Sometimes, people’s passions grow up with them and become stronger over the years until they are a force to be reckoned with. Such was the case with Dr. James Meiman and his love of the outdoors. From part-time jobs at nurseries and seed stores to the Soil Conservation Service to the snow hydrology program and Watershed Center at CSU, he followed his passion.

Born on December 10, 1933, he grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. “From the earliest days,” he says, “I was always very much interested in the out-of-doors.” He visited the little county park close by and read any articles or books about natural resources that he could get his hands on, including Outdoor Life magazine and Hugh Hammond Bennett’s Soil Conservation. When it came time to go to college, he wasn’t enthused, preferring instead to do “something productive, outdoors, preferably,” but his parents insisted he go. He attended the University of Kentucky, studying Agriculture and earning his Bachelor’s of Science in three and a half years.

After college, from 1955-1957, he served in the Army Signal Corps. He never went overseas, but he did teach. “It was my introduction to teaching,” he chuckles. “It was one of the few times I ever had, actually, instruction in teaching. Because you don’t usually get that in the university system.” One of his professors from Kentucky pushed him to come back for his Master’s degree after his military service, and while working on that, he learned about “a new program starting at Colorado State University, in Watershed Management. I said, that’s for me!”

In 1959, Meiman got his wish and came to CSU for his PhD in the Cooperative Watershed Management Unit, part of the College of Forestry and Natural Resources. “Almost everything impressed me about CSU!” he declares. “The setting. The mountains – I’d always dreamed of being in the mountains … It was so welcoming and supportive a place.” He was hired as a professor before even finishing his degree. When he started teaching at CSU, he was housed with other employees in his department. “We learned very much from each other and supported each other,” he says of the experience.

Jim’s research focused on snow, and particularly, where snow fits into the hydrologic cycle. “Snow, the water it produces, is, you could say, largely the reason why we’re here. Why Fort Collins is here, and the whole Front Range is here,” he says. “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to say, hey, we ought to be learning more about snow and the water that comes from it.” The snow hydrology program was brand new when he started, so he had to build a curriculum that taught students how to “operate in the field, how to do things. How to put in soil conservation practices.” He credits the Army motto he was taught – “If the student fails to learn, the teacher failed to teach” – as his guiding pedagogy. This philosophy found him with 30 graduate advisees and a member of more than 100 graduate committees. He helped build a research lab in the Pingree Park facility and served as the Director of International Programs, where he helped the department earn the name, “the International Watershed Center.” In explaining his drive to expand understanding of water usage to students of all nations, he says, “This is the world we live in. So we better understand how this world works.”

Even though Meiman was reluctant to go to college as a teenager, he lived his life at the university, and he understands it better than many people. “A university is a spirit,” he says, built of libraries, laboratories, and people who are “led by reason rather than force.” He worries about the widespread role universities are forced to play in the modern age and urges us to remember that “education, undoubtedly, is the first role of the university.”