

GEORGE LAUFF

May 19, 2004

Jeff Charnley and Fred Honhart,
interviewers

Charnley: Today is Wednesday, May 19th, the year 2004. We're in East Lansing, Michigan, on the campus of Michigan State University at the MSU Archives and Historical Collections. I'm Professor Jeff Charnley, along with Dr. Fred Honhart, interviewing George Lauff for the MSU Oral History Project for the sesquicentennial. Michigan State will be 150 years old in 2005.

As you can see, Professor Lauff, we have a tape recorder for this oral history interview. Do you give us permission to tape?

Lauff: I do.

Charnley: Okay. I'd like to start first with some general questions about your personal background. Where were you born and raised?

Lauff: I was born in Milan, Michigan, and raised there through high school, and left Milan, never to return. [Laughs]

Charnley: And then where did you go to college?

Lauff: I had one year at Michigan State [University], and then I was drafted. After military service, I returned to complete my bachelor's and master's here.

Charnley: Was that during World War II?

Lauff: It was after World War II. I remember I was playing on the softball field here, and the activities in Germany, Europe, ended. Then I was in Camp Roberts when the activities in Japan ended.

Charnley: Did you serve overseas?

Lauff: Yes, I was in the Philippines.

Charnley: So in occupation and that sort of thing?

Lauff: Well, I was assigned a company of Philippine scouts. I guess I was eighteen, I had two hundred men under me. [Laughs] Quite an experience.

Charnley: Were you an officer?

Lauff: Yes. A 90-day wonder. I think it took 120 days, for me. [Laughs]

Charnley: Quite a few of the emeritus faculty that we've interviewed have been World War II vets, and I think that's certainly an important part of this story, showing how the university was shaped afterwards by those vets that came back.

Lauff: That's true, certainly true.

Charnley: What were some of the things from your service that you gained?

Lauff: Well, a lot of maturity. At that stage, I was probably the youngest person in the whole outfit at that time. At that time in the Philippines there was a rebel unit, much as there is today, trying to distort government. And they were after supplies, so ours was really a guard duty in terms of military storehouses.

Charnley: So there were guerilla operations that you were having to deal with?

Lauff: Yes.

Charnley: How long did you serve?

Lauff: Two years.

Charnley: Did you have the G.I. Bill available at that time?

Lauff: Yes. Don't remember using it specifically. I must have, but I don't remember that level of detail.

Charnley: Did you come back to Michigan State?

Lauff: Yes, I finished my bachelor's and master's here. Bachelor's in '49 and master's in '51. And then I went on to Cornell [University] for my doctoral work.

Charnley: What did you study?

Lauff: Limnology, which is the study of fresh water, and I minored in oceanography and invertebrate zoology.

Charnley: Was there any professor that got you particularly interested in that?

Lauff: Well, here, it was primarily Bob Ball, who at that time was in zoology, because that was before fisheries and wildlife faculty split off. And also Jerry Prescott in botany. I guess it was just botany then, not botany evolution.

Charnley: Did Cornell have a particularly good field in that area?

Lauff: Yes, Dave Chandler was there, and he worked under Paul Welsh, who was at U of M [University of Michigan]. I considered Cornell and Wisconsin [University], visited both sites, and I liked Chandler particularly. If you're going to work for a person for a couple of years, you know, it's an important decision.

Charnley: What was your dissertation on?

Lauff: Multiple-sample plankton trap. At that time there was concern in terms of aggregation of plankton and how to sample. I was a lot better in math at that time than I am now. [Laughs]

Charnley: Did you teach at Cornell?

Lauff: No. It was interesting, because Chandler was hired at University of Michigan, so I was well along in my degree program, but I couldn't effectively transfer, so I completed it at Cornell, then had an instructorship in zoology at U of M.

Charnley: How many years were you there?

Lauff: Through—when did I leave? 1960. So, seven years. I had tenure when I left as associate prof.

Charnley: How was it that you came to Michigan State?

Lauff: Oh, that kind of involves a story. I really became interested in research administration. That's something that evolved. And I was also interested in field station activities. Backtracking a little bit, I had a summer at University of Montana's Biological Station at Flathead Lake, and then a summer out at the University of Washington's Marine Lab on Friday Harbor. I spent four or five

summers up at Douglas Lake, University of Michigan's Biological Station, where we were working on the Great Lakes at the time.

So I felt that I could do a better job on some of these things than other administrators that I had seen. Gene Odum, who is considered the father of ecology, was at the University of Georgia at the time. They had recently lost the director of the University of Georgia Marine Institute at Sapelo Island, and I was interested in looking at it or helping out if I could on a leave basis.

I took a two years' leave from the Department of Zoology, spent the spring down at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and then visited Sapelo and liked the potential that I saw. So I went down with an understanding on the basis of two years. I liked what I was doing and decided that I wanted to stay, and so I resigned from U of M and I spent, actually, four years down there and was shifted because at the time I was not particularly pleased with what the University of Georgia was doing.

The operation was supported by RJ Reynolds, Reynolds Tobacco, on a grant. We had kind of a grand plan to make it a consortium, Reynolds and I. He went over to Switzerland and built a home there with his fourth wife. He was not in good health. So we had these plans, that when the tobacco cancer scare hit, and I was spending a fair amount of his money on facility development down there, and he felt that he couldn't continue with the commitment.

I had been approached about the position at Michigan State at that time and tossed my hat into the ring, and finally went through the process at that time, and I was offered the position.

Charnley: Was this at Kellogg Biological Station?

Lauff: Yes.

Charnley: So you came from Georgia back to campus.

Lauff: Yes.

Charnley: So you had a quite a length of time where maybe you weren't associated with Michigan State. What were the big changes that you saw from when the time you were a student here to when you came back?

Lauff: Growth, particularly across the river. When I started, practically everything across the river has evolved since that time.

Honhart: How did you find the administrative style in dealing with the university here?

Lauff: Oh, very pleasant, actually. Of course, it was almost like coming back home in some regard, working with the department, and I felt the central administration was very open. I guess you have to be aware of what happened during that period of time. The College of Natural Sciences was formed after a spinoff from the Arts and Sciences. Dick Byrum [phonetic] was the new dean.

Also during that period of time, Dean Cowden of the ag school—I guess it was just ag then.

Charnley: Right.

Lauff: And was not particularly happy with some of the units they had down there, particularly the sanctuary and the farm. It's an age-old problem, and it's common to the university to have revolving accounts. They were struggling, and it was, in part, leadership, I guess, and maybe underfunding of the sort. But when Kellogg established those units back in the late twenties, there was a modest endowment that I guess was probably fine when it was established, but given, what, forty years, it was insufficient. From the university point of view, it was probably out of sight, out of mind, and I don't believe they could realistically assign appropriated monies down there.

Of course, the major change was that in '52, when Mr. Kellogg died, the Kellogg estate was transferred to then the College of Natural Science. Well, no. Hang on. It was a unit under the old college.

Charnley: Probably Arts and Sciences.

Lauff: Remember some of the names. Herman King. It's interesting, I had kind of an open door because I took entomology from Herman.

Honhart: He was my first boss.

Lauff: I enjoyed working with him.

Honhart: He was great.

Lauff: Anyhow, so that put that in that unit, and it evolved, of course, when Natural Sciences shifted over there. It was clear that Cowden wanted to bail out of those two units, but he wanted to keep the forest, because the forest probably operated the same way, but they had a better income stream from managing the forest. So we had then what's termed the Kellogg Gull Lake Biological Station, which is the old Kellogg estate. We had the farm and the sanctuary, and the forest wanted to remain aligned with forestry since Walt Lemmien [phonetic] ran a pretty good shop. It remained that way, although we always considered it as a cooperating unit, So there's a working relationship there all through the years.

Charnley: Who was president when you took over there? Was it [John A.] Hannah?

Lauff: Hannah. There was a fairly ambitious land-acquisition program that I guess maybe I can get to a little later. He obviously had a good liaison with the Kellogg Foundation. I sometimes wonder if that development wasn't a consideration of an MSU West.

Honhart: Exactly.

Lauff: See, it was before the community college. Let's see. We had MSU East. They didn't call it that.

Honhart: Oakland.

Lauff: But I think they were the same pattern, and it was undercut by the community college as well. That's just my guess.

Honhart: I think your guess is correct.

Lauff: You probably have a better source of information than I do.

Honhart: It would be certainly in keeping with the way John Hannah operated.

Lauff: Yes. Okay, where are we?

Honhart: Just going on about what you were doing. How did you find it when you got there, and what sort of changes did you implement when you took over?

Lauff: Well, they were fairly substantial, because at the time the unit was known as the Kellogg Station. Actually, it was a experiment station in that complex. To identify all those units, the forest and farm and the biological station, I developed the concept of having an overriding Kellogg Bio Station with these functional units. That was proposed, and the name change took place at that time.

And then there was probably—I don't know this, but recognizing how things work, I have a suspicion that the new dean had an allocation of positions and it was a good period of time then. I came in with wanting to build a year-round program, which meant having at least a modicum of faculty positions, and I guess we ended up with three at the onset. So then it was a matter of

recruiting the best people I could, because it's a little different down there than here on campus because oftentimes the major responsibilities are a teaching responsibility. Down there it was research and graduate training, so you really had to have topnotch people in order to be able to achieve grant support, because while the university budget would provide salary support and some amount of supplies and services, I mean it couldn't support any significant research programs.

So we were fortunate in that regard in getting three people, and through contacts at U of M and elsewhere I had a pretty good line on who was doing what in the field. So because of my own expertise in limnology, we focused on that area. From the onset we had looked at the joint appointments as a way of enhancing the campus liaison, and that proved to be generally good. Their teaching responsibility was primarily during the summer at that stage, although that's evolved more recently, and I think everyone has some teaching responsibilities on campus now during the academic year.

Honhart: Which makes for better interaction between campus and the station.

Lauff: Well, and it gives you a better sense of how the faculty person is received, and for the most part, we didn't have any difficulty. I mean, we were fortunate in getting a good faculty base. And the environment's open to additional positions after, I guess, a proving period.

Honhart: That's good.

Lauff: So it's evolved as one of the major stations in the U.S., if not the world.

Charnley: What were some of those early research projects that you were successful at, do you remember?

Lauff: Well, the one that I think is most related to the community is Don McNaught [phonetic], who was interested in zooplankton. He got his degree, undergrad at Michigan, and that's where I was acquainted with him at Douglas Lake. We worked on the Great Lakes together, and he completed his doctorate in Madison and then joined the faculty. He worked on Gull Lake, and it was clear from our initial studies that there was a major problem. There was some oxygen depletion in the bottom waters such that the cold-water fish population, which would have been whitefish and trout, couldn't survive there anymore, because in order to maintain they require cold water, but they also require oxygen, and the oxygen was depleted.

Anyhow, we worked on that for a period of time and then established a linkage with the local community, really an outreach function, since we didn't have an extension unit there at that time. Got into cooperation with—I can't think of the name. S____, who helped with the analysis, and we did some lawn fertilization studies. Everyone was grossly overfertilizing their lawns and irrigating the water running ragged. So our activities were instrumental in drumming up community initiative and then pursuing both state and federal funding for a sewer system around the lake. The lake continues to be holding its own pretty much in terms of level of productivity.

Honhart: What was the reason for the low oxygen levels?

Lauff: Yes. You have a very abundant growth of algae up in the light zone. When they die, they go on down, they decay. It's as simple as that.

Charnley: That uses up the oxygen. Nothing for the fish. Did you work with DNR [Department of Natural Resources] at that time or Department of Conservation?

Lauff: We had some contact. Primarily they were conducting fish surveys on the lake because there were obvious changes in fish population ongoing at the time, too. It's a fairly complicated story because they were catering to the interests of people who bought fishing licenses. They stocked some smelt there, and people liked that. But that impacted the lake ecosystem, the fish population dynamics quite involved in competition for limited food sources, zooplankton. You get into the food-chain relationships in something like that, but fisheries management is, I think, as we know from the work on the Great Lakes, more of an art, perhaps, than a science.

Honhart: What did you find the most difficult aspect as an administrator?

Lauff: Budget. We had more poor budget years. That was always a period of strife, I think, in terms of personnel, having to let good people go. And the other was, you know, sometimes you get some bad apples. We were fortunate at not having that situation with the faculty, but other employees, that's always stressful.

Honhart: What sort of working relationships did you have with the various provosts and presidents during your tenure?

Lauff: Jack Kinsinger was particularly open, I thought. I didn't have a lot of time working with Lou Anne Simons, but both those people had a good understanding of the station, Lee Winder as well, perhaps not as understanding of the operation. Lou Anne, for some reason, did; she grasped it. Of course, we had a pretty good track record by the time she had oversight over it, and I think she was appreciative of some of the confidence in the station in that period.

Honhart: Did you have contact with any of the presidents at all?

Lauff: Cliff [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]. John Hannah because early on the board met there, and then the board would visit KBS. In fact, John Hannah used to have his budget meeting down there, about the time I came.

Honhart: Get away from East Lansing.

Lauff: Yes. Right. Phones.

Honhart: Yes. Exactly.

Charnley: Did they meet in the manor house?

Lauff: Yes, I think so. As I remember, yes. That was before we had our upgraded facilities.

Charnley: Were you involved in that, in the upgrades?

Lauff: Oh, yes, yes. 1980 we had a major grant, a major facilities grant, about \$10 million from the Kellogg Foundation.

That provided the support for the new academic building and the dormitory complex and some initial renovation of McCrary Auditorium, the cafeteria and conference center and the new dairy facility, which probably was a mistake. Well, it is difficult, because at that time, John Spiker was involved, but the dairy felt there was an inadequate number of animals available for their research faculty. And parallel, within a couple years there, they got a new dairy facility here on campus, and there was a new dairy facility in the UP, so while we were anxious and looking forward to having a meaningful interaction with the campus group, in fact, I had a chair, a Meadows Chair, who was supposedly to work closely with us, and that never evolved. We had the first Hannah Chair that was designated, and that has only begun to work. I mean, people come in and they were to be campus-based in most instances, but once they got on campus—

Charnley: You couldn't get them off, eh?

Lauff: Yes.

Honhart: Who, of all the colleagues that you've worked with at Michigan State, would you say were the most memorable from your experience?

Lauff: I guess I have to look at Dick Byrum, because although he was administrative oversight of the station, he really had sensitivity to it. I think it's one of the things he saw the potential that it had

for the units and the co-staffing, so he was, I think, very supportive of that. And I think I got a sympathetic ear during budget crunches, more so—I could never manage my supplies and service budget. Always ran a deficit.

Honhart: That's a good thing to have if you've got a problem like that.

Lauff: Well, we kept him well pretty well informed, advised. The associate and assistant deans were always sympathetic, generally, as well.

Honhart: What would you say are the biggest changes that have taken place in the position from when you came to what it is when you left?

Lauff: Well, I think I see an enhancement of faculty expertise. The younger faculty had a higher expectation of their getting research grants and graduate training programs. I noticed it in zoology. I was co-staffed in zoology and fisheries and wildlife. I think zoology tended to [unclear] first, so to speak. Then, perhaps, fisheries and wildlife. I may be a little biased because I could never get the support from fisheries and wildlife that I was expecting, and you would think with that faculty base, that faculty orientation, you know, they would be swarming all over the sanctuary and some of the areas down there, but they weren't. There may be an early history that predates me in terms of that relationship; I'm not sure.

Charnley: How often did you come to campus, the main campus?

Lauff: Well, there seemed to be always various meetings in terms of at the college level, and co-staffs in two departments, there were departmental meetings. There was a lot happening administratively.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Charnley: When the tape ended, you were talking about coming to campus and the administrative.

Lauff: Well, it was in the late sixties and early seventies that this rather ambitious land-acquisition program went on. So here we were with an expanded land base and affiliation with the College of Natural Science. While I had some farming experience in my background, it was clear that if we were going to use that total resource, we had to have a closer alignment with the College of Ag and Natural Resources.

I think it was in '76 or '77, there was a group I put together, including representatives from the two colleges, departmental chairs mostly. They laid out the situation that existed, and they came forward with some specific recommendations that Jack Kinsinger implemented in '77. I've got some of the records here. That set up an associate-dean-level position, and Jake Hooper [phonetic] was in that spot. There were some budgetary allocations for that, and my title changed. I've forgotten what it was. It was no longer just director; it was director of program development or something like that. I don't know if that record's in your files or not.

Honhart: May not be.

Lauff: I found a number of things that probably weren't. Anyhow, so that changed things. There was an influx of people, particularly using the land resources there from the various departments, particularly crop and soil sciences, you know, because the need for land base. I think the land availability up here was for some of their activities. I'm not sure how they establish priorities within the department, but a number of people were working down there, fortunately.

Charnley: What was the relationship in the community, around Gull Lake and Hickory Corners? How did they view this? You mentioned this sort of aggressive land-acquisition program. Was there opposition? Support?

Lauff: I guess I never really discerned that. This heralded what—it's continued to happen during the last few decades, because a farmer doesn't necessarily put so many dollars away for retirement. Some do; some don't. If they pay off the farm, that's their retirement nest egg, and if the youngsters aren't willing to assume the responsibility, and a lot of them don't, so it goes on the market. That was the situation with some of these. I never heard anything negative about it. The university runs a pretty good show, and more recently I think they're delighted to have the open space rather than things cropping up all over the place. There's selling off road frontages. That was the other way they would gain some livelihood from their land resource. They'd sell off a lot here and there, whenever they needed some money.

Charnley: Did you live in the area?

Lauff: Yes. I think that was important. I didn't have as much contact with the community that I might have, had I had a family and been involved with the school system and like that. But I did have a very good rapport with people in the Lake Community. That can be looked at as both a plus and a minus. A lot of people around the lake were fairly affluent. But beyond the lake, they considered that, the residential group there, to be a little, elitist, may be the word. I mean, you have the P____ and the S____ and some of those, you know, Upjohn up there, and a number of other wealthy people.

But we did, I think, really lack an outreach or extension program, and that's one of things that I was able to implement in the eighties with the Kellogg Foundation grant. That was primarily a facilities grant, but it was also a program development grant, and we established with the grant money initially and some Crawford Extension money a small core group that has continued down there since, and has had a substantial impact in the community in the awareness of the resources of the station as it applies to public education.

I think we've expanded K [kindergarten]-through-12 visitation and programs at the sanctuary and also at the bio station directly working with the research faculty. So that's all growth. I've forgotten when it was—might have been something Lou Anne Simons administrative decree, in terms of all faculty having an extension role, not just an appointment with Crawford Extension, but there's a service contribution expected for an academic appointment.

Charnley: Importance of outreach.

Lauff: Yes.

Charnley: What's your impression of the facility today?

Lauff: Oh, it's topnotch. I never thought it would evolve the way it has, and it's been very good. When I had overall responsibility, it was for the whole ball of wax—the farm and the sanctuary, physical plant and grounds maintenance. Hard budget times. I can remember a couple of summers we didn't cut the grass.

Charnley: Bring on the sheep.

Lauff: Well, it was political pressure, in part. It was after I left, and Pat Weber [phonetic], who succeeded me, left after three years, I think primarily because he came from the University of Colorado and wasn't used to a dual administration by two colleges or understanding of the College of Ag and Natural Resources. After his departure, the physical plant and grounds maintenance was transferred over to Jerry Harr's [phonetic] outfit.

Honhart: Land management.

Lauff: Land management. And that was a boon, a great help, because that removed that operation from an academic bias, which I must admit I had, because I much preferred to support the research and graduate training program at the station. You can let maintenance slip a bit, but it's certainly much improved, and Jerry Harr, rightly so, had very great awareness of the impact of the physical setting, the physical appearance in community relations.

Charnley: Did you have contact with Dr. [Russell] Mawby?

Lauff: Oh yes. He's a neighbor.

Charnley: And he strongly supported the station.

Lauff: Yes, yes. Well, I think he would have liked to—he supported the station, thought the university should also support the station, perhaps to a higher degree than it did. I think through some of the negotiations on grant activities, that probably happened.

Charnley: When did you ultimately retire?

Lauff: I think the paychecks stopped at ninety-one.

Charnley: That's retirement.

Lauff: Actually, anyways, I don't feel that I've retired. I still have a mailbox over there, and my journals go to the library. There's been very limited change in faculty since I left. Three hires, I guess, and I was still involved in one of them because I think he came on as a postdoc—that's Phil Robertson—and I was involved in the interview selection process on the other two, so I've continued to have involvement.

Charnley: Did you have any staff members, longtime staff members, that you want to make sure that get recognized that you worked with?

Lauff: Well, Oswald Bandoozen [phonetic] at the bird sanctuary. I don't know in detail—I know Miles Pirnie. I just ran onto some old records, a sheet that—pretty much the second appointment. Kellogg was out in California, and not in good health, but the procedures for establishing the sanctuary were under way then. And I think that Tack Minor [phonetic], whose waterfowl activities in Ontario were the basis of Kellogg's interest, hired the first individual. Then Pirnie was hired, because Pirnie was a waterfowl specialist. I don't know what the person there, in his late twenties, what his background was.

I don't know the motivation for Pirnie coming up to campus. It could have been family needs in terms of schooling and the like, because it was still a rural environment back there when he assumed responsibility, which was back in the thirties.

Then Van came on. I've forgotten the date. I wasn't involved in that hire. Van's getting up in age.

Charnley: Van Doogan [phonetic]?

Lauff: Yes. We call him Van. He's well respected in the community, in his field of waterfowl management.

Bill Gunn [phonetic] was in field research, but that was a Kellogg grant activity, a Kellogg Company grant. They were using cereal byproducts, and they had both the dog food and a mink

food. They had a mink farm there and a dog kennel which was used for nutritional research, I think with competition from—I'm having lots of senior moments. Excuse me.

Honhart: They happen to everybody. I think you just get more aware of them the older you get.

Lauff: It's an animal food place down in St. Louis, I guess. Anyhow, they got out of the dog food business, and they continued in the mink food business, but as a protein source, they were buying scrap fish out of the Great Lakes. That was before they were aware of pesticide contamination in the fish flesh. Of course, the mink were losing their hair, aborting their young, and all those sorts of things. I think they got out of that because of concern with lawsuits. But when I came, that was the dominant operation at the station, the contract research with the Kellogg Company.

Charnley: In looking back at your career at Michigan State in particular, is there anything you see as maybe most important?

Lauff: Well, in terms of maintaining a vital program there, it's active and open liaison, and I think the station has to go more than half way to make that realized. I think it's important in terms of younger faculty coming aboard here in an appropriate department of essentially recruiting them to use the facilities down there.

Charnley: Michigan State's had this issue of, you mentioned, the east campus and the potential west campus, and now with the moving of the medical school potentially to Grand Rapids, to west

Michigan, that's obviously administratively something that you had to deal with, sometimes struggle with.

Lauff: Oh yes.

Charnley: But do you see that as a role of MSU as having these satellite academic institutions? Has that been an important part of—

Lauff: Oh, I think it is. I think we laid the background there with the development of an extension unit and the beginning of an outreach. I was involved in—what did we call it? We recruited topnotch. It was a special program. We got Kellogg Foundation monies for it, for a summer program where we would bring in bright seniors from—I guess it was at the end of their junior year, maybe, and we developed a two-week residential program for them.

We hired teaching assistants, usually graduate students who were in residence at KBS doing their degree work or research. Then they'd interact. In the programs that evolved, they'd interact with the research faculty as well. It really was an introduction to field natural history with research overtones.

Charnley: I'd like to thank you on behalf of the project, and appreciate the time and especially your insights.

Lauff: Fine. Thank you.

Honhart: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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