

ASEH Founders – Oral Histories

Interview with Donald Worster by Lisa Mighetto

Boise, Idaho

March 13, 2008

Lisa Mighetto -- This is the interview with Donald Worster by Lisa Mighetto, Boise, Idaho, March 13th 2008. Well, good afternoon, and thank you for agreeing to do this. As we mentioned earlier, I think the first part of the interview will focus on your background and your career, and then we'll talk about the development of the ASEH and your involvement in ASEH. So, to begin: what attracted you to environmental history? How did you get interested in it?

Donald Worster -- I was sick of Puritan sermons and intellectual history of the kind that I was exposed to in graduate school days. Of course there was a lot of earlier personal biography in that response. Growing up on the Great Plains, I was always interested in land, climate, prairies, and mountains--my parents took us on vacation to the Rockies -- so that nature was very important to me growing up. Then I moved to the state of Maine in 1964, and taught there for a couple of years, discovering a fascinating new world of nature—the ocean, the northern forests.

Lisa Mighetto -- Where did you teach?

Donald Worster -- At the University of Maine, in Orono. It was an incredibly beautiful place for me, and so different from what I'd known growing up. Water oozing out of the landscape every spring. Floods. Mud everywhere. So, just going from the dry part of the country to the wet part really struck my imagination. While I was there I started reading New England writers, including Thoreau, Henry Beston, and Joseph Wood Krutch. I discovered a powerful environmental tradition of writing in New England that I began to read and was influenced by. That was just two years after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and she had written also about the Maine coast. I was also reading Aldo Leopold and all of the standard books of the 1960s that were behind the environmental movement -- the environmental renaissance.

The graduate courses I took at Yale University, from '66 to '71, had nothing to do with that literature of nature and environmentalism. My seminars were not talking about any of it. Puritanism was then a huge topic – deciphering the 'Mind of the Puritan World.' One of my very first graduate seminars was spent on the difference between Unitarian Boston and Congregationalist New Haven, Connecticut. And I wondered, "what have I gotten myself into? The planet is in crisis and we're talking about this kind of stuff."

Lisa Mighetto -- Did other students have similar responses?

Donald Worster -- Very few of them. Mostly, they seemed amused by my interest in environmental topics. I made some good friends there; Dan Rogers, who later became Chair of the History Department at Princeton, was one. He was always interested in the

outdoors and the natural world, although he did not write on the subject. Mark Lytle, who's now at Bard College, was sitting next to me one day at lunch, in the commons at Yale where we graduate students assembled for lunch, and he asked, "What is this environmental history? Is this history for the bears?" And I said, "You're damn right it's for the bears -- the bears and all the rest of us." Mark wrote to me two or three years ago; "you know," he confessed, "at that point I couldn't quite figure out what you were doing, but now I understand." He has recently published a fine book on Rachel Carson and is trying to put together diplomatic history and environmental history. So, I think my fellow Yale students were a little bit puzzled by my interest. It just didn't seem to belong in history.

Lisa Mighetto -- Where was your first teaching job? Was Maine your first?

Donald Worster -- Well, I did teach at Maine but that was in rhetoric and debate. I later taught as a GTA at Yale. But my first real job out of Yale, after I got my PhD, was at Brandeis University, in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Lisa Mighetto -- And when did you start teaching environmental history?

Donald Worster -- My first environmental history course was at Yale in fall 1970. I was still a graduate student, but in my last year there they gave me my own course to teach.

Lisa Mighetto -- And did you choose the topic?

Donald Worster -- I was able to choose the topic for that one.

Lisa Mighetto -- What was the response of the Department?

Donald Worster -- Well, this was in the American studies program. They were quite happy to let me do whatever I wanted. I teamed up with another graduate student -- John Kasson, now at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. John had been working on Lowell and technology in the early national period, and we put together a course. We called it American Environmental Studies, but we taught the subject as historians. There was a section on Lowell—the river, water power, sanitation, the mill girls, their nature writing and poetry, etcetera. But, the first thing we did in that class was my idea and it was a great success. We undertook a Saturday field trip to find the New Haven harbor. Now, if you haven't been in New Haven, an interstate highway cuts the town off from the harbor. There is a lot of shorefront industry and oil tank farms sitting out there these days. It's an industrialized landscape. And the city is, basically, cut off completely from the harbor and from Long Island Sound. In the old pictures of New Haven, however, Long Island Sound comes right up into the town and people built houses facing the water. There was trade up and down the east coast out of New Haven. But all that had disappeared, and it had become an industrial port, an oil depot. And so, we went looking for the saltwater. The students got all muddy and dirty and sweaty, but they loved it. They had not been away from the Yale campus.

Lisa Mighetto -- Approximately how many students did you have?

Donald Worster -- We had about 15. These were all seniors in American Studies.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did you continue to teach this class? You were a graduate student, right?

Donald Worster -- It was my last year in graduate studies. When I went to Brandeis I continued to teach a course in Environmental History. I taught one on from a global perspective and I taught one on North America.

Lisa Mighetto -- And students continued to respond well?

Donald Worster -- I wasn't hired at Brandeis to do that subject, but they quickly saw that the students liked it. I was hired more as a historian of science and technology. Most of the students at Brandeis had come from the same high schools on Long Island. They were very urban, but they were getting interested in the environmental movement. I gave them the option of doing some kind of project -- not just reading books about nature and the like but projects that took them out into the local environment. A couple of students, for example, went along the Charles River that fronted the campus and collected willow branches and wove baskets. Of course they also wrote essays about the river and the campus. They hadn't paid any attention to the natural setting of the campus, so my classes became a way of finding their way into their environment.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did you continue to do field trips, like you did at Yale?

Donald Worster -- Yes, we did some. We did one to nearby Walden Pond, to Concord, and to the islands in Boston Harbor.

Lisa Mighetto -- Would this have been in the late '60s, early '70s?

Donald Worster -- I started in '71 at Brandeis and was there for several years. After living elsewhere for almost a decade, I came back in the mid-'80s for about five years, before moving in 1989 to where I am now -- the University of Kansas.

Lisa Mighetto -- You weren't in Hawaii then?

Donald Worster -- I was in Hawaii from 1975 to 1984.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did you teach environmental history there, too?

Donald Worster -- Oh, yes, of course.

Lisa Mighetto -- And how was that received there?

Donald Worster -- It was received very well. Students in Hawaii always had trouble relating to topics on the mainland. They never understood what Puritanism was about. You can't with all the sunshine and trade winds and that non-Western cultural background.

Lisa Mighetto -- Different heritage . . .

Donald Worster -- Very different heritage. So I spent more time on the plantation experience-- water, forests, irrigation, and pesticides in the island setting. And then I developed a class that actually met on some of the other islands, on the plantation experience from an environmental point of view. We brought people in to talk about labor issues, the plantation work staff, and the ethnic relations there. But my own part was mainly on the preservation of the mountain forests, the planting of eucalyptus, the preservation of water supplies, the history of endangered species. Hawaii has had an extraordinary environmental history.

Lisa Mighetto -- And the department was supportive?

Donald Worster -- Very supportive.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did they know what it was, or were they supportive because they saw the students were responding well? I'm asking because interviewees have said, "well, no one knew what environmental history was" when they started out, and so . . .

Donald Worster -- I think in most cases people hired me and just let me do what I wanted. The American system of higher education is remarkably open, by world standards, to junior faculty who have a commitment, who feel something is important. The senior professors may ask, "What is this?" One of them kept calling my class the "eco-freaks" [laughter], or they talked about it as "your environmentalist class." And I kept saying, "it's not about environmentalism. We're not gathering to sign our name to some kind of petition on behalf of the Sierra Club". But, despite a few misconceptions, they were very open to the new field. And I was lucky, because I came into history just when it became extraordinarily open. I first entered as an American Studies interdisciplinary program, because history then seemed so narrow and closed. But, things changed around. American Studies became more closed, narrow, and uninterested in environmental topics. And historians suddenly began to branch out into new directions like social history. And environmental history rode along in the wake of this new openness.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did you have contact with other environmental historians during the . . . say, the early '70s?

Donald Worster -- Well, what other environmental historians were there in the early '70s? [Chuckles.] I first met Rod Nash, if memory serves, at an American Studies meeting in San Francisco in the early 1970s. I met Susan Flader and John Opie in San Antonio, in 1975. So those were among the first . . .

Lisa Mighetto -- At a meeting?

Donald Worster -- At an American studies conference in San Antonio. John Opie I had not met before, but he asked me to go explore the River Walk with him. We sat on a park bench, and he told me he had an idea for a new society to focus on environmental history and asked, was I interested? And I said, “you bet, I’d be very interested in joining.” Later during that conference we met with Flader and a few others—including, Larry Chisholm at SUNY Buffalo. I was not at the OAH meeting when a more formal organization of the group occurred. I couldn’t come to that.

Lisa Mighetto -- You attended the Irvine meeting, in 1982?

Donald Worster -- Yes, by then I was president of the ASEH.

Lisa Mighetto -- Do you want to talk about how you became president?

Donald Worster -- Sure. I won a Guggenheim Fellowship around 1980 and chose to spend a year in Berkley to do a book on water in the West. While living on the Mainland, I got a phone call from Kendall Bailes, who taught Russian history at UC Irvine, saying that he had just learned that there was an environmental history organization and wondering whether I could help him organize a conference on the subject. I had become president by then, after getting a phone call and invitation from two guys who wanted me to become president of the organization.

Lisa Mighetto -- And when was this? Do you remember?

Donald Worster -- Well, it would have been around 1979.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

Donald Worster -- I think my *Dust Bowl* book had just come out. The callers were Roderick French, who was a philosopher at George Washington University, and Harold Burstein, a historian at the US Geological Survey. They said, the American Society for Environmental History is in a crisis. John Opie had been president for a while. The journal, which was very slender, was not coming out on a regular basis. John had gone on sabbatical and left the journal in the hands of one of his colleagues at Duquesne University, who proved to be irresponsible. People were dropping their subscriptions, and we only had a few hundred members anyway. So French and Burstein asked, “Would you consent to be president?” And I asked, “don’t you have an election or something?” They said, “No, we don’t have the means to do a mail ballot, so would you be president?” And I said, “Sure.”

Then, after relocating to the Bay Area, I received that phone call from Ken Bailes saying, “I have been thinking about a conference, a global - or international - environmental history conference on my campus, and I hear there’s this organization, the American

Society for Environmental History.” And I said, “Yep, and I’m president of it. What do you want to know?” And he said, “I want to put together a conference but don’t know whom to invite.” So I drove down from Berkley, and we spent a full day planning his conference. We included scholars like Lynn White, Jr., Clarence Glacken, Sam Hayes, Rod Nash, Gerald Nash, etcetera.

Lisa Mighetto -- Was it easy to solicit participation and speakers?

Donald Worster -- Kendall did most of the actual solicitation. Later, the conference proceedings came out in print, edited by him. The meeting on the Irvine campus was very well attended. The opening session was packed. I know Rod Nash brought several grad students down to this meeting. I can’t remember everyone else who was there, but there were a lot of graduate students around. It may have been at that meeting that I met Steve Pyne, when he was a graduate student, and Bill deBuys [unclear]. They were both at the University of Texas. How or where they got interested, I don’t know. They were working with Bill Goetzmann, who was not an environmental historian.

Lisa Mighetto -- Did this surprise you, that there was this much interest?

Donald Worster -- Well, being it was California, I was surprised that there wasn’t even more interest! But that was a great meeting in Irvine, and during that meeting, Rod French, Hal Burstein, and several others of us, got together in a hotel room with John Opie and said, ‘we’ve got to find a new editor for the journal.’ Actually, before that time, I had already had a few conversations about the journal. I mean, my task was really to get the journal back on track.

Lisa Mighetto -- So that was the major responsibility of being president at that time?

Donald Worster -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

Donald Worster -- We didn’t have annual meetings then, and we had to get our journal coming out on a regular basis. The title of the journal, at that point, was Environmental Review, which didn’t say a lot. Being in Berkley, I thought, maybe the University of California Press would be interested in publishing it in a regular way. They were already publishing Agricultural History

Lisa Mighetto -- Right. Right.

Donald Worster -- So, I had a meeting with their journals editor, actually several meetings with him. But it became very clear that he was not interested in the field of environmental history. He was not interested in our journal as an academic enterprise. He was interested in creating what he called the “Harpers” of the environmental movement, loved the title Environmental Review, and wanted to take our journal and turn it into a more popular magazine. It would be published by the University Press, but

it would be a wide ranging magazine about the arts, the humanities, and environmental issues.

Lisa Mighetto -- And that's not what you had envisioned.

Donald Worster -- No. Perhaps it was closer to what John Opie had in mind. John always included artwork, woodcuts, etcetera. I think he thought about it as a very interdisciplinary journal.

Then I had conversations with the editor of *Agricultural History*. James Shideler [unclear] was the agricultural historian at UC Davis, just up the road, and was interested in environmental history. He proposed, at one point, that we put these two journals together. He thought that there wasn't enough of an audience for both. *Agricultural History* was just limping along, the number of people doing ag history was dropping. So his idea was we should just join these two together. I came very close to saying, "Yes, let's do it." But then Don Hughes stepped forward and offered to take our journal over, and to do it as *Environmental History*. We arranged for him to talk to us in a hotel room at the Irvine conference about what he would do. His university gave him time off and an editorial assistant, and Don really rescued the journal. From him, it went to Bill Robbins, then to Hal Rothman, and then to Adam Rome, my former student. Now it's quite secure. It's safe, I hope ... although you have to say that with your fingers crossed.

Lisa Mighetto -- Knock on wood.

Donald Worster -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, when you were president, were there other issues? It sounds like the journal was a central ...

Donald Worster -- The journal was all we had. We hadn't had any meetings on our own. Ken had organized and funded that first meeting. And it really was not ASEH sponsored. Ken died prematurely a couple of years after his conference. I had great hopes that he might become my successor as president, but such was not to be. Morgan Sherwood succeeded me--Morgan of UC Davis, Shideler's colleague.

Lisa Mighetto -- How did he become president? You mentioned that you didn't have elections ...

Donald Worster -- I don't think he was elected, either. There was a board, a kind of a steering committee, who did the nominating and electing.

Lisa Mighetto -- Was there a vice president when you were president?

Donald Worster -- No.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

Donald Worster -- No. I didn't even know how long I was going to be president. They didn't tell me what the term of office was, but I was in office for two years.

Lisa Mighetto -- And then Morgan?

Donald Worster -- Morgan was really a historian of science. After him, we got into the mode of doing elections. But, I don't know what year we had our first such election.

Lisa Mighetto -- You were actually head of the nominating committee, weren't you, at one point? When I came on board, I think you were.

Donald Worster -- I think that was the year that we persuaded Bill Cronon to take it on.

Lisa Mighetto -- And how did you convince him?

Donald Worster -- At some meeting, Bill had come up to me and said, "you know, this society is in real trouble because John Richards (then president) is not doing anything, and we can't communicate with him -- he doesn't answer phone calls; he doesn't answer letters. We should be holding an election now for the next president." And so finally, the steering committee, or whoever it was, bypassed John completely; they called me up and said, "Would you serve as a nominating committee?" I was basically a nominating committee of one, or at least I don't remember who else was on that committee. At that point, I was back teaching at Brandeis, and I drove down to New Haven, walked into Bill's office, and said "You know what kind of situation we're in, and I know you want to see this organization thrive. So how about you agreeing to become president?"

Lisa Mighetto -- When you say "thrive," was it now, not just in terms of the journal, but "thriving" in terms of other activities as well?

Donald Worster -- At that point, we were just holding onto our membership. Our numbers were still low. If you only had 300 members or thereabouts, and you lost 50 or 75

Lisa Mighetto -- That's a big proportion.

Donald Worster -- Yes, it was. Although the journal was doing okay, we all had the sense that this organization could be doing a lot more--not only holding bi-annual or annual meetings, but influencing government agencies to hire environmental historians. Fish & Wildlife needed an environmental historian. You know, Mark Madison owes his job to some of us. [General laughter.] Also, the Bureau of Reclamation and the EPA, we thought, ought to be hiring environmental historians. We ought to be getting more support there. We ought to have more of a voice in public policy. That was at least one of my concerns, that we try to have more of a voice -- bring historians together with people in public policy. And Bill seemed keen on doing that. I don't know whether he's ever said this, but I believe that he took some of the support money that the MacArthur

Foundation gave him and turned it over to ASEH, as a kind of savings account. We were very short on money. He could give his funds to any institution he wanted, and his explanation to me ... this is the sort of thing you need verified ... but, his explanation to me was that, "Yale hasn't done anything to help me on this MacArthur business, so I'm going to give the money to ASEH." I think he gave it anonymously-- in the neighborhood of 10 or 15 thousand dollars. That was a pretty substantial amount of money for us to get.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, yeah. Yeah.

Donald Worster -- It allowed us to do a few things to improve the journal.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay. Were there other things that you did with the money?

Donald Worster -- I don't know. I was only the nominating committee.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

Donald Worster -- And when Bill came into office, he met with Susan Flader and other people to begin building an endowment for the organization, improving funding, etcetera. You need to talk to Bill and Susan about that. Bill had great discipline, a sense of responsibility, a lot of motivation, and considerable skill in bringing people together.

Lisa Mighetto -- It strikes me, too, that in you and Bill, we had such excellent, visible scholars, too, as president.

Donald Worster -- Well, I don't know about excellent and visible, but, yeah, we were scholars. But I think you need above all else somebody who is conscientious. It seems kind of obvious, but if you've been around academics a little bit, you know that some are conscientious and some are not. Some people come to meetings and some don't.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, do you think some people are good at administration and some aren't? I mean

Donald Worster -- Sure.

Lisa Mighetto -- Some might have the best of intentions, but

Donald Worster -- Oh, yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- I mean, running a meeting is a different skill than--

Donald Worster -- I'm not sure I would make that excuse for all of the lapses in the past - that people had good intentions and just didn't have the skill. But a young organization like this one was ... it was so vulnerable. I mean, it was like a new-born lamb, trying to stand on shaky legs. And it didn't take much to bring it down. So, there had to be a few

people who stepped forward saying, “This little critter’s going to die if we don’t give it mouth to mouth resuscitation.” And now it looks like it’s healthy, growing, will never go away. That comes from the fact that it has had such good leadership over the last few years. And good editorial people... and people like you who have come in to help out and serve as officers.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, when you look at the organization now, at a meeting like this, that has 500 people ... does that make you feel proud, that, I mean, you were there and you stuck with it when it was struggling....

Donald Worster -- Well, I’m delighted to see the success. I don’t take any personal credit for it. I’m glad I was able to help out a bit at certain points. I have not given nearly as much to this organization as a lot of other people, to be honest. I’m not a particularly good administrator. I helped solve some of its problems, but to be an administrator – carrying out fundraising, going to meetings, all that, I’ve always disliked intensely. But, there are people who really could that ... Bill Cronon is one, Nancy Langston is one, and so is Susan Flader. Carolyn Merchant did a fantastic job, when she was president. These people were great institutional builders.

Lisa Mighetto -- How important do you think ASEH was to the intellectual development of the field? That if you think that environmental history would have evolved in the same way if ASEH hadn’t existed?

Donald Worster -- Absolutely not. We needed a society. That’s what John Opie wisely saw early on. Otherwise we would not have a field; we would be lost. And I think that’s been exactly the case with all of the other environmental history organizations that have formed. It took the Europeans longer to get their act together, but they finally found a leader in Verena Winiwarter, with her amazing dedication and talents. And the same thing is true with the Latin American group, and so on. Now we see environmental history groups appearing all over the world. There may be one forming in China, I understand.

Lisa Mighetto -- Do you think annual meetings are important? I’m asking this because I’ve just had a conversation out in the hall, right before I came in here, about whether we should have annual meetings or go back to bi-annual meetings.

Donald Worster -- At first my response was, bi-annual is enough. I had so many other meetings to go to. I was also concerned that there weren’t going to be enough papers every year. That’s how short sighted I was. I think the annual meetings are a great institution, even if you can’t come to them every year. And we’ve clearly had enough papers to make up an annual meeting. Having the annual meetings, instead of bi-annual, has allowed so much more room for graduate students to get involved in this organization. And that’s been one of the distinguishing characteristics of this organization, from the beginning: graduate students integrated with faculty members, meeting faculty in the hallways, in this very informal setting. I think it must be inspiring to them to realize that they can bring whatever they’re doing and get a place on the

program. People may scratch their heads and ask, is that environmental history?" But we're open and accepting.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, get feedback. Right.

Donald Worster -- Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- You encourage your students to come here as well.

Donald Worster -- I do, and we have a Jayhawk reunion every time we come to the meetings. There'll be about 20 people tomorrow night going out for dinner. It's our way of keeping in touch.

Lisa Mighetto -- Keep that community.

Donald Worster -- Yes, because sometimes-- not at my institution, but at a lot of institutions--there is only one person, one faculty member or one graduate student.... There may be a department of 50 people, but only one environmental historian, who can feel lonely and isolated. I am struck by how few environmental historians are teaching in some of these very large, so called, elite departments. There may be a token scholar here and there, somebody who does it on the side, or sees it as marginal to their other work. But too many of our institutions have not made it an important part of their hiring policies. So, if you are that one person in that department, you need meetings like this.

Lisa Mighetto -- To keep that community, that connection.

Donald Worster -- In my department we can carry on a monthly seminar in environmental history. We have some money; we can bring in visitors. We have had plenty of graduate students over the years, and now we have several faculty in the field. But very few places have that critical mass.

Lisa Mighetto -- Is there anything that you'd like to add? Well, thank you so much again, for your willingness to do this.

Donald Worster -- My pleasure.