

Word of mouth

Ordinary voices
give histories of
old Santa Cruz

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — There are three volumes of transcribed taped interviews about the birthing of UC Santa Cruz tucked away in a locked file on the third floor of the campus library.

Only three people have read the nearly 1,500 pages — the former chancellor who sat still for the interviews and the two people who prepared the volumes.

The pages have been sealed from public light at the request of Dean McHenry, founding chancellor of UCSC, who deemed some of his comments too nakedly honest to be read until after his death.

"Many professors and administrators will release their memoirs, but will hold back a few pages that are particularly sensitive," said Randall Jarrell, director of the Regional History Project at UCSC.

"That encourages them to be candid. . . . Dean McHenry sealed all of his."

The oral history project — started in July 1963, before the first shovel of dirt was turned at UCSC — focuses not only on the origins of the campus but also on life as it has been lived along the Central Coast for the past 100 years.

"Its major purpose was to interview longtime residents of the Central Coast area whose comments would add significantly to the sketchy and inadequate written history of the region," said an introduction to one of the early volumes.

Jarrell added that it was not until 1967 that the scope of the project was expanded to include university and Lick Observatory history.

"When this project started, oral history was still in its infancy in terms of its method," said Jarrell, who has been running the program since 1974. "It really showed an imaginative flair on the part of Dean McHenry and Donald Clark (UCSC's first librarian) . . . to initiate an oral history project office right from the start."

The two men, said Jarrell, "took seriously local history."

Oral interviews as a way of recording life dates back as far as Thucydides, an Athenian historian who documented the Periclean wars around 440 B.C. "Personal interviews as a way of obtaining information . . . is very old," said Jarrell. "It's full of biases and prejudices just as much as letters and documents."

It is, however, just one part of the fabric of history.

"If somebody wants to see a complex historical issue . . . that historian will have to sift through all sorts of different documents (including oral history tapes and transcripts) and come to some conclusion," said Jarrell.

"My generation of historians, as well as students today, have all be-



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Randall Jarrell, Regional History Project director, keeps track of oral histories.

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— *Marion Taylor, head of collection planning at UCSC*

come aware of how biased and one-dimensional our own national historic resources have been."

Marion Taylor, head of collection planning at UCSC, said the oral history project is a major effort to preserve the area's past.

"It's very important source material because it's information that's not in print in any other way," said Taylor. "People's memories . . . would be lost otherwise."

The project doesn't just focus on movers and shakers — who often write their own memoirs, anyway — but also on average folks who have a story to tell about a subject of interest.

"We appreciate that history is not just made by elites," said Jarrell. "The daily living experiences of ordinary people taken collectively can give us a sense of how people lived in the past."

In addition to keeping more than two dozen bound volumes of transcribed interviews printed on acid-free paper, Jarrell also maintains all of the 200 to 300 tape recordings in fire-proof safes.

Hearing the sound of someone's voice, listening to their emphasis and cadence, can be another key to a histo-

rian's search for truth, she said.

Taylor said the interest in oral history as a way of preserving the past has gained in popularity since the proliferation of tape-recording machines after World War II.

Even her sister, in the Santa Cruz area on a visit, brought along a tape recorder to hear their father's stories so "she can preserve his memories that way," said Taylor.

Most people who use the UCSC project's resources read the transcripts rather than listen to the recordings because they simply want to know more about this area's past, said Taylor.

Many of the early interviews, conducted by Elizabeth Calciano, founding director of the project, concentrated on the turn of the century.

Topics have included the logging, apple and lime industries; land use; Santa Cruz in the early 1900s; life on Mount Hamilton; the Great Depression; Aptos and the Mid-County area from the 1890s through World War II; Clark Kerr, former UC president; blacksmithing; Asian-American farmers; and the origin and early history of the Cowell Ranch.

In addition, UCSC students doing papers for their course work have contributed interviews to the growing oral history collection, said Jarrell.

"I'm providing primary sources," said Jarrell about the collection. "I want to be careful and thoughtful in the way I think about and produce an interview so the interview in 50 or 100 years will be of historic value."

Taken together with other pieces of history, "the oral history dimension really enhances," she said.

One goal, said Jarrell, is to complete the trilogy of main UCSC chancellors: She has McHenry on tape, and is working on Robert Sinsheimer, chancellor from 1977-87. The next one would be Robert Stevens, who will be leaving campus later this year.

Time and money are against her, said Jarrell.

The process of preparing for an interview, conducting it, returning the verbatim transcript to the person for corrections, obtaining the necessary releases, editing, adding footnotes and introduction and then publishing the interview is both time-consuming and costly.

Occasionally special grants are received, said Jarrell, that allows a broad topic — such as the changes in agriculture in the Pajaro Valley — to be tackled.

When completed, each volume in Special Collections can be used for scholarly work only, and can be quoted from only with the permission of the university librarian.