Transcript of Professor Rocky Rohwedder’s Interview of the Fairfield Osborn Preserve

(Note: for the cassette of the interview, the first 31 minutes are on side A, while the last 5-6 minutes are on side B.)

Daniel: So we have here Professor Rocky Rohwedder of the Environmental department, when [and where] were you born?

Rocky: I was born in Ventura, CA, that is [in] Southern California in 1953.

Daniel: When did you first visit the property that is now the Fairfield Osborn Preserve?

Rocky: In the early 1980s

Daniel: How were you introduced to it?

Rocky: By a man named Steve Norwick, a professor in Environmental Studies.

Daniel: What were your first impressions of that [the property]?

Rocky: Wow….. Great field resource as an environmental educator, so teaching people about the great outdoors was what I did. Here is the great outdoors close to campus, so it was a good field resource.

Daniel: As time went on did any of the buildings change at all?

Rocky: So lets fast forward, when I became the director of the Preserve, first faculty director, then I changed the building around a lot, or changed the whole focus, so do you want to jump to that?
Daniel: Yes.

Rocky: So what happened in the past is that the property there. When you first start coming along the edge of the property as you start to make a big hard turn to the left then go up to a steep area, there is a pull out area, a rock wall, and a little iron gate area on your right. As you go on down there, that’s where the residents’ quarters were and there is a barn down there. So the barn and residents quarters were probably where the people would come and interact within the preserve in no coordinated way really. And then farther up the road where a sort of parking area and that’s where the Roth family had the artist, kind of an artist’s studio, so her place to retreat there and do her artwork was where the current desk center is now. So when I came on, I knew [of these previous things] because we had liability issues, lack of control, lack of clarity about where the public would go when they arrived, we had all these issues and resolved those things and made it one point. So we closed that off to public access and made it not look that that is a place to pull out or that’s an option anymore and we moved everybody to the top of the hill. Then because of the residents’ quarters below was not code, not close to code, was not going to be close to code and we needed onsite presence. And then we got looking creatively at the slight cut there, so that classroom sort of based up [there] now that was sort of the main art studio. So then we built off of that to what sort of led up to the area of the office area and the resident area. And then we included in all of that we made that courtyard in the back that is a part of that classroom building] and turned [it] into a U-shaped building that included the public restrooms in there. So the other thing I did is I got water to the site, got the portable tape system put in, got the back-up battery system, drilled the well, [and] got all of that infrastructure in place. That was my first goal. Students when they came up [to the preserve] in the past they would go to a port-a-potty and then they would go out on to the trail. There would be no place even to wash their
hands. And then of course, they would be encouraged to share their work with all their friends on the trail you know, and [it was] not going well. An operating infrastructure was not set up to really accommodate that kind of public interface. That the preserve was… I don’t know. The potential [for how well the preserve could be managed] was not being utilized and there were a lot of problems that you saw so we tried to accomplish that and we realized that the cost of bringing in utility poles up there to run electricity was so high that we got creative. So that is why the whole pv thing is there, they were on the residents and guest center, but it became cost effective to do that as the alternative was very pricey and [too] powerful to do that.

**Daniel:** Alright, good, could you maybe tell me about the things like memories of fires or loggings, that you might have had to deal with at your time there?

**Rocky:** Fires or Loggings? Nope.

**Daniel:** No.

**Rocky:** Nuh-uh.

**Daniel:** Do you know of any floods?

**Rocky:** Nope. From the top of the Mountain? Nope, who came up with that question?

**Daniel:** Alright, how were you invited to go there?

**Rocky:** Okay so here is the background on that, so I was on sabbatical with the George Lucas Education Foundation on Skywalker Ranch. It was a very nice place to be and I was bitter to this day that I left that in order to get this preserve because one of my students by the name of Bill Wilconson was working for the nature conservancy at the time. He lived in that funky little staff quarters that I was telling you about down below and he informed me and showed me the letter
that the biology department was asked by the nature conservancy to take over their collaborative preserve and their response was that it was not of biological significance or interest to the faculty in the biology department and that they were too busy so thanks but no thanks. The preserve thought that the education program is not what the biology program does and public interface which was not the biology departments forte, so I am not judging the biology department but when I heard that there was a field station not 15 minutes away from campus and that we were going to turn that down, I started asking questions. So anyway, there were some people outside biology who were very interested including our [environmental] department and so I looked at the provos of the university and said do we really want to lose this. And he unfortunately was a biologist, he had come actually from the biology department at Sonoma State, and now he was the vice president of the university and he said hell no. And I said well maybe will you anoint me? I will go talk to the nature conservancy and to the Roth family and maybe you could get this thing after all so he said okay. So off I went to San Francisco and I talked to Bill and Joan Roth and talked to other people and got that (the preserve acquisition) approved so I came back to the provos and said that if this is going to run we have to have a staff condition guaranteed to coordinate all of the volunteers and to manage supervising the site itself. He said okay your chair of the hiring committee and you’re the faculty director of the Fairfield-Osborn Preserve and [I] said Ahhhhh!!! And I [also] said okay so I will do it for three years, and then that was it, I will help you get it going and then I am out of here. So that’s what I did. So for three years I was the preserve director, so I hired Julia Claudier who became the education director and site manager person, she was awesome. She is now the director of the Proprietor’s National Seashore, she moved on from her job there to fundraise. Then when I stepped down three years later as faculty director, the concept was to pass the directorship around campus from faculty [member] to
faculty member so I passed it down to Nathan Rank of the Biology department and Nathan held
on to it for a little longer than three years. Then it morphed from being in the provos office,
which was where I established the preserve, to being in the school of science and technology [at
Sonoma State] which now has the supervisorial responsibility for all of our preserves, therefore
Osborn, Galdric and others. There was a shift from the provos office to the school [of science
and technology] that ironically enough was the school that was originally invited to take the
preserve and denied it but then after we got [the preserve], I got it, and got it flourishing enough
on its feet they took it back and they are running it now, and running it well.

Daniel: Alright, what sort of responsibilities did you have as the faculty preserve director?

Rocky: Well, initially I had to work with the infrastructure because the infrastructure was in bad
shape, but then there was also staffing, that I had to hire and sort of manage/supervise the
education director. And dealing with the whole interface with faculties and campus police and
insurance folks, liability people, and interfacing with all the elements of campus because this was
a new part of campus. So I moved all the little business people up there [to the preserve] in their
freaky suits and walked them around the trails and say this is your campus as well. Just like
every place [on campus] as well, you are standing at Sonoma State University even though you
think you’re in the woods somewhere. That this preserve belongs to us, [us being Sonoma State
University], we own it, we are responsible for it, you know, try to build some ownership, that
was a big part of my job early on. Now Claudia Luke is the director of the overall preserves on
campus and Susan, Susan’s last name [I am] forgetting right now, but she’s the coordinator who
has specific responsibilities for Fairfield-Osborn so there is two people now that are supervising
and managing with a lot of volunteers still that go on up there. But my job originally was a little
different than Claudia’s job is now because at the time the immediate needs were establishing the
infrastructure and keeping the program in place, and building on old relations because it was a new ownership that Sonoma State took over from the Nature conservancy. So people were like well lets see how this is going to go [with] public relations and public interface. I enforced the nature conservancy’s policy, which was you cannot go on to the site [meaning the Fairfield-Osborn Preserve] unless you have a guide, your part of the education program or workshop. You have [to have] someone who is with you on the trail, you just can’t go on your own unless you are a preserve volunteer then you get anointed to do that but general public just can’t go on their own. When the nature conservancy added that policy [and] because of this thing nobody was around, they (the conservancy) didn’t [have anyone around to] really enforce [it], cars were parked here and there, there were people at the site all the time strolling there a few times, so most of the time, 99 percent of the time that was fine but that one out of a hundred is a problem. So we said nobody goes anywhere on the preserve unless you are accompanied by someone, a staff person, obviously staff or volunteer [person], they are trained in basic first aid and fire safety and know the safe species and not safe species to be messing with, stuff like that.

Daniel: Alright, could you describe some of the research or education activities that went on there [at the preserve] as you [were] faculty director?

Rocky: I didn’t do too much research there but education activities were like 3000 school kids a year that were coming from various elementary schools as part of a lottery. They would apply to come up there and if they were lucky and their number got picked, they got the privilege to pay 3 bucks a kid to come up to Fairfield-Osborn for a four hour guided tour that Sonoma State students primarily were leading. So that was the primary [education], we had workshops out on the weekends, we had experts on you know acorns, Native American history, nature photography or birding, or whatever it would [be]. So those would be our educational activities that happened
on the weekends. Then you know I’d say when, to his credit, when Nathan took over and other people subsequently had a lot more resources up there, Caroline Christian of our department, Paul Christian in biology, Nathan Rank in biology, they would be better people to talk to about what is happening research wise, has been happening research wise, or Susan who is up there now, who will tell you what is going on. But for the first few years I was [up at the preserve] he, [Nathan Rank], was like lets get functional toilets, and deal with the neighbors, and you know it was a little different time so my responsibilities were a bit unique because they were start up things.

Daniel: Can you maybe describe some of those experiences?

Rocky: The start ups?

Daniel: Yeah

Rocky: Well all the interfacing with all the construction people, had to get goods for the education center to be remodeled, getting that within budget, and then finding the money to build that and how much stuff from campus. The Roth family is very important because they donated all of that land originally, you know since it is their family name. Osborn was her, [Joan], father, Fairfield Osborn, so with the interface with the founders and the neighbors in the area, you know all those things were key at the time. And then trying to keep the education program going because it was a great contribution to the community, 3000 children a year were being, you know, experiencing nature…. That was awesome. The police department there [at Sonoma State] did not want the preserve because it was a pain in the ass for them, they would have to go up there every once in a while to drive all the way up the mountain, that’s a long way up there for service calls or for whatever they were sure of the area or anybody was going to be up there,
shooting off guns, growing dope, that stuff, so they did not want it and the risk management people on campus also did not like it but calmer heads prevailed and it has been going on for about 3 decades and we haven’t had any problems, knock on wood. Alright what else?

**Daniel:** What were your experiences like with the Roth family when you first met them?

**Rocky:** What was it like?

**Daniel:** Yeah

**Rocky:** Well, they are awesome. Have you met them before (*I shake my head, no*). They are super gentle, what can I say. Bill was on the University of California regents, he was a candidate for governor in the state of California, very bright, you know, wealthy families both of them. Joan was very charismatic, yeah. Gracious loving people. And you know, they took this land they so loved and gave it away and then the land that was adjacent to the Fairfield-Osborn preserve the original gift, they kept in their name that they gave us access to, so then we have another several hundred acres. And then they turned around and gave that to the university as well. So not only did they entrust us with the first big gift but they liked how we managed and ran the shop so then they gave us more land right next to it, so all that came to be a part of our management. So yeah, I remember the very first thing just very shortly sat down and explained what was happening with Julia Claudier, who we just hired, with Bill and Joan and I had an apple. And I was talking, and as I was talking I cut the apple into four pieces. And you know, cut the seeds out of it and laid it out in the middle of the table, and I remember Joan, think that that was just the coolest thing, you know. Interesting, huh, I am all worried about the policies, rules and regulations, liability, etc.. And she, [Joan], told me later that she really liked the fact that this guy cut that apple up and shared it with us. It was just a nice human thing or something that you
can do, spoken to her humanity or something like that, that is what she said. And that was more important to her than all of the financial policy concerns that she might have giving this land to the university, what are the people going to be like there that you’re going to work with, who is going to be carrying this torch for me. And somebody cuts their apple into four pieces and shares it as a kind [gesture] that made her feel good. Isn’t that interesting, alright what else?

Daniel: What were your favorite memories from the preserve?

Rocky: Okay, I have a couple. So one is this guy Joseph Cornel who wrote *Sharing with Children*, a colleague, very well known in the environmental education community and so I brought him here and he has given twice a workshop at the Fairfield-Osborn preserve. An all day or two day workshop, so having an old friend and colleague come and see him up on a hilltop with 30-40 students all listening and learning from him at the preserve, that would be a favorite memory. All the times that kids are in buses, or whatever, when they are leaving they are waving, yelling, and screaming bye, thanks, that kind of stuff really. Julia [Claudier] used to do these debriefings after the kids would go home at the end of the day, all of the docents would get together and they would just kind of go around in the circle and pass a deer antler or something and share their Kodak moment. And those were always great because then I got to hear from the university students, what they were experiencing, how this has impacted their lives, how this is related to the course material that I was teaching them in the classes, so that was a good memory. Joseph Cornel, seeing those kids faces pressed up against the bus window, and hearing those stories about how this place has transformed them as individuals, alright what else?

Daniel: What is your favorite place on the property?

Rocky: I am not telling you. *(chuckles)*
Daniel: Alright, why is that?

Rocky: Because I don’t want you to know that. (laughs)

Daniel: Alright, (laughs with Rocky). How did you go about convincing other committee members about the property?

Rocky: I don’t have any favorite place [on the preserve] but there is this that thing about this great place in the wilderness that nobody knows about that friends tell their friends about this great place in the wilderness and that the next time you go to that place you bring someone special. You go there with people and there is trash and you know, and there are no good vibes left from all these people that were there. You know, any place with moving water, I like, so I always like being near a creek and the killing pond. But there is this place called Frog Island, where you go in the certain times of the day where there are this incredible amount of frog noises and such that would want to make you plug your ears because the frogs are so loud. There is a great look out above killing pond, lots of panels where you can see so much of the valley and get a sense of where you really are geographically.

Daniel: Alright, what did you hope that the citizens and community members would learn or gain from the property?

Rocky: Citizens or community members?

Daniel: (Nodds.)

Rocky: Not so much students or SSU folks but the community?

Daniel: Actually a bit of both.
Rocky: Okay, yeah, well that there is still some nature nearby. Also the awe moments, spiritual moments, moments that make you feel humble, feel connected, spiritual, I don’t know what you want to call it, awe moments. To be in nature, you know, to be where it is truly quiet enough, still enough with culture around you, where it is quiet to slow down and then everything stops for a little bit. Or learned something about how this species is connected to that species, but mostly I would rather have them not that their head is impacted but that their hearts impacted, emotional connection to the place, that value in nature in the community and how important it is to have access to it. And a breath of fresh air, that figuratively speaking to go into nature and have that (heavy sigh to emphasize the awe moment). That is what I want people to get out of it. Science, facts, figures species, you know. Okay, how are we doing?

Daniel: Pretty good, just a little bit more…. So did the preserve itself influence your career in any way in where it is at now?

Rocky: No I don’t think so, I mean it supported what I am doing because I can send my students up there for internships and it enhances the course work to have an actual place where students can try out the things that I am helping them learn about with real students at a real place, but I don’t think that has changed [where I am at] more than it has in supporting [my students]. I don’t know if that is a change or not, it’s a dance step so I guess that is change.

Daniel: Alright, Did you know any earlier history of the preserve before you came on as the faculty director?

Rocky: Oh well, not a lot. But that Steve Norwick had taken me up there and walked me around so I knew it existed, I knew it was owned by the nature conservancy, I knew Lin and Larry, whose name may come up in this whole history thing. They were staffers at the nature
conservancy and was for time to time involved with the university because it involved students but also projects and programs. But it was very distant knowledge and I didn’t really, until I knew that it was being offered to the university but we were choosing not to take it on, that’s the point that I really got to know the preserve a lot more.

Daniel: How were you able to convince the other faculty here that we need this preserve?

Rocky: By helping them see why it is a value to them, that’s part of it. Talked to the English faculty about how they are supposed to go and have students can be inspired to write. Or there were some biology faculty that had some interest, there were new biology faculty that had interest, great potential [to get their support] since they just arrived on the scene. It is valued to the education community, to remind them that these 3000 kids go up there [to the preserve] so they can get them [students] to intern and teach young children, that’s an important service component of it. Just a matter of where the police were concerned I said well here is the plan, nobody is going to be there alone, there is going to be only one place to park where all the cars are going to go to one area, and there is going to be somebody living there all the time. And there is going to be a lot of gates, and there is going to be specific signage to address each person in where they are at, don’t deny their concerns and try to make them minimize them, but acknowledge them, and try to work with them to make them your allies as best you can. So one at a time, person by person, and finding out what their interests were in helping them realize what their benefit might be or if they had concerns. It wasn’t that hard, it just took time to hear each person’s story, to cultivate it. I incorporated a lot of supportive relations so I got them to write little letters, send little emails. I also had an advisory board, a campus wide advisory board, so all these people of different disciplines, staff, community members, faculty from different departments all went up to the advisory group and we met twice a year and if there was a
problem with the preserve and also to provide feedback about how to improve it. So that’s part of the way to build, bind, people together on campus.

Professor Rohwedder mentioned these people within the interview, Steve Norwick, Bill Wilconson, Julie Claudia, Caroline Christian, Paul Christian, Joseph Cornel,