

Oral History at Scripps

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ABSTRACT: In 2005, Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library and Archives initiated a two-year oral history project. Oral histories strengthen and augment the historical record by supplementing written documents in our Archives holdings with interviews capturing the experience of individuals at the Institution. An oral historian was hired to conduct and record interviews of faculty, women scientists, and shipboard personnel who have not previously been interviewed in the few oral histories conducted in the past. Our oral history and management issues and products will be discussed as well as future planning for oral history at Scripps.

Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library and its Archives began a two year oral history project in summer of 2005. The goals of this oral history project were to strengthen and augment the historical record at Scripps Archives by supplementing written documents with interviews capturing the experience of individuals at the Institution. We wished to conduct and record interviews of 2+ hours with individuals associated with Scripps including faculty, staff, women scientists, and shipboard personnel. We wanted to document history further than interviewing the “great men of science” and thus our interviewing encompassed staff, shipboard personnel, and women.

The interviews were recorded using a Marantz PMD670 digital recorder. The digital audio files created from this recorder are stored on hard disk for future use in producing edited sound bites from these interviews for the Archives’ digital library website. We do not intend to put entire unedited interviews on our website. Our ultimate product is an edited and revised PDF transcript of these interviews, available open access on the Scripps Archives Repository. Our interview tool is an audio interview, and not video. Audio recording and its equipment is less obtrusive than videotaping, creating a more relaxed experience for the interviewee. Interviewees may speak less frankly and are more stiff in videotaped interviews, which they associate with being on television. Our ultimate product is a revised, edited PDF transcript, and not audio or video. Transcripts can be edited, corrected, and amended by interviewer and interviewee, yielding a more accurate historical record. An interview reads better if it is revised and edited, with the interviewee coming across more clearly. We remove “no value” words or phrases, while retaining the spoken word personality of the interviewee. Historians prefer transcripts for their use, since transcripts can be read and scanned much more quickly than audio or video files.

Transcript PDFs can be word/phrase searched, individually & across PDF collection. Transcript PDFs are indexed by Google & other search engines, making content accessible to researchers who are unaware of our content. Portions of the interview can be restricted by the interviewee, and excised from the posted PDF, yielding a frank discussion of controversial events and personalities.

A half-time interviewer was hired in August 2005 for a two-year project, concluding August 2007. Time was spent by this new employee to orient to our work environment, email system, work practices, computer setup, and many other facets of working in the UCSD Libraries. Starting up an oral history project will not produce immediate results. The interviewer received oral history training at UCLA's oral history program. Under the guidance of the Scripps Archivist, the interviewer wrote an outline for an oral history interview and developed the master question set for these interviews. The interviewer drafted a cover letter and an oral history copyright agreement which would be submitted to each interviewee. The interviewer did historical research and readings on the history of Scripps, and the history of oceanography, in order to better understand the subject matter. The Archivist submitted extensive application paperwork to the University's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The copyright agreement developed has these key stipulations:

- 1) The Interviewee assigns to UCSD all of the Interviewee's copyright, title, and interest in and to the Work.
- 2) UCSD has right to use the Work for research, educational, or other purpose, including storage and distribution via electronic reproduction and digital reproduction, that UCSD may deem appropriate.
- 3) The Interviewee receives no remuneration or compensation for participating or for the rights.
- 4) The Interviewee has the right to review and comment on the transcript of the tape-recorded interviews for factual accuracy before it is put into final form.

The outline for the oral history interviews provides a pathway for the interviewer to get started and move efficiently through the interview process. First some introductory remarks are made by the interviewer:

"I want to know your place in the history of Scripps Institution of Oceanography as well as Scripps' place in your personal history. This objective is primarily met through three broad questions: How did you come to be at Scripps? What was your experience at Scripps like? Where did that experience take you? In the process, I hope to learn about the institutional structure that you experienced, the networks of communication you encountered, what research at Scripps was like for you, and your interpretations about the Scripps community – the laboratory as well as the surrounding community of La Jolla and UCSD. A primary goal is to learn how Scripps changed over time. "

Then the question set is followed, with questions structured in the following outline of an oral history interview:

- 1) Coming to Scripps
- 2) Scripps as a Community
- 3) What Scripps Meant to you
- 4) How was Scripps structured and your research organized?
- 5) What was your research like at Scripps?

- 6) Research Cruises
- 7) Closing Interview

The master question set developed for these oral history interviews are customized for each interviewee, according to their background, experience, scientific discipline etc. Everyone is asked many of the same questions (i.e. How did you happen to come to Scripps?). A question set gives a framework, structure and flow to the interview. The interviewer follows the interviewee's train of thought and asks follow-up questions, while keeping control and managing the flow of the conversation.

Master questions from the “Coming to Scripps” section of the interview:

- 1) How did you decide to pursue a career in oceanography?
- 2) What kind of training did you have in preparation for your career in oceanography?
- 3) What sort of life did you expect to lead as an oceanographer? What sort of job prospects did you foresee?
- 4) How were you recruited by Scripps? What year did you start work at SIO?
- 5) Why was Scripps attractive to you?
- 6) Were you offered some kind of hiring package or fellowship (teaching position, laboratory space, etc)?
- 7) Where did you live when you first came to Scripps? Did you buy a home?
- 8) Can you describe what it was like to live in San Diego when you first arrived?
- 9) How did this experience change over the years?

Master questions from the “How was Scripps structured and your research organized” section of the interview”

- 1) Let’s talk about how Scripps was structured and how this structure had an impact on your research:
- 2) What department or research group did you start work within at Scripps?
- 3) What specialties were encouraged in the department? Why were these specialties favored? What effect did this have on you in choosing the direction of your research?
- 4) How many people were in your research group? How were they recruited?
- 5) To whom did you report? What was (name of supervisor)_____ like?
- 6) Were you closely supervised? Did the amount of supervision that you were subjected to change over time?
- 7) Did you socialize with (name of supervisor)_____?
- 8) Who reported to you? Did you socialize with them?
- 9) What kind of working conditions did you work under when you started at Scripps (physical space/conditions, equipment, etc.)? Compare your working conditions when you started at Scripps with those later on.
- 10) How did your job change over the time you worked at Scripps (position, supervisor, more freedom, research direction)?
- 11) Et cetera...

This entire oral history production process proved to be time-intensive, and more so than we had envisioned in our naivety. The interviewer started work in mid-August 2005, and the first interview was conducted during November 2005. The first finished oral history was published as a PDF on the Scripps Archives Repository during February 2006. Work progressed and the interviewer's two year temporary position ended mid-August 2007. Scripps Library and Archives staff continue to work on finishing up editing of the last interviews as of October 2007, so we are not yet finished. 22 interviews were conducted in the 21 months since the first interview, and we had projected 38 for the two years of the project. This is roughly one interview per month from a half-time position; we don't know how that production rate compares to other similar oral history endeavors.

Back to the interviews.... The interviewees were selected by the Scripps Archivist, and there are not sufficient resources to interview everyone. We did not publicly announce that we were doing an oral history project in order to avoid being overwhelmed. The Scripps Archivist knows from experience who are the best people to interview for the intended purposes, and she also consulted with some at Scripps about this matter. The interviewer travelled to conduct some interviews, and this takes up considerable time as well as involves travel expenses. Most interviews were two hours in length, though a few were longer.

After an interview is recorded, we need the audio transcribed to text. The Archivist contacted the American Institute of Physics for transcribers they use. She reviewed transcribers listed by Society of California Archivists. A transcriber was sought who had experience in (1) oral history transcripts in a library setting; (2) science interviewees, and familiarity with physics terminology; and, (3) providing Word transcripts & using FTP for Word & digital audio files. Each prospective transcriber was asked for examples of their transcription work and their rate per tape hour. A transcriber was selected and an independent contractor agreement had to be filled out with the University. For this transcriber's work, we prepared a purchase order specifying confidentiality and timeliness. Each interview generates a digital audio file, which is put on an FTP server for the transcriber to pick up, and from that, the transcriber produces a Word DOC file for us as her product. The transcriber we selected has gotten transcripts back to us within a week of receiving the digital audio file, and charges \$125 per tape hour for the project lifetime. This is a bit higher rate than some other transcribers, but this transcriber has proven well worth the money for the quality of her work, her speedy turn-around time, and the ease of working with this transcriber.

After we receive the transcript from the transcriber as a Microsoft Word DOC file, editing of the transcript begins. Editing a transcript takes about ten hours of work for a two hour interview. Next, the interviewee reviews the transcript for corrections or clarification. Working with corrections and other input from the interviewee consumes one to two hours of work time. This is variable; fussy interviewees soak up time in revising their own revisions, discussing at great length, etc. Finally a final version of the oral history is assembled with a photograph, a short biography, and table of contents; this takes about two hours of work time.

Editing the revising the transcript can change the text considerably, improving readability, adding clarifying information, and correcting errors.

Following is a section of a transcript straight from the interviewee's mouth, followed by the same section edited into the final product. The affected words and phrases are in **bold** to illustrate how editing improves the final oral history transcript without affecting too much what the interviewee says.

ORIGINAL RECORDED INTERVIEW:

And, in my undergraduate **degrees I have**, I'd been interested in geophysics and oceanography generally but it wasn't a topic that was called **that** then, at least not to my knowledge. ... I had applied and been admitted to Caltech and **actually** had an advisor and an office and was all set to work at Caltech in geophysics. My advisor was Professor **[01:15 B. Walda]**. **And**, when a friend of mine phoned up from San Diego, **and I had been, I'd lived in San Diego for long periods of time so I knew it quite well**, and **he** said, "Did you know that the Scripps ... is starting the first organized classes in oceanography?" Before that they'd always been **something** more like a field station (**Harkewicz: Uh huh.**) where graduates could come **And**, I was so fascinated with this idea of working and going to **someplace like** Scripps that **I already knew about but didn't have the vaguest idea that Scripps went as far beyond the small aquarium we had then and the museum, which was in the old building across the street from it. And so, I left.** I drove down the following day from Caltech to interview,

EDITED TRANSCRIPT:

And in my undergraduate **work**, I'd been interested in geophysics and oceanography generally, but it wasn't a topic that was called **oceanography** then, at least not to my knowledge. ... I had applied and been admitted to Caltech and had an advisor and an office and was all set to work at Caltech in geophysics. My advisor was Professor **Buwalda**. When a friend of mine phoned up from San Diego and said, "Did you know that the Scripps... is starting the first organized classes in oceanography?" Before that, they'd always been more like a field station where graduates could come ... I was so fascinated with this idea of working and going to Scripps that I drove down the following day from Caltech to interview.

There have been challenges throughout this oral history project. The copyright agreement consumed considerable work with an attorney. Some of the interviewees scrutinize such agreements closely and it consumes considerable time addressing their and our concerns and interests. Since the interviewee must sign the copyright agreement before we interview, there can be delays. The age of the interviewees is also a challenge. We were too late for several interviewees of interest; a few passed away before we worked our way to them on our list. Scheduling interviews can be a challenge, since it's not a priority for the interviewee to meet with us and get it over with. Interviewees can be reluctant to speak frankly about others, even with the ability to restrict specified portions of their remarks for a specified number of years into the future. One interviewee wanted remarks on an individual excised and not restricted, which led to management/staff conflict over fully documenting the history of Scripps and the Library's interest in maintaining a good relationship with academics.

A half-time position as our interviewer produced a bit over one oral history interview per month, or one oral history interview for eighty hours of work. During this two year project period, only thirteen of the twenty-two interviews conducted by the interviewer were finalized into edited transcripts for posting to our institutional repository. Producing the final edited transcripts for those additional nine interviews continues with pre-existing staffing. Given our limited experience, it is difficult to say whether this was normative productivity for a half time oral historian position, or whether an interviewer with a more extensive editing background could have produced more interviews and edited transcripts.

Overall, this oral history project has been worthwhile and beneficial. We would do it again. We have documented individual experiences working at Scripps, and the interworkings of the community at Scripps. We have gathered a more personalized history of the Institution and its community. We have gone beyond the “great men of science” version of Scripps history. We have obtained audio of various Scripps personnel so we can produce sound bites to put onto our public website. When this project was nearing an end, we did not request a permanent oral historian position for recruitment; we requested a digital library specialist position. The need was greater in our digital library operation. We don’t need a steady stream of oral histories from a permanent position, or we would run out of people to interview. We plan to explore doing oral histories in the future at a low level with part of our senior technical services position, and with the Archivist.

