With endless curiosity and enormous capacity for learning new things, Dr. Willis Shaner could have been anything, from a professional musician to a U.S. ambassador. His early interests in international affairs and mathematics led to a wide-ranging career in civil engineering, including 22 years with Colorado State University.

Shaner was born on November 9, 1926, in New York City, where his dad played bass fiddle and base horn with Jimmy Durante. The family soon moved to Iowa, where his parents grew up, because as he explains, “[my dad] didn’t want to raise me in New York City.” As a child, he built model airplanes and played the violin, bugle, and trumpet, swam and went camping, “played just about all the sports.” In high school, he played in the symphonic band and a nationally known government bugle corps. Even though his Dad wanted him to become a career musician, he was “interested in international development. Thus, the excitement and challenge of “things international” determined his future. He turned 18 in 1944 and immediately enlisted to fight in WWII. He joined the Navy Air Corps as “a radio radar gunner on a torpedo bomber,” but before he was deployed, the war ended.

Using GI Bill benefits, Shaner attended Iowa State University to become a civil engineer and study Spanish so that he could work overseas. He continued in the band and played on the football team. After graduation, he worked for a few years in Iowa before taking a civil engineering job in Venezuela with Creole Petroleum. “When I was there,” he explains, “I got more into administration than design. So I said, if I’m going to do it, I ought to learn something about it.” He returned to the States to get his Master’s in business at Harvard Business School. He made some connections at Harvard that led him to a job with the Stanford Research Institute, and while working there, he earned his PhD from Stanford in economic systems and development. With a newly minted doctorate, he once again left the States, to work for five and a half years in the agro-industrial sector of Ethiopia.

At age 44 and looking for a new challenge, Shaner decided to pursue another dream, teaching. He wrote a contact at Colorado State University and soon returned stateside to a job at CSU as an associate professor in the mechanical engineering department. Because his background was so varied, he had to carve out a position in the university, which wasn’t always easy. However, with his extensive international experience, he soon found himself on an irrigation study in Peru that led to a project paper adopted by the World Bank and then a $2 million project on farming systems. Although he “knew nothing about agriculture research,” he accepted the project and the money brought in was enough to gain tenure. This would become a pattern for his career, “going from so many different subjects – irrigation to farming systems research and research methodology to managing large projects,” all in service of the university, “an important teaching ground that has an obligation both to people in the United States and to the poor around the world.”

Because Shaner joined the academic world so late in his career, he admits to never really feeling like a part of the university, but despite this feeling, he fulfilled the land-grant obligation of CSU many times over. He consulted on important subjects and shared his expertise all over the world: Pakistan, Peru, Egypt, Jordan, Indonesia, Nepal, Bolivia, and Swaziland. He “never wanted to retire,” but even though he has, he’s still following his curiosity, writing memoirs about his international career and studying linear algebra. “What I found is that I’m curious about a lot of things,” he says, “and curiosity is fundamental to an enjoyable life.”