

## *An SfAA Oral History Interview with J. Thomas May*

Choosing Career Tracks, Founding of the Current Society Management, Organizing Annual Meetings, and Fund-Raising

Tom May served the Society as treasurer, business manager and executive director before his death this past year. His leadership was important to the Society's current solid fiscal status, the development of student annual meeting travel grants and special lectures and the general increase in membership. Prepared as a medical sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh he served the University of Oklahoma Medical Center as faculty and Dean. This transcript is from the second interview Donald D. Stull did with Tom in September of 2017. The first transcript is previously published in the *SfAA Newsletter*. Editing was done by John van Willigen.

**MAY:** I was enrolled formally, in the Department of History [at the University of Pittsburg]. The chair of the department was a young person, very famous, becoming very famous, had a particular view about the interpretation of history. Half of the department was aligned with him; the other half had different views. They were all on the same floor in a building, half of them didn't talk to each other, and this was very obvious to graduate students. If you get Mr. Hayes on your committee, you're not going to be able to get so and so. It wasn't because Mr. Hayes went to Harvard and Swarthmore; it was because Mr. Hayes interpreted social history in a different way than so and so from the University of Pennsylvania. I'd take a seminar and then I'd go over to Public Health and I'd do my research work. [The group there] was Peter New, Medical Sociologist, David Landy, Medical Anthropologist, Bernie Mausner, Social Psychologist, he had just done some important work on, worker morale. These guys would all go down to the cafeteria in the College of Public Health Building and they'd have lunch together. And then for example, Peter comes back from a department meeting one day and we're coding, I think it was a hospital administrative study, and he said, "We're going to put that aside because we've got a new responsibility, and I said well--oh, and I guess chair of the department was Ray Elling, Medical Sociologist. So, he then sits us down and says the Ford Foundation Gray Area Studies that Herb Maccoby was doing here and over in psychology, is dropped in our lap, because Maccoby announced that he's resigning to take a position in the University of California. It was not like we can't do this, but it was it was a cooperative thing, and at the time of course, what we didn't realize was, all of the people who were key to the Ford Foundation, so-called Gray Area Studies, that started in the last '50s, early '60s, were the ones that [Robert Sargent] Shriver recruited, to start the Office of Economic Opportunity.

**STULL:** Oh, really?

**MAY:** Yeah. So, and what we're doing, once we got started, was going out and interviewing people in their homes, about measures of community cohesion around the logic that ethnic neighborhoods can survive if you support their ethnicities and their ethnic practices. So, it was just an extraordinary opportunity, but it was part of that closed system in Texas, and the more open system. And as you know, for a person growing up in the 1950s, with any sense of racial equality, the first thing you tried to do is lose your southern accent, and you worked at it. So anyway, there was that.

**STULL:** You didn't succeed though.

**MAY:** What?

**STULL:** You didn't succeed though, did you?

**MAY:** Well, I could do it any way I want, you know. So, there was that going on and then of course, there was within public health, a lot more of a mentoring sort of arrangement. I mean, I didn't know anything about anthropology, but David Landy was very friendly, and also, we had to go--his first wife was having mental problems, so we had to go down to Washington a couple times, to retrieve her from a demonstration. So, those two things are going on, which kind of gave me a sense of, the closed world, the open world, and I wanted to highlight that.

**STULL:** So is that one of the things that attracted you to a medical school, rather than an arts and science--

**MAY:** --yes--

**STULL:** --college, with the depart--with traditional departments?

**MAY:** Absolutely. And I think it was one of the things that was integral to our department, to our personal decision to live outside of the university community. We both were--Anita and I, my spouse, were both committed to the idea of giving our children the opportunity to grow up in an economically and racially mixed community, and a university community just seemed to be so bland. You raise your kids to be PhDs just like you and so on and so forth. So that was, I think critically, of not moving down there and not taking... I don't know if I could have competed

appropriately or successfully, for an academic position. I was all over the board, you know, so but anyway, yes, the answer.

**STULL:** And what drew you into administration? We didn't really talk about you were a dean for--

**MAY:** --yes--

**STULL:** --a good part of your earlier career.

**MAY:** I'm going to get into that later.

**STULL:** Okay.

**MAY:** But the other thing that I wanted to kind of correct, with regard to Peter New, is two points, I think. If you were to talk with any of the students that he was close with, I think you would find the same opinion I had. So my opinion is less unique and more, I guess you would say visible, because I've helped to set this board up. The second thing is none of us ever thought of him as perfect. We did not know of his background, but there were eccentricities which were not bothersome, but which we learned to live with. We never saw him as perfect. He--I can remember very distinctly, we were running the punch cards in the computer system, a counter/sorter machine, on our hospital administrator study, and I had done the keying and keyed them in field, by the cards.

**STULL:** I remember those well.

**MAY:** Yeah. And so, we weren't getting the kinds of summaries that we anticipated. So I looked through and we had about four stacks of Hollerith cards, and he said well, we have to go back and check them against the original data. So as we started going through and went back, we found that I had keyed wrong, and he found about five or six of them, and he just took the cards and started throwing them on the floor and throwing them against the wall, and stormed out. And you know just, that as an example of some of his curiosities.

**STULL:** Well.

**MAY:** He also had this extraordinary blind spot with regard to his spouse. He would not listen to anybody who said Mary needs to be medicated. It was something he

shut off. So I mention those examples as as examples of the fact that he was very much a human being. Now, one of the things that I do want to talk about, is the way in which I saw the best opportunity for PMA [Professional Management Associates], our consulting firm, to administer a contract with the society. I taught a seminar in organizational theory for years and years and years, I became convinced early on, that it would be very easy to have a highly structured bureaucratic organization, not unlike American Public Health Association, American Sociological, American Anthropological, where there are rules, and everybody has to follow the rules, and if the deadline for a receipt of papers is October 15th, you don't change that. If [Mary French] Polly Doughty dies four weeks before the annual meeting, the program is already set, you can't do anything with the program, it's printed, period. So, I thought to myself, we could best serve the society if we were able to figure out what parts of the organization absolutely have to be zipped up tight. What parts can you lose your IRS tax exempt status, what parts can put the auditors on your back, et cetera. And then, the other parts to the extent that it benefits the society in some way, ought to be as flexible as possible. So for example, I have been called in by the auditor only four times in twenty-seven years, and in each of those cases, it's about something he warned me about, which is officers, members, award winners, cheating on travel reimbursement. Only four times, that's an extraordinary thing.

**STULL:** Yeah.

**MAY:** So beginning in '92 or '93, all of our journals have gone out on time. We have never received a black mark from the auditors and that to me, was the important part of the bureaucratic thing. You know, we, for example, we had one president who was elected president, a very good person with experience in the university and out, and who looked at the budget and said I see here, there's an expenditure line for the president, which amounts to about \$2,500; you can write a check for that (amount) and send it to my office. (Don laughs.) Well, I said, Mister, or Madame President, I can't do that, and then the response was yes you will. So, what I had been advised, by our accountants and by the auditor was, let us take some heat for you, and that was the smartest thing I ever learned. So I just got a letter from the auditor, to that particular president, saying we don't do accounting that way, and it solves the thing, and that particular president was extremely cooperative. It was just, that was the first opening salvo. It's sort of like when you start a war, you shoot your big guns first or something. But, I didn't, going back to this notion of, an organization zipped up tight where it needed to be, going side-by-side with a more flexible one. I never effectively got that across. I'm convinced that that was the biggest flaw.

**STULL:** Got that across to who?

**MAY:** To the leadership. It has come across in a, what you would say, through examples, for example, in 2010, after the death of Michael Kearney, who had been an off and on member, I had some correspondence with his widow, Carol Nagengast, she was a friend going back to the Santa Fe meeting in '05, when she was very, very helpful. She, by the time, had retired out to Riverside, where Michael was, I said Michael was very interested in borders and trans-populations. The annual meeting of the society lacks that in a conscious way and I said is Michael's family, are you doing anything about this, and she said, "Well, we haven't had the chance to think about it." So I got Allan Burns on the phone, who was the president at the time, and I said it seems to me that the border issue is more and more something we need to bring into the conversation at the annual meeting, I mean we can't leave it to chance. This is, this is sort of like in our face from now on. So I got in the car and I drove to Riverside and Allan said I agree completely.

So I got in the car and I drove to Riverside and I sat down with Carol for two and a half days, and we worked out, a theme, a lecture, the idea of a lecture, a list of 150 donors, potential donors, and by the time I left, there had emerged, a distinguished lectureship. Not the kind that I would have preferred. This was a lecture to academics. So the Kearney thing really is for academics. Now, we can try to water it down a little bit and try to bring in the public, and I only was able to do that after Carol got the notion established that this was going to be real researchers, first class researchers. But Allan gave me the leeway to go out there and spend two days talking with her to say, in addition to the Hackenberg thing, we're going to implant, in our annual meeting, not something that the program chair chooses, but something that we see on the horizon as a vital theme that our members should be exposed to. And to me that was a perfect example of the flexibility, but the dilemma there was that oftentimes, some of the leadership could not get the two straight, could not understand there was a difference between the two.

A second example is Polly Doughty. This was the spouse of a longtime member, a very generous member, the sweetest lady in the world who always came to our meetings, we knew that she was ill, died four weeks before the meeting, the program is already printed, but we're able to arrange a special memorial for her and a special dinner for all of Paul's friends, et cetera, and pulled it off with a bunch of people.

**STULL:** Ye I was part of that, it was very nice, and it went very well, and people really appreciated it.

**MAY:** Yeah. Two weeks afterward, I get this letter from Paul that it was extremely touching, and it was, it gave me a very real sense of how effective, that kind of combined organization could be if you could make it clear to everybody, which as I said, I don't think I was able to do. But that was, I still think that that's one organizational thing that I hope they continue to foster. Whatever the case, okay. So, let's go on to some of your questions.

**STULL:** Okay, let's come back to the to the Peter New Award for a moment. That was working--that was your brainchild and it was implemented, and then subsequently, there have been awards like the Kearney Award, like the Hackenberg Lecture, and now, ten student prizes or awards, an international travel award, and there's the slew of, of awards of just named lectures and so forth, that are now in place in the society. There's a mechanism by which new ones can be created if, if the membership wants. Can you talk a bit about how your experience with the New Award influenced and led to this, to the development of these other initiatives?

**MAY:** Yes, and I'm glad that we're focusing on that. There were smart things that we did with the New Award, and then there were things that were not smart, that we later learned from. First of course, the smart thing is that we pulled together a group of people who were absolutely committed to doing it, his former students, and that became critical. The trust that I had developed over the years with the widow was also critical, and it was trying but it was critical. That got us started financially, so that in 1990, when we got the IRS approval for a separate trust, we had forty or fifty thousand dollars in the bank, whatever it was. The place where we were naïve and learned was the assumption that just because you, meaning myself, had a great deal of respect for this person and felt the loss keenly, and saw the competition and prize as something appropriate, others who knew him equally well did not have that same sense of responsibility, financial responsibility. So, I went wagging into the fundraising with the thought that, I could easily pull together some of Peter's old friends and hit them up for a donation. That never happened, unfortunately, but I did learn from that, and one of the things that I learned was the notion that of course there has to be an appropriate thing that you're doing, which can be used, such as anything with student on it. The second thing is that you really have got to think carefully, about how you raise money and who asks for the money. The first efforts to raise internal and external funds to finance some new venture, occurred quite accidentally, with the conversation with the [Edward H.] Spicer family, and there, as I mentioned yesterday, Penny Spicer explained that the triple-A, another association, had turned down their offer for a contribution, and what should she do. We then gladly accepted her money and with the help of Gil Kushner, a former student, and

Art Gallaher, a former student of Professor Spicer, they set about organizing a committee which tapped into former Spicer students and raised the money very quickly, which was, I think about ten or fifteen thousand dollars. Very important, I began to see, was the fact that it was Gallaher and Kushner, and former Spicer students, doing the asking, not staff. Also, it became very clear that, the notion of raising money to support something with student on it was an immediate sell. That became very clear and became almost the recipe that we used for successive ones. And so with the death of, I think it was Del Jones, you jumped in, Don Stull.

**STULL:** The Hackenbergs were the ones that originated it, and then they pulled in me and some other of his former students.

**MAY:** And it was also a perfect fit, because you look at our meetings and you say my goodness, they're all nice people, they're all liberals, and they're all white, and so what do we do? Well, we do what other people do, and that is to offer a bounty. You come to our meetings, our meetings are good for you, we'll pay your way, and we have to start when they're young. So, lo and behold, we used the same formula for raising funds for the Del Jones thing and it worked.

**STULL:** Yes, it did.

**MAY:** And then so, it's almost like organizational culture when a procedure succeeds, you don't even stop to question it, you just automatically do it. I think we probably have reached the point of saturation. There are now thirteen student awards.

**STULL:** Wow.

**MAY:** And, but the hard thing is to turn the machine, meaning the society, slightly, so it can refocus on other things. I hoped that we would be able to do that with the, Bert Peltó Award, which focused on an international visitor. We raised the money, but that's gotten caught up in some logistical issues, so that they want a lot of lead time to select the visitor and they're not able to bring in the program chair, who really is the person who knows what kind of requests come in for international travel.

**STULL:** I assume there was probably some politics involved too, in the sense that I know when I was program chair, there was a lot of pressure to bring Mexicans to the Santa Fe meeting. Mexican anthropologists and other social scientists were poor,

they can't afford to come, so the program committee should pay their way, or waive the registration fees, or something like that.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** And the Pelto Award is a response to a longstanding felt need on the part of the society, to bring more international participation and to recognize that it costs a lot of money to come from someplace far away, and those folks often don't have it.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** But it seems to me, and I'm just asking, that you know, I work with people in Brazil, so therefore, we should bring a Brazilian. Somebody else works with people in Timbuktu and so we should bring somebody from there. Is there that kind of pressure?

**MAY:** I would have hoped to have that kind of pressure, within the Pelto committee, and I would have hoped that if there were several of those, the best would win. What happened the first time they did it, of course, is a person who was resident of a Latin American country but who had been born and educated in the United States and had a checking account in a Seattle bank, was the person they selected, largely because there were not--there were insufficient, requests coming in, which sought to promote a particular person. What I would hope in the future, or what I always hoped was, with regard to how our office functioned, is money is never a problem, it never is. The right time to get the money is the problem. And so for example when the program chair starts to work on a meeting, let's say in 2000, and starts in the spring of 1999, that's the time to go searching for money, and our office was absolutely committed to find the money, within reason. I mean, if there was one thing that I felt skilled at, it was the ability to not be embarrassed in asking for money.

A little bit of background. When I started out doing the fundraising thing, I really took a serious look at it and said, I've got to be able to answer the question, "You're asking me for money, Tom May, what have you done?" I mean fundraisers don't necessarily say that. [David L.] Boren, the president of the University of Oklahoma, has got a fundraising staff that doesn't contribute to the University of Oklahoma necessarily, but I felt I had to be able to say well actually, here's a piece of paper that shows I committed \$100,000, not because I'm great, but because I can use it as a tax dodge, but I can answer your question. So, we always felt that, felt that if we had



enough lead time, we could find, within reason, support money. The problem, almost consistently, has been fundraising to support legitimate requests for international travel, or travel of speakers, doesn't really surface in the mind of the program chairs, until the program begins to come together in the early fall, at which time it's too late.

Raising money is not hard for, as I say, for a legitimate thing, and we have had some program chairs. So it's possible with lead time. Oh, we were fundraising, okay. So we went along with this formula of, raising money for student travel, almost in a willy-nilly sort of thing, going from success to success. I think what I began to see is that, people are basically very generous if you can show them that you're doing something which, moves their interests. So for example, each year, we've got a current member who knows that the Del Jones Student Travel Awards are fully funded, and each year sends us a check for \$500, and it's largely because of a longtime friendship, and I think it's largely because we take the time in the summer, to pull together information about who got the awards, and we send them out to the, regular donors. We have some people who do a similar thing for the Bea Medicine Award. So the Bea Medicine Award has been fully funded, but each year there is, there are additional contributions that come in. So over the period of time of establishing the Bea Medicine Award, the principal of which had to be \$18,000, the board added two or three, to give \$20,000, which would fully fund, in principal, two Student Travel Awards. Between the time we started and the spring of 2017, we received \$47,200 in contributions.

**STULL:** Wow.

**MAY:** So in effect, as we continue to show reliable stewardship, there continues to be this flow of money from these people. Bea's son signed over all of the royalties to her books to the society. Ted Garner. So, the thing that struck me about that was, people are willing to give money if you're doing something reliably, that they approve of. Okay, now, the thing that, I began to see with the Student Travel Awards, is there are things that other people would have liked to have done that we're not doing, and I think the first thing that came along was the Hackenberg Lecture. And there, it was a case of we do not need any additional Student Travel Awards, but this was a person who was very important to the society, very important to the discipline of the applied social sciences, and how can the society honor him in a way that meets the interest of his family and his students and colleagues, and so thus, the Hackenberg Lecture emerged.

**STULL:** And we're still trying to figure out how best to do it.

**MAY:** Yeah. (both laugh) Right.

**STULL:** Which gets back to that flexibility.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** Which we appreciate. And we've of course run into some of that rigidity on the part of the, the board. Some people on the board, sometimes, I guess is, but now that we've been around and keep changing our minds all the time, they seem to just recognize, that's part of the Hackenberg legacy, is changing our minds all the time.

**MAY:** Well, the other thing is, if there's no yardstick for what flexibility should be, except in the minds and the hands of the donors. That's the key thing. Those are the people who have to decide, and the responsibility of the leadership is to say is that choice consistent with what the society stands for. If somebody came to us and said we want to advertise used cars, well of course that's silly and you can't do it. If somebody came to us and said we would like to set up a permanent lecture, that would be against rednecks who voted for President Trump, well you know that's not something the society can reasonably do. You can go about it in a different way, whatever. So, it's something that has to be consistent with the wishes of the donors, and the values and mission of the society.

**STULL:** And the value and missions of the society is not always agreed upon.

**MAY:** Correct.

**STULL:** So, you and I remember well, the heated arguments between me and some of the other board members, over advertising for a job, working for one of the big tobacco companies.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** The social scientists. And we ultimately, as a corporate body, or as a board, decided not to. That was an inappropriate job for us to be advertising.

**MAY:** Right.

**STULL:** And the majority is--can be, can be, can be cruel to people that have a different opinion.

**MAY:** Young Peter Hessler has done a couple of articles for the *New Yorker*. He's a trustee on the Peter New Award, and he's done a couple of articles on the--for the *New Yorker*, on voters in rural, Colorado, where he lives, and why they voted for President Obama four years ago and voted for Mr. Trump in this election. There's one line in the most recent one, where he says, this lady explains to him that she carried her three year-old on her back when she did house to house canvassing for President Obama, in his second election, and she voted for Mr. Trump this time, and Peter's comment was, after looking at the paucity of funds for the public school system, the loss of support for welfare, the loss of jobs, et cetera, et cetera, in this rural community. He said who can stand in front of this woman who is telling you her life story and using that life story and those experiences to say who she voted for. And to him it, it's very clear, a society has failed that woman. Whatever the case, okay. The thing that, I began to see, with the Michael Kearney Lecture was--and it became riveting, is that when you are raising money and it is consistent with the interests of the donors, and more importantly, benefits the mission of the society, it's also important if those donors are not previous donors, because you're bringing in money from the "outside." So, the thing that was fascinating, as I stumbled into this really, with Michael Kearney, raising those funds, is I began to look at the names. And these were people who were, by and large involved in border issues, anthropology, Mexican, Mexican American issues, and they were not members. [One couple gave] consistently, \$1,000 every year, although it's fully funded. And [another member] was not a heavy contributor until she saw us doing this. Now, so now, the fascinating thing is we've got a lecture that's fully funded, bringing into the society, an issue that everyone agrees is important, transborder issues, and which is fully funded. We now have raised \$41,000; the board has kicked in another six or eight. The Kearney committee has decided they want to expand the publicity for that, so they've embarked on an effort to raise an additional \$10,000, and by that time, it will be appropriate to sit down with some of the key people and say what do you think about putting this as a legacy gift in to your will, or whatever. So but, but the critical thing is fully, half of the funds raised for the Kearney Lecture, came from individuals who were--would not have contributed to the society function heretofore.

**STULL:** And those people who weren't members, are they now regular members?

**MAY:** Yes, and they attend the meeting.

**STULL:** Great.

**STULL:** In the fall of 1985, at a special meeting in Denver, you volunteered to take over the society's finances.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** And then, you subsequently identified a team of associates, who emerged to become the staff of what emerged into the Professional Management Association. I'd like for you to talk about the evolution from treasurer of the society to the business manager, which you became in 1987. You resigned as treasurer, or I guess you resigned, you are no longer treasurer, and then that kind of evolved into the PMA, the business office and so on.

**MAY:** Yes, the easy answer, which is partly cute and funny, is that evolved in a, unreasonable and hectic fashion. I'll highlight a couple of examples to show you that. Initially, we, meaning myself, received the database from [William] Bergman [Associates], simply because we had outstanding invoices that exceeded our existing bank account, and something had to be done, and the board said can you do this, and I foolishly said yes. What I did, I realized that I could not charge the society as an officer, so we traded some tasks such as manipulating the database with a contract that I was working on, in pediatrics, with the section on adolescent medicine. A person there who was a so-called computer person, did some work for me and I paid him off with free consulting. There was a not very, interesting conclusion to that. I brought Neil Hann, in fairly early, because Neil, as a former student, was a person that I trusted, and he helped clean up the database, et cetera.

This person, who was the so-called computer person, called me one Sunday evening, about a year into our effort, and said, "I'll meet you at the McDonald's," in this little town thirty miles from Oklahoma City, and be prepared to take all of the records that I have. He, by the way, had, with our concurrence, had hired his wife to do some of the data entry and stuff like that. So, between the two of them and a little bit of a ragtag, we were pulling the database together, verifying it, trying to get things in order. I drove out there and he had all the boxes, all the files, turned them over to me and said, "we're done." I learned later that the young man had an alcohol problem and that this was one way--he called a couple years later and said, I've solved my problems and blah-blah-blah. But that was one event which suggested how erratic the early years were. I was able to rely, we were able to rely, largely on officers who

were very tolerant, and understanding, largely because we were not charging anything, or if we were charging anything it was very small, we being PMA. Joe Harding took over as treasurer, as PMA began to emerge, and the board and I sat down and said we need someone to come in and give us some advice. The board then selected, and I fully agreed with, Art Gallaher. And so Art came down and spent a couple of days. I'm not sure what year it was, but he gave us some obvious advice and then wrote a report to the board, which carried significant weight, and what he essentially said was, the board needs to draw up a contract and make it available to other potential contractors, but this has to be in writing and these have to be the particular things that should be put into it. That was a very crucial point in how PMA emerged, and I don't think it could have been done by someone who was staff, such as Neil or I, or someone who was junior status. Art carries a degree of heft with him, so that worked. From there, it was fairly clear, I think by the late 1990s, that we had a reasonably successful staff, and a couple of things happened. First, I began to see that there had to be a separation between--there had to be a change from so-called SfAA business manager, to SfAA executive director. I was just being questioned too many times when I was signing contracts, so that had to occur.

The second thing came out of the blue and for--and without any of my prompting, from a curious source, Tom Arcury. Tom was a member of the leadership. At one point in a board meeting--it wasn't a board meeting. I think it was he was down here with the president and he sat down, and he said look, you're paying PMA, X amount of dollars. Anyone else who--any other association receiving these services would pay X plus three. You're getting a bargain, they're not asking for more money, but anticipate this. Anticipate that they decide not to contract next year. Then you have to go out on the market and pay X plus three. And what does that do with your budget? Tom Arcury was very effective. And so the, the fee that we negotiated became much more realistic, and for--and this was a second thing, I think, a second example, of how the emergence was, to a more structured and formal organization, was somewhat erratic, but all coming from legitimate sources.

**STULL:** You know, last night I had supper with Neil Hann.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** And we were chatting, and he said that I should ask you about some of the early days of PMA, and some of the humorous events, and sort of some of the shoestring kinds of things that, that occurred as PMA was evolving in terms of an organization, but also in terms of, he mentioned for example, the York, England

Annual Meeting. He said that was particularly humorous, there were some particularly humorous events that occurred in that process.

**MAY:** There has to be somewhere, a tape recorder that that I can put on there, some of these humorous events and with the hope that we learn something from them. Now, before I would put them down, I'd try to salvage some element of something that we learned.

**STULL:** Some element of self-respect.

**MAY:** Right. So...

**STULL:** I don't want to embarrass you, I just...

**MAY:** No, I've got to tell them. The meeting in York, occurred in 1990, by 1990, we had the Peter New thing, we had a president who was Tom Greaves, who was very interested in having the international meeting, and so here we go. Now the question is, are we going to print the programs here and if we do, how will we get these programs to the United Kingdom, to the city of York. Are we going to print them over there? We had no one on the ground in York who was taking care of these things. We had a contract with the university, to use their facilities, their dormitories and classroom space, during the period of time when the students were on a spring break. So, this is all we had. So, I called the airline--we decided to print them here, without a great deal of forethought. By this time, by the way, I had gone down to the dean's office and was distracted by other things.

I called the airline ahead and said can we ship these things, and I had kind of an elite status or something, and they said sure. So, the morning of the flight, Neil and I go out to the airport with our suitcase. Neil's got his pickup truck. His pickup truck has about forty boxes of programs for a meeting in York and we're checking them in, and the people at the airlines desk initially thought we couldn't check this without an exorbitant fee, they finally got it okayed. We got them on the airplane and again, without a great deal of forethought, didn't realize how we would get them past customs in London, because we're landing in London, taking the boxes, and then we were going to transport by land, rent a car or truck, and go to York. Nobody stopped to think, how do we get them out of customs and if Neil did, I'm sure he didn't mention it to me, but we sat in customs for a couple of hours, certainly four hours or more, and the customs officials looking at each other and saying what are we going to do with these crazy people. We were tired, we'd flown all night, and we just kind

of stared at each other and didn't know what to do. Ultimately, they let us put them in the rental car, rental truck, and we got them up to York.

**STULL:** Well, [Neil] said it was a small van that I guess was tilting quite badly.

**MAY:** Yes. It was--some of the things that we did bordered on felony. And I suppose the critical thing, the very important thing, was the tolerance of the leadership. We were not taking money of a significant nature for a fee; the leadership really was very understanding of a lot of the stupidities that we slogged through. I mean just, what we did was just bizarre, I mean just... I can remember Saturday afternoon, sitting up in my wife's--the foundation office of my wife, while Neil and I keyed in membership updates and then listening with one ear, to the football game on the radio. That was our Saturday afternoon. So, and this is stupid. Here I am, a PhD at the university and I'm supposed to be full-time teaching and we're running an association, the two of us.

**STULL:** Well, and Neil is a full-time administrator in the Oklahoma Department of Public Health.

**MAY:** Absolutely. He had a very responsible position.

**STULL:** Working full-time, five days a week. Working at nights and on weekends for SfAA.

**MAY:** Now, now what I can do is as I go back later, over each of the years, and we look at the leadership and board at each year at the annual meeting, et cetera, et cetera, my hope is that I'll be able to make notes and get back on the recorder and say something like if you think that York was a goosey situation, you should have seen us in Oaxaca. The meeting in Oaxaca was 1987. The program chair was Dimitri Shimkin, a highly respected anthropologist at the University of Illinois. We arranged a contract, with a hotel, which was much to our advantage, through an individual with much experience in Mexico, Ted Downing, Ted presumed that, he would take the lead with the meeting, because he was the president, the sitting president at the time. Professor Shimkin assumed that he would take the lead because he was the program chair. We had a contract with the [Hotel] Mission de Los Angeles, and also with a high-rise, hotel, which was conically shaped, and I believe was called the Governor's Hotel, or whatever. With the second contract, we got the suite at the top, which was open air, two stories, and looked up and down the Oaxaca Valley. It's an extraordinary room and it's the place where nobility stayed, so to speak.

Over a period of six months, as we, arranged for the meeting, Professor Shimkin booked the floor on top of the Governor's Hotel in his name and the name of his new wife--he had taken a younger wife--and Ted Downing called and canceled the reservation and put his own name, of him and his wife, three times. So, and I was left to negotiate that. Also in Oaxaca, again, illustrating the kind of the seat of the pants, and also the tolerance of the leadership, favors were extended without a full understanding of the things that come with them. So, for example, we were, the first day of our meeting, included and addressed by the governor of the state of Oaxaca. We were all to be transported from the hotel, down to some public event space, and the governor would address us with a welcome ceremony. And this was very critical because of "the culture of the people." So I said well great, that's fine, let's do it. So then, the buses were arranged, but then the day before, someone said well, you have to buy gas for the buses, and I said well, go to the gas and send us a bill. No, no, no, it doesn't work that way. So then we had to go to the bank and arrange for a transfer of funds, or a line of credit or something, and then once that was settled, they said well, buses come with drivers, and so you have to pay the drivers. (Don laughs) And I said, send us a bill. So, this went on for three or four days and it was again, a learning experience on our part, and the tolerance of the leadership. We were never really what you would called screwed. All of this was, when you pulled back and were--looked at it in a reasonable way, were all legitimate expenses, but when they come at you in the afternoon and you're not prepared, and it has to be done before sunset, then it's a bit frightening.

**STULL:** Who got the, who got the top room in the hotel?

**MAY:** Shimkin. Now, the other thing about that meeting, which is also illustrative, is we, in those days, we were unable to make a transfer of funds. So, I would have preferred, and I can do now, to simply deposit funds taken in U.S. dollars in a bank, and then have them wire it up here, and vice-versa, to pay invoices as I needed them. That wasn't available in '87 and so I found myself checking out of the hotel the day after the meeting, with a briefcase that had \$22,000 in cash and checks, much of it cash, because people had brought U.S. dollars down. We flew, by regional carrier, into Mexico City, to get a transport from Mexico City to the U.S., to Dallas, and there were a lot of SfAA people on. There was about a three-and-a-half-hour break. Everybody else went shopping in the airport. I sat in a corner with two hands, holding on to the God-damned little briefcase that had about \$20,000 in cash, not knowing what I would do if someone just--if a policeman came up and said we'd like you to come in this other room. And, and I think I probably was constipated for a week after that incident, just was, but again, very much a learning situation and as I



look back on it, very much a reflection of the tolerance of the leadership. Dimitri Shimkin was just so honorable about that and Ted was, despite his sort of more irascible personality, never said do you remember that, you son of a bitch, how embarrassed I was, and da-da-da-da, and so forth. So it was--those were a couple of examples of things that we, were able to laughingly talk about later.

**STULL:** Of course when I was program chair in '89, I guess that was the last year that the president got the really snazzy suite, and so Erve Chambers had the top floor of... I can't remember the name of the hotel.

**MAY:** El Dorado.

**STULL:** El Dorado.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** And I was in some little cubbyhole, next door, at the Hilton.

**MAY:** Yes. Not, that was not the last one, but that was, close to the last one. I was thinking last night, that I really should mention Setha Low, who was at the time was the spouse of Erve Chambers. At the time, I saw Setha as one of the really crucial people in the kind of SfAA that might emerge in the future. Crucial because she had documentable credentials in anthropology, but a vital research interest in issues around design and urban living. I always thought this is the kind of person that society should welcome and, and hopefully keep in. Their personal relationship floundered later, and so she moved on to other things. But it was that mix of using anthropology and some other subdiscipline, which I found to be the kind of thing that SfAA should welcome and house.

Now, the interesting thing about who gets, the big suite. We began to realize, I suppose around, 2000, at that point, or maybe shortly after as well, that it was important to cultivate smaller groups within the society. I became convinced, by watching other associations, that there is a natural tendency towards, moving to your clan. The Navajo, and people who have reservations are not dumb, so people tend to say yes, I am an anthropologist, but I am an urban anthropologist, and I want to hang out with the urban people and I want to identify with, the bear clan or the medical anthropologists. Now, a certain amount of this, I felt should be encouraged and fostered, but there was always the threat of what you might call balkanization, the Balkans. That is that those smaller units will take on a life of their own, which may

emerge with a mission inconsistent with the overall organization. I was conscious of this and frightened by it early on. What I saw as an antidote is to encourage it within bounds. So for example, I thought why not have a, a social at the annual meeting for the medical people, if they would like to have a drink and an hors d'oeuvre together, why not do that with the Southwest people? I don't think what I moved towards was a resolution, but it was an effort to allow social interaction within different tribes or within different clans or within different subsets of SfAA. Now, as we began to do this of course, the hospitality room became the prized setting. You can go up there and you can get cheap liquor, cheap food, you don't have to buy hotel food, et cetera, et cetera. and when we tried doing it one year, with the president's residence, I got an earful from the spouse of the president, who said, I can't even go to the bathroom because, you know I've got this kind of anthropologist and that sort of sociologist coming in, and so on and so forth. So, we had to arrange a different kind of deal, where the president got a fairly luxurious thing, but not the hospitality room. The hospitality room became kind of the setting for a lot of the interchange within smaller groups, which I think is very vital to our meeting.

**STULL:** Yes, very, yes.

**MAY:** Largely because the board meets only twice a year.

**STULL:** And then of course your spouse complains that she can't go to the bathroom because there's this kind of anthropologist and that kind of sociologist there all the time.

**MAY:** And there, there were some really, humorous tales that took place. Rosie was in the bathroom one year, I forget what it was, my daughter, Rosie, and some guy barges in and she's sitting on the commode and he barges in and says, "Don't worry, I understand the six-packs are on ice in the bathtub," (Don laughs) and he just walks over and gets a couple six-packs of beer and goes out and doesn't disturb her at all. I see a young woman sitting on a commode, you know twice a day. It was there were-- as Neil rightly suggested, there were some curious things and ridiculous things. There's one thing that is, a story that came later, after we learned a lot, but nonetheless, has to be told somewhere. At the first meeting in Seattle, which was highly successful, in '97, [Jean] Jay Schensul was the [president] and we were at a hotel, the Renaissance Hotel, and Ed Liebow was the program chair. There was a special session convened at the last minute, because the United States Prosecutor's Office was bringing, to U.S. Courts, a Native American man who had killed an eagle in order to take eagle features and use them in a particular ceremony. There is this

question about the legality of U.S. prosecutors bringing to U.S. Court, a Native American who had killed an eagle to get the feathers. It's in the headlines, so Ed [Liebow] says let's do a special session and bring some of the principals in to discuss this, because it comes around tribal immunity and cultural issues. So it's arranged. As the preparations occur, it seems as though, in order to show the feathers, they have to be blessed in a particular way, with a little fire. And so, someone comes down to me, an intermediary, to the individual under prosecution, and said they want to start a fire and bless the feathers and I say you can't do that in the hotel. And they said well, we can't do it out on the sidewalk, because they'll make fun of the guy. So, I said I have a solution. The top floor, where, there is a restaurant, has an open-air space, and so what we'll do is send you up there, and you can go out in the open-air space, start the fire, do the blessing, come down and then have this special session dealing with tribal immunity.

So I get my daughter, Rosie, and I said take this guy, who is the intermediary, and take the tribal official, go up there, let them start a fire on this brazier, do the blessing, and and they'll come down. It was late in the afternoon. Rosie takes them up to the top floor, they get out, they set the brazier up, and then they start stripping, taking their clothes off, not completely but down to the waist, but when they got to the waist, Rosie said I'm out of here, and so she exits and comes down to tell me that she succeeded but she got out of there because they were stripping. At the same time, the Seattle TV stations were doing their usual helicopter to say which highways were clogged and which highways should be dodged, and lo and behold, there's smoke coming out of this thirty-five story Renaissance Hotel, at the very top. So, obviously, they come a little closer, they see some people going around a fire, they see smoke, they call the fire department. So within fifteen minutes, we're downstairs, waiting for the people to come down and have this session and the fire department charges in with all of their equipment and everything like that. That had to be an astounding example, another example of I guess kind of interesting things that took place.

**STULL:** Did they go all the way up to the roof, the firemen?

**MAY:** No. They didn't take our word for it and so, they checked the fire alarm system in the hotel and found it had not gone off on any level. They went up the stairs, checked that, and were out fairly quickly, but it was a little bit of an interesting thing, to see them charge into the ground floor.

**STULL:** I bet.

**MAY:** There's been other sorts of--there's going to be a dozen of these things that come up, but, but again, I think the critical thing was no one came from the board, ever came to us, PMA, and said the quality of your work relative to the fee that we pay does not match up, which I always found it was useful because we were charging less, but it was important to us, that we had that level of confidence as we stumbled and learned.

**STULL:** For a time you were, PMA was considering managing other professional societies' business affairs.

**MAY:** Yes.

**STULL:** But that you backed away from that relatively soon, I guess.

**MAY:** Yes. What, within, I suspect, about four or five years, we stabilized the society and a member, an active member of Environmental Design Research Association, Setha Low, approached us and said would you consider contracting with Environmental Design, and so we did. Our thinking was, we could charge a competitive rate, that we could learn from what mistakes we had made, and that that we could make it work. So we signed a contract with them and then within a year, we were approached by a group of linguists, and they also asked us to do it. So for a point in time, we had three contracts and were approached by another group, the Quarter Horse Association, of all things. We wisely--well, it was not that wise, because Environmental Design wisely decided that they were not getting what they wanted, and they backed out. The linguists were impossible. I don't know how you live with a person like that. And Neil and I just said you know, we've got to refocus, and this of course was at a time when, I was in the dean's office, and we wisely got out of the other business. But it was very hectic, and I don't think that we really, were efficient with all of them, but yes, we had kind of half dreams of becoming the William Bergman Association of Oklahoma City. That was sort of scary.

**STULL:** What, what did or does, being in Oklahoma City do? I mean, that's not the normal place where professional associations' offices are located.

**MAY:** Yes. I realized early on, that there would be advantages and disadvantages, once we stabilized SfAA. I thought that the disadvantages would be the collegial contact with other association administrators, so I felt that my contact with and exchange with, say for example the executive director of the American Anthropological Association would have been vital, and indeed it should have

been. I also thought that I could try to, erode that loss, by some kind of regular contact, and I thought for example, of going to Washington and spending a couple days every other month or something. Never really was able to work that into a schedule. Again, I was full-time at the medical school, and the others.

On the other hand, I was also struck by the advantages being that we were not bound by what the other associations were doing. We had a certain degree of freedom with regard to, some of the things that were automatically taken for granted among the associations. This was pertinent when it came to making public statements about political choices. It was also important, most important I came to realize, in terms of how our staff operated. For example, I had an appointment, when I was regularly going up to see, a couple of association executive directors. I went up on Sunday afternoon, had an appointment on Monday morning, with one executive director, supposedly at 9:00 a.m. Went over to that person's office, in time for the 9:00 a.m. appointment, sat there until 11:00 a.m.

**STULL:** Boy.

**MAY:** Because that executive director and his or her staff, had not communicated, and the executive director's assistant was out looking for another apartment. The receptionist didn't know anything about it, the executive director was doing something else, and everything was--all of their travel and commitments were beautifully written down on a chalkboard on the wall, and so everybody was bureaucratically where they wanted to be, except where they told me that I was supposed to be. And so I sat there for two hours and the receptionist kept saying, wouldn't you like to go to your hotel and come back when so and so is here, and I said no, no, no, no, I want to be here, I want to be here. Now, that I find to be emblematic of the way organizations are structured, particularly in the large cities, where getting the salary and living by the rules is more important than getting a high-quality job done.

Last year--I'll tell you another. I can tell you exactly what year it was. the meeting in 2003 was in Portland, Oregon. the program chair did not decide to put the program together on time, but when I called to remind, kept saying there's this wonderful software that's going to do all this for us. I called, I had to call, staff in, to work on Thanksgiving, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and they did it gladly. On Christmas Day, my daughter and I went to the office and did the final things on it. She groaned and moaned, but it got done. So there, I don't think I could have ever gotten that level of commitment were I in a work setting like say D.C., where people are more concerned with following the work rules than the quality of the work.

**STULL:** Yes.

**MAY:** So, I saw that as a distinct advantage, to the business of being removed from, Washington, D.C. I still think there may be a better arrangement, of keeping in contact but being able to stiff-arm the other associations if they insist on your, participation. Most recently, it came up with the, the question of Palestinian efforts to boycott the state of Israel. I have a personal opinion about that, which has nothing to do with what the society does. At the same time, I've always felt that if you put a sign on your door, whatever the sign is, it says who is welcome and who is not welcome, and if you put a sign up that says whether you believe it or not, that people who smoke tobacco are less than people who have political science degrees, then you're sending a signal. If you put a sign up and say we're not going to boycott anybody, but we believed the Israelis or the Palestinians have a right to do this and that, then you're telling one or the other, our notion that we started with, which is that this is a place for many people and this is a place where anybody can express an opinion, and everybody who does, is an adult. And we do a disservice to that mission if we say we prefer this one rather than that one. I still believe very firmly in that. And interestingly enough, all of the associations that have gone through this discussion regret it. Ed Liebow came out to Vancouver, specifically to have a lengthy chat with myself and one of the officers, and it was always around the headaches that surface from that. And it's as I say, the best thing that we could say about the society is it's a house for many people and everyone is welcome equally.

**STULL:** Well that leads me to another question. I mean it seems, I think, and I think a lot of people would agree, that the Society for Applied Anthropology is, to a large extent, here and successful because of your--what you have done, your leadership, your vision, in, in bringing us from-- through a very rocky time, and transforming us into a powerful professional organization that serves many people. We are now certainly on very, very solid footing fiscally and our membership has grown dramatically in your stewardship. So, you just said that you see SfAA as a house for many people. What you brought us to this important point, what is your vision about the future of the society?

**MAY:** That's a question that initially, I tried to think about as I--we went through this transition, and subsequently came to realize that my vision is less important than being able to pass a stable organization, onto the successor, executive director, and leadership, and I don't say that in kind of a superficial way. I think I would be bound, by some of my experiences, which might limit what others can do. There's things I

would like to see done, which I think are important, but I'm not absolutely convinced that those would be the best things for the new leadership. Some examples, perhaps. I'm pleased with the financial stability the society enjoys, but I find questionable, the reliance on the annual meeting as a source of, major source of funds, say for example, in the absence of membership dues or other opportunity. I think we haven't pushed that far enough. --I find, a little lacking, our ability to move outside of the university. I think it would be so much more effective if we had board members and program chairs and active members who came from community organizations, came from criminal justice, came from gender studies, that sort of thing. So I wonder about the heterogeneity, or the mixture. I think I also, find troublesome, our (PMA), our inability to renew young members at a higher level than we do. I keep thinking of course they're joining to get on the program. Now, if like alcohol or sex, what you're purveying is good and you believe it, then why can't you present that in amounts which will bring them back, but each year we lose a significant number of new members at the student and regular level, and we haven't had the staff really, to figure that out. That's a disappointment because ultimately, your organization financially and historically, is going to depend upon long-term members, the people that have been there for twenty years. And so that's something that's a bit of a disappointment.

I don't know what to provide as a benefit of membership which would have the same impact, say in 2018, that two journals had in 1980. I don't know whether it's some kind of life insurance, cheap, a driver's license, something of this nature. And so that's sort of a curious thing that new leadership has got to solve. But those are examples of things that I hope people will have the comfort of a bit of financial security in order to address them. I was trying to think of there was other things.

**STULL:** Well you've been very supportive, encouraging, I guess, pushing the society to be one where students feel welcome--

**MAY:** --yes--

**STULL:** --and have a place on the board of directors and other things. And I know that a lot of that, that student friendliness, for lack of a better term, comes as a result of your vision and your efforts.

**MAY:** Right. And yet at the same time, unfortunately, students renew at the lowest rate of any member group.

**STULL:** They're the most, they're in the most precarious of situations.

**MAY:** That's true.

**STULL:** Or at least they think they are, but they may not be as precarious as when they get out.

**MAY:** Yeah.

**STULL:** I mean, I have been--it's an interesting question. I don't know what the answer is. I push my students hard, to be active in the society, and then pursue, and then continue on. I've been disappointed that more of them have not become, like me, devoted to the society, or at least regular members of the society. Some are, but not as many as I would like.

**MAY:** I think if I were to will to successors, some thoughts about directions in the future, I might say something like, why can't we use the tools that we have, survey research, in-depth interviewing, things of this nature, to find out why so and so joined and stayed, and why his or her colleague joined and quit. I think with a little bit of financial comfort and slack, this would be something that the leadership and the staff would want to think about and say, you know why, why is this happening? Two ways that I've tried to tell my children, of looking at a problem like that and say the person who is causing the problem is dumb, or we can look at ourselves and say what is it that we did or did not do, which didn't necessarily turn that person off, but it eroded his or her enthusiasm. And to me that would be kind of a vital question. Maybe you can take that back to the leadership at some point and say now we have the staff, now we have everything online, we're financially secure, let's find out about these people. So, that is kind of something I would hope that future leaders can address. As I say, those are the people who are going to make the big contributions down the road and those are the people that are going to carry the history, who are going to be able to tell somebody ten years from now, you don't put a sign up and say Israelis not welcome here. You leave the signs off the door, that's our history. Anyway, so those are a couple of things.

**STULL:** Is there something else you want to talk about that we haven't covered?

**MAY:** Probably not today.



**STULL:** This is--hopefully we will have more, I mean I--we'll do this again if you're willing.

**MAY:** Yes. In fact, our plan is to go through the files, and year-by-year, and to reorganize the files along with the annual meeting and the board minutes, et cetera, so that when I'm out the door, the files are in order. And as we do that, I'll take notes, so I'll be able to say if you think the Oaxaca meeting was a riot...

**STULL:** Let me tell you.

**MAY:** Let me tell you. Well, the only thing that kept us on track and made me, for example, with the first Tampa meeting, and it made me think everything was in order, was that Gil Kushner took complete control of it. And that was, as I say, a sense of security that I never had up to that point and ditto with the Santa Fe meeting and so forth, but in-between, there was...

I have to tell you. The Toronto meeting, when Bergman was managing it and we had that sumptuous dinner with cigars and cognac, when I got ready to check out of the hotel and pay the bills, there were some guests of the program chair for that meeting, and so not only [their] room and tax, but the other charges to the room, were to be paid by the society. So, I got ready to check out of the hotel and was looking at the bill, et cetera, and here's a bill for this one particular speaker, and the guy had watched porn movies all night long and half of the next day, and seemed to have ordered from room service for about twelve hours straight. Now I don't know a person or a guest who could have consumed all that porn and food, unless he was having a party or something in there. But it was, the damndest thing I ever saw, it was.

**STULL:** And did you have to pay for the--

**MAY:** Of course. I had to ask them to, change the titles on the movies before I would pay for it, so that's the end of that. It was very funny. This has been really helpful for me, in allowing me to put together a lot of things that were disconnected, and so I'm very thankful for that.

The Oral History Project of the Society has resulted in an extensive collection at the Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries. The Nunn Center maintains an on-line data base of their holdings of which the SfAA Collection is part. Please submit suggestions of persons that you think should be interviewed to [johnvanwilligen@gmail.com](mailto:johnvanwilligen@gmail.com).

