

Gathering the forgotten voices: an oral history of the CFHT's early years

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Abstract. They came to the Big Island from as far away as Murrumbidgee, Australia, and as near by as Hilo, Hawaii. They were progeny of Scottish coal miners, French physicists, Chicago truck drivers, Japanese samurai and Big Island cane workers. Together, these men and women would build and commission one of the most dynamic and productive 3.6 meter telescopes in the world that remains in the forefront of science and technology. The CFHT oral history DVD preserves the stories of the first decade and a half of the observatory.

Keywords. Oral history, observatories, telescopes, Mauna Kea, Hawaii

1. Goal of the project

Saving the oral history of CFHT for posterity

2. Motivation

Liz Bryson, the Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope librarian, was inspired by Peter Hingley's 2002 paper at the Library and Information Services in Astronomy Conference. The value of preserving the oral history of the telescope was confirmed in January 2003 when the Mount Stromlo Observatory in Canberra, Australia was destroyed by fire. All of the recorded history of the observatory was also perished.

3. Scope

The original plan was to document CFHT's history from 1980-1989. As the interviews began, it became clear that the beginning of the telescope would provide the basis for the study. Thus, the decision was made to include 1972-1989; chronicling the first international collaboration, the construction of the telescope and dome, first light, and the early instrumentation.

4. Interviews

Selecting whom to interview for the project was difficult. The initial list was based on recommendations from past and present employees, including CFHT's directors. The final list was whittled to a total of thirty-five persons, including astronomers, administrators, technicians, researchers, engineers and Liz. The average interview spanned one to two hours. Prior to the interview, each subject was sent a list of biographical questions; however, the final interview was conducted with blind questions. On the basis of the biographical questionnaire, each interview began with personal anecdotes and reminiscences, essential for encouraging an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. In addition,

since Liz Bryson, the interviewer, has worked at CFHT for the past twenty-seven years, she was able to participate in the recreation of CFHT's unique history.

Much more footage was taken than was used in the DVD itself. The transcripts and full footage of each interview will be available on the web at: cfht.hawaii.edu/Reference/Library/Oral_History/oralhist.html.

5. Time scale

The video camera was purchased in 2002, and the DVD was completed in late 2006. At the peak of work on the DVD, the man hours involved came to at least two days a week for two years. While the interviews were time consuming, the most time was spent in converting tapes from VHS and 8mm to DVD.

6. Budget

The funding for the project came directly from the CFHT library budget. The startup costs included the purchase of a digital video camera and accompanying equipment. It was also necessary for Liz to travel to both Canada and France to conduct some of the interviews. Other expenses included professional transcribing of the interviews, color processing of old film and pictures and the actual production of the DVDs. Fortunately, all of the music and sound was done by a CFHT staff member at no additional cost. The largest expense was the professional editor hired to help complete the final version. The final expenditures totaled almost USD 20,000. This figure represents an expenditure of approximately USD 20,00 per 1,000 DVD units; however, the cost does not include staff time, most notably Liz's.

7. Conclusions

After the success of the initial project, talk has begun of creating a second DVD to chronicle the 1990s, an era of unprecedented scientific success. As with the first DVD, the project will enlist significant people with first-hand knowledge of special historical developments and experiences at CFHT from 1990 until 1999.

[...] *I would wonder what kind of present you could possibly have without knowing the stories of your past.*

Mendelssohn (2007)

References

Mendelssohn, D. 2007, *The Lost: a search for six of six million* (New York: HarperCollins)