the States, I suppressed it all. Kids would say, “Oh, you speak French? Speak some French for us.” And I’d refuse; I didn’t want to be taken for an oddity by my peers, so I simply suppressed my command of French, and managed to forget it. However, later, in college, I got the idea that I’d like to spend sometime living the expatriate life, preferably in Paris, à la Fitzgerald, Hemingway et al. I chose French as my required foreign language course and signed up for an intensive course in that language, which was one of several foreign languages that Yale and other colleges were offering, using a method inspired by the immersion techniques by which the military had trained people in foreign languages during the war. It involved two three-hour classes a week, and counted as two courses toward the required five per term, and I did well in it. I found that I didn’t remember any of the
vocabulary, but the accent came back to me, so I had reason to be glad for the time I’d spent in a school in France, even though it was an American school, where most of the classes were taught in English. French must have been one of the subjects taught there, and there may well have been some other subjects that were taught in French; anyhow, as I’ve said, I’d managed to become quite fluent in that language.

Sinclair: Do any other memories stand out from your time at the MacJannet School?

Isbell: Yes. One of my memories is of visiting an outdoor stamp market on the Champs Elysées on Sunday mornings, where I mainly engaged in looking, but occasionally made some minor purchase. (On a visit to Paris not long ago, I noticed that Sunday morning stamp market was still functioning.) Another memory is of a bicycle trip with my parents and my sister down the Loire Valley, exploring the various picturesque chateaus. A few years ago, Florence and I made a similar excursion down the Loire, though this time by car, and as we parked and set off to explore one of the chateaus, we were approached by a young woman with a clipboard, doing a survey of visitors, presumably on behalf of some sort of tourist agency. She asked us (in French) whether we had been there previously, and I responded, “Yes—fifty years ago.”

I also have memories of two performances in which I had a leading role. One of them involved my playing Puck in a performance of Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream. The MacJannet School put on a play every year, and that was it in one of the two years I was there. I was drafted to play the part of Puck, possibly because I was the smallest student in the school, or perhaps because I was something of a joker and troublemaker; but I don’t think I ever asked, or was told, why. I do remember that I had made a mess of my copy of the script, and was worried that my stern English teacher, Miss Pegg, would be angry about that; but on the contrary, she was pleased with my performance, and forgave me for ruining my script. We have a copy of a
still photo of the cast of that performance, but in those days Mr. MacJannet was in the habit of also taking movies of significant events involving the school or the camp, 16 millimeter movies. Some years later, when, as will be recounted, I was back at the MacJannet Camp at Lake Annécy, this time as a counselor rather than as the youngest camper, I asked him if by any chance he had a movie of any part of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* performance. I really would have liked to see what I looked like, prancing around as Puck. Of course, he wasn’t recording sound in those days, but just the visual part of any movie film of that performance would have been interesting. Unfortunately, however, Mr. MacJannet told me that if he’d made a film of that particular event, he couldn’t find it, so I never did get to see what my performance looked like.

The other performance I remember involved the whole school giving a song recital in front of a large assembly of French boy scouts. One of the songs we sang was the Negro spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and I was picked to sing the solo part in my clear boy soprano voice.

**Sinclair:** What came next in your education?

**Isbell:** When we returned from France, we lived on 121st Street in New York City. The first year we were there I attended a private school, Lincoln School, which was three or four blocks from the apartment. I don’t know how my parents, who didn’t have a lot of money, managed to afford that private school—or Michal’s, which was a different school, Saint Agatha, but also a private school.

At Lincoln School, I was placed in the fourth grade, even though I had already done fourth grade work at the MacJannet School in France; so there wasn’t anything that they were teaching in the way of normal academic subjects that I didn’t already know, but it was a very
progressive school, and a lot of things were taught about that were not standard subjects for fourth grade.

Sinclair: In what sense?

Isbell: Well, for one thing, we had cooking classes, and one of the items in my scrapbook is a photo that appeared in an article about the school in the *New York Times*, of me stirring up a dish of some kind. A particular memory I have of that class is of accidentally sticking some fingers into an electric mixer, and coming out of it with a lot of blood and some handsome scars on the fingers involved.

Another of our fourth-grade activities in that school that I particularly remember was our writing and then performing a play called *How Boots Befooled the King*. We were given the general plot but had a competition to write a script for the play, which the class then performed. It seems to me we also studied the sex life of frogs. The only normal subjects I remember our having were arithmetic and English. In the arithmetic class, we were doing long division and long multiplication, and since I’d already learned both of those in my previous school, I was given the task of teaching them to my classmates. As it happens, there was another boy in that class who had come from abroad, in his case not from France but from China, where his father was a missionary teacher, and he also had done fourth grade work before. So the two of us did that arithmetic teaching together.

There is an interesting sequel to the story of this other kid in fourth grade in Lincoln School having come from abroad and taught fourth grade arithmetic with me. When I arrived at Covington after law school and a few diversions, in early 1957, there was a guy in my class of associates who had spent much of his youth in China, and was still fluent in Chinese, and he used to take us fellow associates for lunch at a local Chinese restaurant, where he placed our
orders with the waiters in Chinese. He introduced us to oddly-named dishes like Twelve Precious Mongolian Stoves. After a year or so, it occurred to me that the given name of the kid in fourth grade at Lincoln School with the Chinese background was Henry, though I didn’t remember his family name, and my law firm colleagues was Henry Sailer, so I asked him whether he had been that kid in fourth grade, and, indeed, he was the very one.

At about that time I was rummaging in a trunk where I stored my memorabilia and found a copy of a story that Henry had written that fourth grade year, titled *Emil the Turtle Goes Wandering* (further evidence that we did have a class in English, or perhaps one in writing plays and short stories), so I brought it to the office and presented it to Henry, who in the meantime had remembered somewhat bitterly that my script and not his had been chosen for the class production of *How Boots Befooled the King*.

That has always struck me as an extraordinary coincidence, to run into somebody that you had been in fourth grade with and hadn’t seen since, and in addition to find yourselves colleagues in the same law firm.

**Sinclair:** Had he gone back to China after fourth grade?

**Isbell:** I think so; though I know he later came back to the States as least in time to attend Deerfield Academy, then Princeton and, after sometime on Wall Street, Harvard Law School, where he was Article and Book Review Editor of the Law Review the same year as I had the same position on the Yale Law Journal (and of course we graduated from our respective law schools the same year). Henry did very well at Covington, making partner a year ahead of everyone else in his “class” at the firm, but sometime in the late eighties or early nineties he took early retirement for health reasons, and he’s still around. When I see him next, I’ll try to
remember to ask him whether he returned to China after than one year we shared at Lincoln School, and if so, why he was here for just that year.

Sinclair: Well, the story of your meeting in fourth grade at that school in New York, both of you having just come from abroad, and then meeting again as associates in the same law firm in Washington is amazing! Absolutely amazing!

Isbell: Yes, and for all I know I may well have crossed paths with other people I’d known earlier in life, without realizing it. Having gone to so many different schools, I made a lot of friends that I didn’t keep track of when I went on to the next one, and my paths may well have crossed theirs without either of us being aware of it. In the case of girls I knew in schools, their family names are likely to have changed from marriage, making it the more unlikely that I’d recognize them.

Sinclair: Let’s continue on now with your education. Did you remain at Lincoln?

Isbell: No, I didn’t. After that initial year, I guess, my parents couldn’t really afford private schools for both Michal and me, so I started fifth grade in a regular public school in New York. There was an occasion when I came home and complained that the teacher had corrected my pronunciation of some word. I can’t remember the details, but she spoke a dialect of New York-ese, or at least had a New York accent, and wanted me to pronounce a word with that accent, which bothered me. I told my parents about that, and they yanked me out of that school and sent me for the second half of the school year back to Lincoln School, with my tuition this time being paid by a teacher at the school named Rose Khoury, who had become a family friend.

I finished fifth grade at Lincoln School, and then I was sent to a public school for rapid learners. New York had then, and I think still has, a number of those highly competitive schools. This particular one was called Speyer School but it also had a public school number, and it was
under the general supervision of Columbia Teachers College. But once again it was rather like Lincoln School (which I think Columbia Teachers College also had some sort of hand in). I don’t remember anything concrete that I learned at Speyer School, but I do remember our doing things like putting on a circus and studying some ancient people, and again I had the feeling I just wasn’t in a serious school, where I would be learning something concrete and intellectually challenging. So I was not terribly happy there, and was not an enthusiast of so-called “progressive” education. I guess I had a good enough time there, and got along fine with my fellow students, but I didn’t think highly of it as a school.

I guess my parents weren’t too happy with Speyer School, either; in any event, for eighth grade they sent me to live with my Crabb grandparents in New Haven and to go to the Susan S. Sheridan Junior High School, which was in their neighborhood. My parents had evidently concluded that a standard New Haven public school would be better for me than even the special New York school where I was skipping grades but not really relating to the curriculum that I was being offered there. Sheridan was, at last, a regular school, and quite a good one, and I enjoyed that school and that year. Among other things, I had two male cousins of about my age, both of whom I liked and enjoyed being with, and both of them were at that school.

Happily, sometime during the summer of 1941, my parents bought a house in Connecticut. It was in a part of Greenwich that at that time was called East Port Chester, reflecting the fact that it was right across the border, marked by a river, from Port Chester, New York. That part of Greenwich has since been renamed Byram, which has a somewhat classier ring to it. The place they bought had been a stable, carriage house, and caretaker’s house, all in one building, on a large estate bordering Long Island Sound that had been owned by a Standard Oil magnate named Mallory. The caretaker and his family had lived there, in bedrooms on the
second floor. The ground floor had a kitchen, but mainly consisted of a large room where the carriages were kept, which became our living room, and a somewhat smaller room, with a horizontally split door that clearly had served as a stable for one or two horses, and that I used for a somewhat undersized basketball court (with a low ceiling that required that the basket be a foot lower than the standard ten feet).

The house came with two acres of land that had also been part of the Mallory estate, part of it wooded and part meadow, with a brook running through it that marked one edge of our property, and a large vegetable garden that the previous tenants, an Italian family, had cultivated. And I think my parents bought that house for just $2,000, and put another $2,000 into remodeling the house, mainly to make the ground floor into human living space. (I think all of the money was from a bequest to Mother from Uncle Steve, though most of his estate went to his deathbed wife.) I was delighted by this move from a New York apartment to a house with all that outdoor space, but above all I was delighted that I was going to spend the next four years at one school—Greenwich High School. That was particularly welcome to me because I’d never spent more than two years continuously in any school, and I felt I really hadn’t made much progress over the course of my education. I’d picked up all sorts of odd bits of knowledge, but nothing very systematic. For example, I’d never learned anything about English grammar—which is not to say that I spoke ungrammatically, but only that I couldn’t explain why it was grammatical; I didn’t know the names of the parts of speech, let alone the rules that apply to them. They may well have been taught at one or more of the schools I’d attended, but not in a year when I attended it. Indeed, I didn’t learn anything about the structure of a language until I took German and, particularly, Latin, in high school. So I was very happy to be absorbed
into Greenwich High School. And it was a reasonably good school—not least, because it had a pretty good group of students.

**Sinclair:** Public school or private?

**Isbell:** Public. And I did very well—not only academically, but also in acquiring some social maturity as well, during those four years.

**Sinclair:** Tell me about some memories from high school—friends, societies, sports.

**Isbell:** Well, as to friends, I developed two different—and quite separate—groups of friends. One group were from the neighborhood where we were living, whose parents were mainly blue collar or tradesmen types; the other group were schoolmates, virtually all of whose parents were solidly middle-class: professionals or white-collar businessmen. I did have a very active social life. I suddenly became very sociable, had a lot of friends. I had a very enjoyable time.

As to sports, my best sport was swimming, and there was a beach on Long Island Sound fairly close to our house, as well as better beaches in other parts of Greenwich. But although I was fairly good at it, I was never of competitive quality as a swimmer. My principal other sports were pick-up basketball and football, played only with neighborhood friends and acquaintances, but I was simply too young and too small (and not gifted enough) to have any thought of trying out for the high school teams.

We lived in that house from 1941 to 1945, throughout my high school years (and the Second World War). As I’ve mentioned, there had been a large garden—a vegetable garden—which our predecessor occupants had kept up. We enlarged that garden so that it measured a hundred feet square—which is to say 10,000 square feet in all, which gives you a better sense of how much work it was to turn it over by hand, one spade or fork at a time. We
planted every square foot of it with annual plants of all sorts, almost all of them vegetables, but with a sprinkling of flowers and decorative gourds as well. People were encouraged, as part of the war effort, to grow as much of their own food as possible, in what was called a “victory garden,” and we certainly did more than our share of that. I participated enthusiastically in that whole operation—planting things and seeing how they grew. I was even an enthusiastic participant in the wearisome task of turning over that enormous garden, one shovelful at a time, every year. Also, on one particularly memorable occasion, I helped my father dig out the decomposed and no longer odorous or even recognizable contents of our septic tank, and spread it as fertilizer on the garden.

The garden produced a good deal more food than we were able to consume, and what we were unable to give away to friends and neighbors, my parents canned, for wintertime consumption—the one part of the gardening operation that I had little or nothing to do with. (I think that when my parents sold the house, it came with a fairly full larder of home-canned vegetables.)

Our family enthusiasm for growing edibles extended, at least one year, to tapping sap in the early spring from our several maple trees, and boiling it down into maple syrup—a long and tiresome process, particularly with the improvised equipment we used for the boiling-down process (at the end of which you have to stop just in time so as to have a sufficiently syrupy product but before it suddenly turned to sugar and then burned up.) The resulting product was sweet enough to use on pancakes, but it didn’t taste quite like the real maple syrup because ours were not sugar maples (which did not grow naturally in our climate), but Norway maples. I also tried raising chickens for a while, and then turned more successfully to raising rabbits. The presumed point of doing that was to eat them, and we did try eating one, which my father was
brave enough to slaughter, but no one could manage to enjoy eating it, so that was the end of that adventure, at least as a source of food.

I played pickup games of football in the backyard, which was spacious enough for it, though there was a piece of vacant property next to ours—another remnant of the Mallory estate—which was even better for that purpose, and which we used if someone else hadn’t commandeered it before the group I was going to play with did.

As to the house, what had been the carriage room became our living room, with a fireplace and chimney that we had had added to the front of the building, replacing what had been a large entrance for the carriages. The room was about forty-five feet long, with a picture window that we had had installed at the other end of the room, looking out onto our property. It was a great place for parties.

**Sinclair:** For your parents or for you?

**Isbell:** Both, I guess, but especially for me, since I was exploring a whole new social life—or, more accurately, two separate social lives, one with local kids and the other with classmates from school. But we also had one wedding there. Our Aunt Jeanette, the youngest and closest in age of our blood-related aunts, got married there, in a ceremony for which we imported Reverend Newton, the longtime Pastor of the Crabb family’s Congregational Church in Westville (where I had also sung in the choir during my year when I did eighth grade at the Sheridan Junior High School and lived with my grandparents).

**Sinclair:** I want to focus a little bit more on high school but before I do that, I’d like to close the loop on pre-high school. Do you think that the Great Depression had any effect on your family and your childhood? You’ve already spoken a bit about your father and the effect the Depression had on his architectural career. It also seems that you moved around quite a lot.
Isbell: Clearly, all my moving around reflected the effect the Depression had on my father and therefore my family, and the moving around meant for me that my friendships didn’t have time to develop roots, so I didn’t stay in touch with people that I’d become friendly with. I think I was always reasonably sociable, but until my high school years, I just never developed a circle of friends with whom I had an interest in keeping in touch. In high school I was also very sociable, though I must confess that after I went off to college, I lost touch with most of those friends as well.

To the extent that I had problems resulting from frequent changes of my surroundings, though, I think the pertinent changes were not only the family’s moves—from Massachusetts to France, then New York, and finally Greenwich—but also the changes of schools.

Of course, the Depression had a marked effect on my family’s income and style of living, but I assume that’s not what you’re asking about.

Sinclair: Turning back now to high school, were you involved in the student council or other school activities?

Isbell: I don’t remember anything about a student council, but the school yearbook for our senior year shows that we had one (called the G.O. Council, but I don’t remember what those initials stood for) and that I was a member, though not an officer. I was also involved in all sorts of other things: my yearbook entry lists, in addition to the G.O., the Debating Club, the Dramatic Association, the Film Critics Club, the National Honor Society, the G.H.S. News, the Victory Club, and, most importantly, The Green Witch, which was the name of the school literary magazine, of which I was elected as editor. I don’t recall anything particular that I did as editor; and, thinking back on it, I don’t think I was a very impressive editor, though no one complained about me or suggested that I improve myself in some way. In any event, The Green Witch
regularly won a prize for best high school magazine in some annual event in New York, and we won it the year I was editor, too. And, I’m reasonably sure, it won again the year after I was editor.

I recall two other extra-curricular activities that didn’t merit mention in the yearbook, but on which I spent more time than on some of those that were listed there: one involved a group of four guys, including me, who from time to time prepared and performed for a school assembly a sort of comic act, of roughly the degree of sophistication later shown by The Three Stooges, but nonetheless well enough received by our student audiences that we did more than one of them. I don’t have a precise memory of this point, but I think those comical skits were generally one of the acts in a talent show, where other students would sing, dance or perform in other ways. And there was a period when I was heavily involved in organizing one of a pair of “political parties,” called, as best I remember, the Blues and the Reds. The members wore ribbons of one or the other color, and the one I helped organize put out a broad sheet.

Sinclair: What did the Blues and Reds signify?

Isbell: Nothing in particular, so far as I can recall; the idea of identifying the two national political parties by those colors hadn’t arisen yet; and in any event, these school political parties were concerned with issues having to do with the school, not the outside world. It was really nothing but a game that we had made up, which became popular for a while and eventually lost its novelty and therefore its interest.

Sinclair: What were your great loves? History, Shakespeare, Science?

Isbell: I think I loved all the subjects, especially Science and Math, and I got A’s in every academic subject but Mechanical Drawing, where I got only B’s, and demonstrated that I didn’t have the basic ability to draw a straight line, even using a ruler, and so was not a likely
candidate for either engineering or architecture as a career path. (I also got mostly B’s in Physical Education, but I don’t think those counted for the academic ranking.) Schoolwork was really a breeze for me; there was always a one-hour study period in the school day, and I almost always managed to get all my homework done in that hour. So I virtually never brought any homework home. I had Latin (I think as a required course) for two years, and I really loved it, partly because it (along with a course in German) provided my first exposure to grammar and the parts of speech; as I’ve mentioned, somehow, in my previous bouncing around from school to school, I’d totally missed any instruction at all in the structure of a language, and I was enchanted with that.

I signed up for an optional third year of Latin, and soon found that it was more demanding than any other course I’d taken; and if I was going to do it properly, I was going to have to take my Latin assignments home and do them there. That seemed to this self-indulgent kid too much of a price to pay, so I persuaded my father to write a note to the school to get me excused from continuing with third-year Latin, on the ground that I had too many other things on my schedule. Looking back on this, I think it was the one serious mistake he made as a parent, at least with respect to me; it would have been better for me if he had insisted that I continue that course. I can’t really resent him for it, though, because he had this kid who was doing straight A’s in almost everything and who was fruitfully engaged in extra-curricular activities, so I must have been difficult to turn down. Nonetheless, I later came to regret that he yielded to me, because with the exception of that one course, everything went too easily for me, and I never really learned to study in a disciplined way.
I recognized later, when I got to college, that I hadn’t ever learned to study because I’d never had to. The standard by which I was being tested, of course, was much tougher in college than in high school.

Anyhow, I wound up with the second best grade average in my high school class. I was also the next to youngest in that class, and was only 16 when I graduated.

I should mention that there was a girl in my class, Anne Garvey, who had an even better grade average than I and who was even a few months younger than me. She was voted the class’s Most Brilliant, and I was voted the Class Baby. I don’t doubt, now, that was a reasonably just reward for my having done a good deal of clowning around and acting the fool, though it surely stung a bit at the time.

**Sinclair:** Did you work during high school? Did you have a job, any job?

**Isbell:** Yes, I did—a variety of them. I had part-time jobs during the school year, and full-time ones in the summer, and the only one of those part-time jobs that I remember was working in a bakery where it smelled of the freshly baked bread, a heavenly fragrance. I also engaged in various money-raising ventures. I sold mail order Christmas cards, to be imprinted with the names of the customers to whom I sold them, lugging around a big suitcase containing a wide variety of sample cards, from a variety of different companies, from door to door in the neighborhood. I did pretty well financially with that.

I also sold magazine subscriptions in the same rounds as for Christmas cards, and that was quite profitable, too; so much so, that there came a time when I asked the school librarian if I could make a bid on the school’s subscriptions to magazines. I was allowed to do that, and the bid I submitted was significantly lower than the price that their previous purveyor offered. So I got the contract, but then discovered, too late, that I’d made a serious mistake in calculation, and
I was going to be losing something close to two hundred dollars on the contract, instead of the profit of half that amount that I’d been expecting. I’m sure I felt a bit like Icarus when he found he’d flown too close to the sun, but my subsequent fall was of course not as serious a matter as his.

It was, nonetheless, very humiliating and disappointing, though in the longer run, instructive, too. I did manage to get the school to forgive part of what I owed by letting me charge exactly what the competing outfit would have charged instead of the lower amount that I had bid for the contract and that the school had accepted. Still, that left me with an out-of-pocket loss of about $100, which I paid out of my savings from other, more profitable activities.

Another quite lucrative enterprise my closest high school friend Dick Walker and I cooked up was running a coat-check concession when there were school dances. With the school’s permission, and without any charge beyond a requirement that we clean it up afterward, we used a classroom for that purpose, and charged some modest fee like 25 or 50 cents per coat. Since we had no expenses, it was all profit, and as best I recall, we would each make $20 or more in an evening, which was pretty good money in those days. I think that that was something that Dick and I thought up; I don’t think it had been done before (though I’m sure it continued to be done by others after we had graduated). I actually also attended some of those school dances, but I don’t remember how I reconciled that with running the cloakroom.

Sinclair: Did you travel at all as a child—I know you went to France—but any other notable travel?

Isbell: Well, my parents, though they never had much money, always managed to take a summertime vacation somewhere in New England. One summer my mother and my sister and I
did a three- or four-week bicycle trip in Vermont or New Hampshire, staying at youth hostels along the way.

Another time, while we were still living in New York, the teacher and family friend who’d paid my tuition at Lincoln School for the second half of fifth grade lent us her country place in Connecticut, where the whole family stayed for much of the summer. I also spent one summer at Putney camp in Vermont. But aside from our sojourn in France, we didn’t travel very far. The longest trip I took was a two-week hitchhiking trip to Florida in, I think, the summer between the junior and senior years in high school, with Dick Walker, the friend with whom I had conducted the coat-checking concession at school dances, and who was also a member of the foursome who performed skits in school talent shows.

Sinclair: What impact did living in France have on you? Did it broaden your view of the world?

Isbell: Well, I’m sure that spending time in a foreign country broadens the mind some, just as visiting parts of this country does, but I don’t think of those two years in France as having had any particular effect on me, beyond perhaps having something to do with my wanting to go back to France after college. And as I’ve mentioned, my early exposure to French had left me with a good accent when I set out to learn the language again.

Sinclair: That makes a good transition to a discussion of college. When did you start thinking about college? In sophomore year of high school, junior high school, elementary school?

Isbell: I really don’t remember when. But it was surely earlier than my high school years. I just always assumed—in part, surely, because my parents always assumed—that my sister Michal and I would go to college. I was such a glutton for knowledge that there was no
reason for them to doubt that I would want to go to college, and although Michal may not have
been as gung ho as I was about it, Mother was certainly anxious that her daughter have the full
four years of college that her own father had denied her.

In addition, I had always assumed I’d go to Yale. My father had gone there both for
college and for architectural school; a couple of my uncles had gone there; and my Isbell
grandfather had as well (though only to the law school). And Yale was, of course, in New
Haven, where my Crabb grandparents were still living, and with whom I had lived on a couple of
occasions.

So I expected to go Yale, and when the time for college applications came, I just applied
to Yale, and happily I was accepted.

**Sinclair:** Yale was the only college you applied to?

**Isbell:** Yes. I don’t think I ever even considered applying to any other college, though I
might very well have had a better time, and an easier time getting adjusted, at some smaller and
less prep-school dominated establishment. But I just didn’t consider it, and I don’t think anyone
ever suggested it to me.

**Sinclair:** Was there an entrance exam?

**Isbell:** Well, in those days there were a cluster of exams that were called College Boards.
One was a general scholastic aptitude test; the others were in particular subjects, and a student
would have some latitude of choice as to which ones he or she would take. But I had won a
four-year scholarship for college under a program established by Pepsi Cola. Pepsi Cola had a
very public-spirited CEO, Walter Staunton Mack, Jr., and the Pepsi Cola scholarships were his
baby. They might well be viewed as a forerunner and perhaps part of the inspiration for the
much later-instituted National Merit Scholarships. The program offered full four-year
scholarships at any college you could get into, plus $25 a month and the cost of travel to and from the college. There were two scholarships for each state, and in addition, an extra two for black students in each state that had a segregated education system—which in those days, of course, was every one of the former Confederate states and a few others besides.

Sinclair: Wow!

Isbell: Pretty enlightened thinking for that time, which was 1945. The scholarships were awarded solely on the basis of a competitive exam; there was no consideration given to the degree of financial need (and so no recognition of winners unaccompanied by the financial benefit, as with the National Merit Scholars). To be eligible to take the exam, however, students had to be elected by their classmates as among the five best students in the class. So five of us were so chosen by our classmates at Greenwich High School and took the exam, and the two scholarships awarded for Connecticut were both to students at Greenwich High School. I was one of them, and a classmate and friend was the other. I don’t remember who the three others were who also took the exam.

Sinclair: The winners were you and the girl who was even younger and had a better grade average?

Isbell: No, the other winner was a boy named David Shapleigh; a friend though not a close one, and the one I thought of as my principal academic rival throughout my high school years.

Appropriately enough, David went to Harvard and I went to Yale. He went to divinity school after college, and was a minister for some years, though eventually he gave that up and became a banker.

Sinclair: What was the name of the scholarship, do you remember?
Isbell: I think it was just called the Pepsi Cola Scholarship. We weren’t required to do any publicity or anything promoting Pepsi Cola; we weren’t even expected to drink it, or prefer it to Coca Cola.

Sinclair: What did the scholarship exam cover?

Isbell: I don’t have any recollection of that at all.

In any event, that scholarship program went on for at least ten years, by which time the Pepsi Cola Company would have been supporting more than five hundred scholarships every year. So it would have been pretty darned expensive for the Pepsi Cola Company, and eventually it was discontinued, probably after the enlightened Mr. Mack had retired.

In any event, that scholarship didn’t take care of all the expense of going to a college like Yale. I also worked for my board as a “bursary” student. The one significant expense that wasn’t otherwise covered was my room; and that, I’m pretty sure, my parents paid for. I worked every summer to raise spending money—mostly as a common laborer for a construction contractor, since that paid better than any other available possibility.

Sinclair: Before we go there let’s start with college. Do you have memories of the first day of your freshman year? Do you have memories of moving in and of where you live

Isbell: I do. As I’ve mentioned, I had a good friend in high school whose name was Dick Walker. We were quite close buddies. We’d hitchhiked to Florida together during high school; we were partners in the coat-checking venture; and we were both members of the proto-Three Stooges. Dick had applied to Yale and gotten admitted, and naturally enough, we opted to room together. We were assigned to a suite with a third roommate, a veteran whom we didn’t know and never developed a friendly relationship with. And, strange to say, during that first college year Dick and I just grew apart. We reacted differently to college life, and were
interested in different things. So by the end of the year we were hardly talking to each other, nor with our third roommate, and I had not enjoyed college all that much. It was a strange, new experience for me.

**Sinclair:** In what way?

**Isbell:** I liked the classes well enough, but I hadn’t developed many new friendships, and, callow youth that I was, I hadn’t quite adjusted to the relatively mature and sophisticated world of an Ivy League college, or one where a large portion of the students were graduates of private prep schools rather than public high schools, like me. Part of the problem may well have been the fact that our freshman class was assigned directly to a residential college (Davenport), where we were mixed in with upper-classmen as well as other freshman, rather than spending freshman year on the Old Campus, where, before the war and after that first post-war year, all the freshmen were housed. In the all-freshmen residence halls, the newcomers received some guidance and support from graduate students acting as “Freshman counselors”—of which I was one later, when I came back to go to the law school.

In any event, I was sufficiently unhappy with that freshman year that I considered joining the Navy for a couple of years (since the Navy would accept enlistees at 17), instead of going on directly to sophomore year, just as a way of getting away from that atmosphere, and perhaps getting better prepared to deal with the challenges of college life. However, after some calm deliberation, I decided not to do that after all. I had arranged to room for my sophomore year with three guys with whom I had a lot of interests in common, and the four of us did get along very well. We four roomed together through graduation.

And from sophomore year on, it was all fun—or at least, it seems so in retrospect.
Sinclair: During freshman year, what courses did you take? What scholastically interested you?

Isbell: I had four courses, each for a full year, one of which was that intensive French course, which counted as two courses. The other three, which, like the French, fulfilled distributional requirements, were Classical Civilization, Biology, and English.

Sinclair: What about outside of the classroom?

Isbell: Outside of the classroom, although as I’ve said, I did not yet feel thoroughly at home, I did start to enjoy some of the pleasures of the good ole college life. For example, I joined Mory’s.

Sinclair: What was that?

Isbell: Mory’s was a drinking and eating club, one that was not very exclusive, since every undergraduate was eligible to join for a one-time cost of $25 (a fair but not exorbitant amount at that time), and it had a distinctly Yale cachet about it. It was certainly more affordable than joining a fraternity; the drink and the meals Mory’s served were cheap; and there was an atmosphere of college jollity and camaraderie and tradition about it. The walls were hung with photos of Yale athletic teams of various sorts, and all the tables bore the carved initials of earlier generations of undergraduates. The Whiffenpoofs, the oldest and best known of Yale’s many singing groups, had its own table and serenaded the guests from around it every Monday evening. It just reeked of Old Blue atmosphere.

I’m sure you know the Whiffenpoof song: “To the tables down at Mory’s, to the place where Louis dwells, to the dear old Temple Bar we love so well . . . .”

Sinclair: I’m familiar with that.
Isbell: And it may well be that it was at Mory’s that I drank an alcoholic beverage—probably beer, though I soon got familiar with hard liquor as well—for the first time in my life, at the age of 16. (I had previously tasted an alcoholic beverage—rum—but only in combination with lemon juice and honey, in a home-made cough and cold syrup that was probably a traditional home remedy from one of the grandparental households.) As to my college drinking, it was illegal to serve minors then, as it is now, but nobody in the college community seemed to pay any attention to that. The legal drinking age in Connecticut was then 21 (and that is still the case, though I gather that the disregard of that law is no longer prevalent at Yale today), so even when I graduated from Yale, at 20, I could not legally drink any alcoholic beverage there.

Sinclair: Was your drinking a bad experience, a good experience, or just kind of a typical college experience?

Isbell: Well, I had some bad experiences with drinking. I over-indulged a few times, and paid the penalty with whirly bed, which is one of the least pleasant experiences I’ve undergone, and from that I learned pretty early what the limit was on my capacity for alcohol consumption. After I’d learned that, on the whole I enjoyed alcohol in various forms, together with the group jollity and camaraderie with which it was almost always associated. I didn’t do any drinking by myself, or surreptitiously (as had been the case with cigarette smoking, which I took up at the age of 13 or 14).

A major activity of mine in college, which certainly started in that freshman year, was singing, group singing of various kinds. There were so many singers among the somewhat overfilled college enrollment that there were three different glee clubs—the varsity Glee Club, the Apollo (I’ve forgotten the full name) and the Gentlemen’s Catch Club—in that order of
status, with each of which I sang at one time or another. There were also a number of established four-part harmony barbershop quartet-type groups, almost invariably a good deal larger than a mere double quartet, of varying degrees of prestige, with the Whiffenpoofs at the pinnacle of that pyramid. There was also a good deal of informal singing at parties and other get-togethers. I’d sung in quite a few church choirs in my childhood, and in at least two school choruses, but I’d never sung in a quartet or other small group, nor done any informal harmonizing, before I got to college.

Sinclair: Were you involved with any of those college groups?

Isbell: In my freshman year, I think, only one of the glee clubs.

Sinclair: Closing the loop on your freshman year, does any big experience jump out, any girls, good friends, the Yale/Harvard football game?

Isbell: Oh, well, I went to all the football games—that is, all the home football games. A very enthusiastic spectator.

Sinclair: Was that at the Yale Bowl?

Isbell: All the home games were in the Yale Bowl. I didn’t get to all the away games, though I did get to some of them, including both of the games with Harvard that were held in Cambridge during my college years.

Sinclair: Any good friends from freshman year, or girlfriends?

Isbell: I don’t think I had any girlfriends or dates in New Haven that first year, though I did have a girlfriend back in Greenwich whom I’d see during the holidays and the summer.

Sinclair: Yale was not co-ed?

Isbell: Certainly not. Indeed, I’m not sure that that was yet even a gleam in any Yale eyes at that time.