

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
NOAA HERITAGE AND THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM OSBORN
FOR THE
NOAA 50th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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TRANSCRIPT BY
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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with Tim Osborn for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Today's date is Friday, December 11, 2020. The interview is a remote interview with Mr. Osborn in Lafayette, Louisiana. I'm in Scarborough, Maine. We'll start just at the beginning if you could say when and where you were born.

Tim Osborn: I was born in Tampa, Florida, at Tampa General Hospital. My brother was born two years later (just before Hurricane Donna hit the Tampa area). It has been striking to see how much the communities I grew up in have grown. As NOAA has become focused on, the movement to the coast by our Nation's populations has been a significant one for the economy and for the changing level of exposure to coastal storms and hurricanes.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit about your family history because I know your parents were not from Florida.

TO: No, my parents both were from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan- the upper peninsula of the state and on the Canadian border. This is an area that sees some pretty severe winters. My father grew up on a family farm, one of a number of families that settled into the area. His early years, he attended a one room school that the farm community had established in the area for their children. Later, he (as his older sister and two brothers) he went to high school in the city itself, before enlisting in the Marines during World War II. For my mother, her family settled into the area from Wisconsin. Her father was a teacher at the local high school and also sold real estate on the side. Being the oldest of 5 siblings, she was a leader from the very beginning.

MG: What's your father's heritage? Do you know what generation immigrated and from where?

TO: I believe he was likely 3rd generation, from Canada. His family was English and French. As described by my father, my grandfather had made a number of attempts to move to Canada to be a winter wheat farmer...all to be stymied by a series of severe winters. As a farm in northern Michigan, the family had to do a lot- from dairy, chickens to raising hay, even to growing maples (and making maple syrup each year) to make a living for themselves. As a child, I remember the visits to the farm and seeing how much work it took every day.

MG: Did your parents meet before your father's service, or was it after the war?

TO: My father and mother met on a ferry, on the way to the 'Soo,' shortly after he returned from WWII and the Pacific Theatre. He took advantage of the 'GI' bill to attend Michigan State University and get his degree. She was at Central Michigan and got her education degree. After they married, they moved to Zephyrhills, Florida to both be able to teach in the area. They later move to Brandon, on the outskirts of Tampa, to the home they lived in for the rest of their lives. In their career, she taught high school English for 44 years (as a student of hers, she gave me a 'B' in her class), and he went on to become a middle school principal in a career of over 38 years. It is an understatement to say that our friends of the family was a universe of teachers and principals that continues even in part today.

MG: I was curious if your father shared stories from his war experience with you. Was he open about talking about it?

TO: Some. He, like so many veterans of that time, really were reserved in sharing their experiences. Growing up on a farm, he joined the Marines, saw the latter part of the Pacific theater island campaigns, and then was in Nagasaki, Japan for several months as part of the occupation force. For my father, he would talk (some) about crossing the Pacific on troop ships, the harsh conditions on the islands, the encounters with kamikaze plane attacks and the landscape he saw first hand of a city devastated by an atomic bomb attack. I think, like many children of veterans of those times, it was the documentaries and written accounts of others that were more of a window to the experiences of our parents.

It was interesting, in working with NOAA, to see the work of the (then) NOAA Coast and Geodetic Survey during WWII. It was ships, like the Pathfinder (one of a number of ships that was surveying and producing charts for the naval forces as they advanced across the Pacific). These efforts preceded the advance of the ships that my father and his fellow servicemen were stationed on.



To Rear Admiral H. Armed Kuro, USN+GS - with best wishes and great appreciation of the assistance of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in making possible the above scene. C.W. Nimitz, Fleet Admiral, U.S. Navy.

MG: I also wanted to ask how your parents came to settle in this part of Florida. I know they were looking for work, but how did they find Zephyrhills?

TO: Growing up in Florida, there was (then and maybe now) a pattern in people moving to the State. If you were from the Midwest, like Michigan, you likely moved to the State's west coast (Tampa, St Pete, Sarasota). People from the Northeast, moving down to eastern coast of Florida

(West Palm, Coral, Fort Lauderdale). For many years, Michigan Day was an event in the Tampa area.

MG: The town you grew up in was Brandon?

TO: Yes, Brandon, Florida. It is striking to see how much this area has grown! From a town that saw our back yard adjacent to a farm field, to now home of several hundreds of thousand residents today...is something that you see across so much of the coast of our country. As my brother and I saw, being born and raised in Florida was only a small percentage of the population of Florida today.

MG: Were they teachers in the school districts that you attended? Would you go to school with your parents?

TO: Oh yes...a mother that was my English teacher. She gave me a 'B' in her class even though I got top marks...she felt I wasn't working hard enough. A father that, at the time, was an assistant principal at the middle school I attended. Every teacher, every principal knew my brother and I. We went to every football game, basketball game and every other sporting event...if our father or mother had to be there. I graded test and quiz papers (when I was younger) with my mother for her classes. Summers, I was put to work in my father's schools working on cleaning out lockers, stripping and waxing classroom floors, getting the school ready for the Fall.

MG: She couldn't take her English teacher hat off.

TO: She could never. Even shortly before her passing, after being officially retired for many years...she was a volunteer in her old high school 3-4 days a week. She was all 'English.' She loved helping put on plays at the high school. She tried (badly) to be a sports fan... coming out to watch my brother and I on the school tennis team. She had no concept of how to keep score or whether winning a point meant winning the match.

MG: You mentioned your mom was in a car accident. Your father was okay. When did this happen?

TO: About twelve years ago, my mother and father were on the road, from Tampa to Tallahassee...to see a Florida State football game. As she drove, the vehicle flipped and crashed. While she was killed, my father was rescued and relatively unharmed. I was able to get over to him pretty quickly, and bring him back to Brandon. As

[Editor's Note: Tape paused due to poor internet connection.]

TO: This last week of navigation meetings is just really almost too assertive because you're going through so many points and so much. It's so serious and everything. Anyway, my father lived a healthy, happy life, even though his memory failed eventually. He did exactly – my mother wanted to go out in a blink. She did that. He wanted to fall asleep and never wake up in his own bed, and that's exactly what happened a number of years afterward. Then, this Thanksgiving that just passed was the second anniversary of my brother and his wife together, over Thanksgiving holidays, passing away at the same time; she on Thanksgiving Day afternoon

and him Saturday morning, from long, long runs of illness. So the last few years have been very, very hectic, not only with hurricanes but in terms of family and dealing with family and trying to get things settled. So I'm the last of my generation of my immediate family; my father, brother, and mother all having passed away in the last several years,

MG: I am so sorry that you have experienced so much loss.

TO: Well, it's a lot of times – and I told my children, as well, because they got to know my parents really well, and my brother was just a terrific person. He didn't have children of his own. In a lot of ways, the biggest honor you can have is people that you have enjoyed being with, growing up with, and being a part of your family, ensuring that you're there for them at the very end. In a lot of ways, it's almost become something of a realization. It's not traumatic. It's not. It's not devastatingly sad. With my brother and his wife, for instance, with their illnesses and everything, the last few days were actually probably the most restful and stress-free. They were in hospice care; nurses and doctors were keeping them out of pain, out of anxiety. They're getting rest. They were finally just – in fact, actually, the night before Thanksgiving, we got their two beds together, and they actually spent an hour or so together before they had lapsed into comas. Those kinds of things, in a lot of ways, aren't so much [traumatic]. I look back at it as not so much a matter of trauma, but it's a part of life. I was glad to least be there with them. With my mother and father, I was really trying to be there as fast as possible. With my father, I continued to get him settled and give him a way of life that he was able to enjoy until he basically fell asleep one night in his own bed and just never woke up. So that was, for me, the most – not satisfying, but it was one of the most important ways to close the pages when people pass away. We weren't disenchanting. We weren't separated from each other. We didn't hate each other's guts. We all still knew, loved, worked, and talked to each other. My mother and I had a lot of fractious times, but butting heads didn't stand in the way of having time with family. In the last several years, those kinds of things and working for NOAA came around to the realization – it's funny, because in a lot of ways fortuitously, you come along with Cheryl [Oliver] and other things. Why do oral histories? I think also the other thing about NOAA is not just the individuals that have really paved the way in so many initiatives, but it's also now NOAA growing and expanding and becoming – even with the virtual work that you and I are doing, the whole thing, think about how we're bringing so much of our own family into our work at NOAA. I mean, with the dogs and Charley [interviewer's daughter], and everything like that. We got to get a nice historic chart for you to put on Charley's wall of the coast of Maine. You talk about a way of inspiring people as a family to be part of the NOAA community at large; we live and work at home in and around our family. I think it's really been very positive in a lot of ways to have people actually see what you do. When we moved here, my daughter, actually – I took her out to the ports and waterways and got her on boats. She actually told me at one time, "It's really neat to actually see what you do. You always hear about people saying what I do, but actually to be on the water, around a port with big ships and things like that. So now I get what you do because I actually see what you do." That's been very, very rewarding.

MG: Can you say what made your brother sick? He and his wife had different illnesses?

TO: Yes. He had ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis], Lou Gehrig's disease. Shortly after my father passed away, we noticed that he was having – it seemed like mental issues. It was

diagnosed as ALS. He lived for about four years, increasingly more and more incapacitated. I would then be spending a lot of time coming and visiting him. The only sensitive part of this interview was – not to dwell on it, but she had serious cirrhosis of the liver. She drank. She was a teacher. In many ways, we would have never thought she was anything close to being an alcoholic, and she probably wasn't, but she was very susceptible. She should not have been drinking, and she had liver failure from cirrhosis. So the two of them, just before Thanksgiving two years ago, went into the hospital for her because of the fact that her body was failing from liver and kidney failure at that point, and for him because with the winter months and Thanksgiving time, being essentially wheelchair-bound and not able to really move, he started having more respiratory issues, and he would come down with pneumonia periodically. So the both of them ended up in Brandon [Regional] Hospital on the same floor, not too far from each other. His conditions continue to degrade. He finally had to go on a respirator. Her condition continued to degrade. She went briefly into Tampa General to see if she could be a recipient for a liver transplant. But her condition was so bad that she couldn't even come close to actually being qualified. So she came back and actually passed away in the hospital two minutes before the ambulance team walked in to transport her to a hospice. I mean, I had literally been with her. She was in a coma. She was breathing heavily and not really conscious. I had walked out to the hall to talk to the ambulance team that was going to go ahead and bring her over to hospice, not too far away. We walked in, and she had passed away. We got my brother over to that hospice that night. I stayed with him through that night, Friday, and then on Saturday morning – it was a beautiful place, the weather just like this, had a beautiful, big patio that the door opened. So he had the breeze, and he could see the dawn, and he passed away Saturday morning at peace and asleep right there at the hospice. So the two of them were a good couple. They had no children. But they were also something of an anomaly because she didn't necessarily like his side of the family. So all this gregarious aunt and uncle and cousin network on our side of the family, she just didn't really get. She didn't like them that much. So they didn't necessarily socialize as much as if it had been somebody else. But they were loved. They were very respected. We had a memorial service for them in my father's Methodist Church in the chapel that I grew up going to church with him in. I even took organ lessons there. As I walked in, the minister, of course, was so kind to look at me and say, "Look, I'll get started in ten minutes. Do you mind standing up and doing the eulogy for your brother and his wife?" It was like, "Sure. Fifteen minutes? Yeah, that's fine." So there I am in the back with the old church memos and church news bulletins, writing a eulogy. We packed the place. There were teachers, wall to wall, apparently, over two-hundred of them that had shown up from my brother's school, from her school, old school teacher friends, old school principals. We had food in the back, and we had music. I was like, "Look, this is about as close as we get to a faculty meeting in high school after regular school lets out as you're going to ever again." So we had a great time. I spoke about all the times growing up, about the church being a part of what our lives were about, and I think every one of them went away with a really good feeling about what a great set of lives my brother and his wife had, and all the friends, and all the teachers that became a part of their family as well.

MG: Again, I'm so sorry for your losses. I appreciate your sharing it with me.

TO: The only thing I'd really tell you about with you, Charley, your parents, and everything is the fact that my brother was actually quite scared of this whole event. There are just people that don't handle the kind of end-of-life-type issues. He couldn't even actually go up to the hospital room when my father was in Gainesville to tell him that his wife had died when our mother had

died. He just couldn't bear it. My dad was getting agitated, and nurses are calling me, "He's demanding. Where's his wife? Where's his wife?" Literally, on the drive over to Gainesville at midnight, I found a minister from the hospital at home in bed, who actually was so kind to get up, get dressed, go to the hospital. He and the state trooper and my brother went up and actually told my father that his wife had passed away. My brother, in a lot of ways, was one of those kinds of people that are like so many that don't have that comfort about those things. All I'd like to tell you about with Charley and your parents is never be afraid. I mean, it's as natural as anything. Charley growing up, and Charley understanding that people get old, people pass away is part of our heritage, and we should never shy away from all the things that actually make for a fuller life. That really is, I think, one of the big key points about these kinds of experiences that maybe I go through now and you in a very, very long time in the future. How's that?

MG: Good. I also just wanted to ask about growing up a little bit more. Would you spend a lot of time in Tampa?

TO: Tampa was one of the big cities of Florida and really was fascinating to my brother and I. It had the port, was located along the Bay, had a diverse population from across the world. We had a really old convertible english vehicle that my mother found somewhere...and it would take us everywhere across the area. From beaches, to Cuban sandwiches, to visiting Lowy Park and the zoo, we piled into this small little car and headed out.

MG: Yes. It seems like there was a lot for kids to do with the zoo, the beaches.

TO: We were a family of school teachers...Finding all the free venues you can was big...beaches, libraries, public zoos, museums...all of it was an adventure.

MG: You put on your survey that you became a scuba diver, and I was curious when that was.

TO: A huge influence on me was the water. Finding an old swim mask opened up a whole world of water, fish, crabs, starfish. The thought of going deeper and staying longer made scuba diving the next step. In high school, I worked summers as a lifeguard. Finally, in college, I took a class (go liberal arts!) in diving and got my chance to dive offshore and in Florida's network of sinkholes. It was exceptional, to see an entire world that so many don't get to see first hand. As you had asked, my interest in going to college was in marine studies. Florida is wonderful in having the Gulf, Atlantic and Caribbean all part of its environment, and all so fascinating to see and study. For my parents, they may have seen their son pursuing a college career in being a beach bum. For me, it was a fascination in the water...with a hope of finding a job related to it.

MG: What did you hope to do with this degree?

TO: Originally, I wanted to work in a marine laboratory. I tried to apply and be accepted for graduate studies at the University of Florida and their lab near Daytona Beach. With a better showing on my graduate GRE's, I may have been accepted, and likely seen spending a long tenure in t-shirts and shorts and sandals working in marine biology and fisheries studies. As it turned out, I did not make the selection. I stayed at Florida State and finished an extra year in marine science, and also getting a second degree in science education, to the primary one in marine biology.

With the education degree, I moved back to the Tampa area and spent a year applying to graduate schools. I was a seventh grade science teacher in a Tampa public school and likely made my parents very happy I was following in their footsteps. For me, teaching was a learning experience that rivals any job I have had.

MG: I have a couple of follow-up questions. First, will you remind me of the years you were an undergrad?

TO: It was '81, '82, '83, and I think I finished up somewhere in '84 because I remember in that last graduate year, I was accepted as a Sea Grant fellow to come to Washington, DC. Then I remember, '84, '85, I was on the Hill in the Senate. I stayed there for four and a half years.

MG: What year did you graduate from Florida State University? Was that in '81?

TO: I finished at Florida State in the 1980/81 timeframe. I moved back to Tampa, taught for a year, spent the following summer as a lifeguard (again), and then moved over to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to graduate school at Louisiana State University.

MG: How did you meet your wife?

TO: It was at FSU. There was a chemistry lab that I met her as a lab partner. I think my making it through chemistry and physics was an open question.

MG: Am I missing anything about your time at Florida State? Any stories that stand out or something I forgot to ask about?

TO: Florida State, located in the state's capital, was very interesting and a great learning environment. Their marine biology program was a real center of excellence, as were their programs in computer sciences and meteorology. I started the same year as Coach Bobby Bowden became the new football head coach. The early year or two of his career were not too promising...I think a lot of fans came to the games more to listen to the famous FSU Band. But, pretty soon, the band, the football team all were pretty popular. Add to this the FSU Flying High Circus, great professors to work with, and the university was a really good experience overall.

MG: Can you say a little bit more about that teaching experience you had in between undergrad and graduate school? Was teaching not for you?

TO: Teaching for me was a great lesson in relating to a large group of people, and trying to get something accomplished every day. I appreciated the year I was a teacher and came to greatly admire the careers of my parents. But, it was a transition...still wanting to stay in marine and ocean studies. The chance to attend LSU in Baton Rouge was a very nice opportunity. It offered a dual program to get two master's degrees, one in marine studies and the other in public administration. It was also a Sea Grant college, and had funding and a connection to NOAA.

MG: How were you sort of focusing your research and figuring out what you would look at specifically?

TO: LSU had a very diverse set of programs in coastal marine studies, oceanography and in coastal zone programs. The graduate program and scholarships provided me the chance to work in the State's Department of Natural Resources Coastal Zone Management Program...another program with close ties and support to NOAA. On the marine science side, I got to look at the impacts to the coast of encroaching saltwater intrusion and the tidal changes to ecosystems from the loss of wetlands. On the public administration side, I learned economics, accounting, the operations of public institutions. Add to this the work at the DNR's Coastal Zone offices and the interactions with local coastal parishes and industry...and the overall experience a window on so much of the things that NOAA is faced with today...a coast and it's ecosystems that are changing, and a population and governments trying to adjust large growth along the coast, development and facing challenges of sea level rise and the likely growing frequency and severity of storms and tropical events. TO: NOAA Coast and Geodetic Survey started in 1807 with a charter from Thomas Jefferson as an entity to survey and map/chart our nation's coasts. As NOAA, officially formed in 1970, there was a combination of many agencies and bureaus into this new organization. I commend so much of the success of NOAA today, to the leaders and innovators that were part of the early years of the organization and so many members of NOAA today...that have thought out of the box to look at new ways forward in technology, community engagement, and expanding the science of our world. Friends like Ken Graham, now Director of the National Hurricane Center. Admirals Shep Smith, Sam DeBow, Rick Brennan, all making lifelong commitments to NOAA. Dr. Nancy Foster, an extraordinary leader and mentor and an inspiration to everyone that met and worked with her. Margaret Davidson, Craig McLean, John Oliver, Juliana Blackwell, Admiral Evelyn Fields, Dr. William Sweet, Commander Alan Bunn...just a small set of great individuals in a much larger group of dedicated people all helping create a NOAA that is important to this Nation more so than ever.

MG: I think it's important to capture all of that. These oral histories capture these stories and all of the connections across NOAA.

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