

Oral History: Maxine Singer, date? (sometime in early 2015)

CAF: Alright Donald, why don't you start

DPS: Well, when did you meet Caryl, Caryl Haskins and how did this meeting come about?

MS: I think, but I'm not really sure, that the first time I met him might have been at a Yale Corporation meeting, and it was probably 1975, if I have to guess, because that's when I went on the corporation. And he had already been a member. So I'm pretty sure I met him at that meeting.

DPS: OK. I'll go on. We have a record of his activities as President of the Carnegie Institution. What would you regard as the facets of his leadership that were most revealing about him?

MS: Well, I think the most revealing thing about him was the fact that he convinced the trustees to close down the Department of Genetics. So: Could you remind me what years he was president?

DPS: '56 to '71, I believe.

MS: Right. So I think the...In my judgment anyway. Maybe other people would feel differently. But in my judgment, that was the single, most important thing he did.

CAF: Why is that?

DPS: What led him to do that?

MS: So this is a good, an interesting question about which we have only fragmentary knowledge. The long time director of the department, whose name was Demerec, retired. And Demerec was a classical geneticist, which is something that Caryl understood. And the people who were coming up, and even some of the people who there, were beginning to study genetics as a molecular science, tied to biochemistry in various ways, which was certainly the new world and the world of science that proved to be incredibly productive. And I don't think Caryl was sympathetic with it. And, from what I heard, and I don't know this for a fact, when people began to talk about recruiting James Watson to be the new director of the lab, Caryl was very troubled by that...Certainly because of Jim Watson's field, but also because of Jim Watson's personality, which was the exact opposite of Caryl's.

DPS: His personality tended to rub some people the wrong way, didn't it?

MS: Yes, but, of course, everyone's personality, including Caryl's rubbed some people the wrong way. But the important thing was that it rubbed *Caryl* the wrong way.

DPS: Right.

MS: And Caryl, I think, misjudged what Watson might do for the department. And so he closed the department down.

CAF: So you think that was a mistake.

MS: It was a huge mistake.

CAF: A huge mistake.

DPS: Because of where....

MS: It was an absolutely huge mistake, because it failed to see where things were going. And it failed to understand that some people are very difficult but are

nevertheless both productive and smart. It was a problem of personalities and approaches, which, in my judgment, should not have been governing.

DPS: Right. So I imagine you rectified this when you became President.

MS: No, I didn't. because the department had been closed...

DPS: I see.

MS: And what happened was...That department shared all kinds of things, administrative, financial, property with something called the Long Island Biological Association. And the Biological Association took over, appointed Watson as director, and Watson made a huge success of it. And it remains a hugely productive department with excellent leadership. So I think...yeah, I mean, it's the only thing I know about Caryl that I think was a mistake. And I think it *was* a mistake.

DPS: Well, he has been described as a visionary. Do you find this an apt characterization in any way?

MS: Well, not in terms of the story I just told you.

DPS: Well, that would suggest, yeah, the opposite. But in other respects?

MS: Yeah. Well, I can't say, because, by the time I met Caryl on the Corporation, there would have been no place for him to demonstrate that. It's not that he wasn't, but that I just wouldn't have seen it. Yeah.

DPS: What do you see as his achievements, major achievements at Carnegie, his impacts?

MS: Well, I think...The other side of the story about closing the Department of Genetics is that there were financial challenges, because...which have remained, of course, because the price of doing front-line research has increased dramatically. So in a sense, he did a good thing by closing *a* department, because it reduced the call on the endowment. Whether the right department was closed, whether that was the right approach, is a different question. But he certainly saw the institution through a very difficult financial period, and it came out in very good shape.

DPS: Well, that reminds me of a further question that we had. He did oppose taking funds from federal sources for the Carnegie.

MS: Yeah. SO that was a Carnegie policy for a long time. And people who were hiered in those days, were told that they wouldn't have to apply for federal funds. In my judgment it was a marvelous idea, but not tenable.

CAF: Right.

MS: Because the price of doing research is extremely high. The institutions with whom Carnegie competes for faculty were paying increasingly higher salaries and so it would become extremely difficult to sustain the research in the absence of federal grants. And there was no way that private funds could make up for that. So, in a sense, it's of a package with the approach to the Cold Springs Harbor [Long Island Bio. Association?] situation, because it was a lack of ability or sensitivity to a world that was changing dramatically.

DPS: Well, we found the situation at Haskins Laboratories similar. Starting in the 1960s a large portion of the support came from government agencies there, and for the same reason. Except of course that we never had a big...the big endowment that Carnegie did.

MS: That's right, So, Carnegie has a nice endowment, but it couldn't possibly sustain the institution in modern science, unless the institution...unless additional

departments closed. So you get almost to the vanishing point. And this is exacerbated by the fact that the institution has always an extraordinary dedication to astronomy and astrophysics, and grants in that field are not very generous and there aren't very many of them.

DPS: Right. Well, I've heard it said of someone of Caryl Haskins that he knew enough about the various kinds of work that were being carried out at Carnegie that he could write...he could himself write the annual report.

MS: Yes, so..I don't know how long he did that. His successor stopped doing that. Caryl was a marvelous writer, but it must have been increasingly challenging to be able to do that. And Philip Abelson who was his successor did some of that. But it was my impression reading that stuff that he leaned very heavily on what the departments gave him. Of course, Phil was a different kind of person completely. I don't know if you know this. The rumor is that when Phil was invited to ...was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, he could have joined any of seven different sections, which means that seven different fields perceived him as a leader. CAF, DPS: Wow.

MS: So he...he was really extraordinary. And he had a lot of trouble justifying to himself the need to depend increasingly on federal grants. And he was the one who changed that policy.

DPS: I want to ask you a question about Haskins Labs that you may or may not be familiar with. You know that speech research is what Carol Fowler, my... and I have been engaged in. But biological research was one of the fields that was pursued there from the start. I wanted to ask you about Seymour Hutner, whether you knew him.

MS: No, I didn't. What kind of work did he do?

DPS: Well, he was a protozoologist, but he studied the nutrition of protozoa.

MS: Yeah. I would not have known about him.

12.32

MS: I started my life as a chemist, not as a biologist

DPS: So did Caryl Haskins start his life as a chemist.

MS: But I moved in the direction of biochemistry and molecular biology. So I really didn't and don't know much at all about what the Haskins Lab did. I gather...Did it work on contracts? Is that the way it worked?

DPS: Well, it worked to some extent on contracts, but mostly on research grants from National Institutes of Health and NSF.

MS: Uh huh. OK Right. And does it still function?

DPS: Yes, it still functions and is still prospering

MS: Oh fine. Good.

DPS: And as a small, independent research institute, we think that Haskins Laboratories is practically unique. And that Caryl Haskins himself said as much on a historical tape that we have.

MS: Yeah. So I mean there are private research institutions that have been founded in recent years with private money but also highly dependent upon grants. The Stowers institute, which I guess is in Kansas City. And not attached to any university. There's a couple more.

DPS: Well in these tapes that were made at the end of the 1980s, Caryl Haskins mentioned only the...Alfred Loomis' laboratory, the Tuxedo Park laboratory as a model. And he knew Loomis....

MS: Yeah, but the ones I'm thinking of have been founded *since*.

DPS: Yeah, right.

MS: And then in the UK, there's this big plant lab, which is private, which is the Sainsbury Lab, which was founded by Lloyd Sainsbury.

DPS: So do you see a continuing special role for such places in science?

MS: I don't see myself what those places do these days that isn't done in other places. This is a constant conversation at Carnegie. You know, are we justifying our existence by doing things that you can't do in other places? And some of the things you can say yes that's true, and others you have to just say that isn't true.

DPS: I'm going to let Carol continue.

MS: OK.

CAF: This is a question I had about Caryl as president of Carnegie. I know this was before your time, but I wonder if you know from knowing him. He was an author of a pamphlet that was published in 1953. And in this pamphlet, he outlines what his aims were as a founder of Haskins Laboratories back in the 30s. And the idea was very appealing to me. It was to be a scientific catalyst. That is, to figure out what areas of scientific research were underdeveloped and needed to be developed. And to start doing work in that area. But once it had caught on, to shift into a new area that needed development. And I wouldn't say that this is what ended up happening at Haskins Laboratories. But I wondered if it was kind of a vision that a person might have as President of the Carnegie Foundation. If you had that kind of role...

MS: Yeah. So people say that about Carnegie all the time. But the fact of the matter is that it is not any more successful at that than apparently Haskins has been. I think it's actually a very odd statement. Because one has to choose a field to study, and the field has to be defined somehow. So in the whole world of asking questions about the natural world, the people who ask those new questions are few and far between. And the likelihood that one would be at a small institution, I mean just the numbers are not for you. The numbers are against you. Because you have so few people, and even if you've chosen them to be original and so forth, there's no way you can predict where the new questions will come up and how they will be.

I'll tell you one story, which I think really illustrates this. In the very late '50s, oh '59, '60 or so, I was at the NIH, and I was a staff member there doing research in the field of nucleic acids, which was, believe it or not was just beginning. So one day, a young colleague of mine from down the hall came into my room and he had set up copying what somebody else had published, a system that was a cell-free system that would make polypeptides in the presence of RNA. And he knew that I was making RNA molecules of one base or two bases, so very simple. And he asked if he could have some of that to try an experiment. So that experiment worked and it led to deciphering the genetic code.

CAF: Wow.

MS: Because the first thing I gave him was polyuridylic acid and he put it in and the only amino acid that got incorporated was phenylalanine and that defined the code for phenylalanine. There was no way that I or he knew what was going to happen.

19:03

CAF: Gotcha. Right

MS: So this is a story that goes on, I mean, over and over and over again you hear this story. And in spite of the fact that the NIH now requires people to write detailed plans of what they are going to do for the next 3 years with the NIH money, the lucky thing is if something happens and they do something quite different and really make a new discovery.

CAF: I agree

MS: Because you can't predict it. So that's my answer to that question.

CAF: I think it's a great answer. I mean I think you're exactly right. You sort of can't plan for that kind of thing.

MS: So the best you can do is have good people and support them. That's the only real thing that matters.

CAF: Yep

DPS: And he [CPH] would certainly.....agreed with that.

MS: I think so. Uh huh. Yeah. die

CAF: We're still trying to get a feel for what kind of a person he was. Is there anything that you can tell us?

MS: Yeah. He was a very modest kind of person. Did you know him in fact?

CAF: I met him a few times and Donald did as well, but..

MS: He was very modest and self-deprecating. Which was peculiar in a way. But I think he came from a culture that trained him as he was growing up to be that way. He was thoughtful. I don't think he ever kept up very well with new things in science. He was as a person probably incapable of taking care of himself in life.

CAF: You mean he had his wife with him all the time?

MS: Well, not only was she there all the time, but she took care of everything. She took care of planning how they ate. I mean she didn't cook, but they belonged to a club and they ate there. She bought his clothes. She organized everything, and I think probably his mother did that before. Because I don't know if you know, although it wasn't that unusual in his day still. When he went to Yale...

CAF: She went along with him.

MS: She got an apartment in New Haven and she stayed there.

CAF: Well, I think his father died when he was three, so they were probably very, very close.

MS: They probably were. But...And you can understand that, therefore, but it's not a recipe for somebody becoming very independent.

CAF: Right.

DPS: Did you know Edna well? I suppose you did.

MS: I knew Edna. Indeed I did. Sure, you couldn't know Caryl without knowing Edna. Right?

CAF: That's probably right?

DPS: Did she make contributions of her own to science?

MS: No, I don't think so. Not that I ever heard about. I mean maybe things that I don't know about. But no. Not that I ever heard about.

CAF: She was a coauthor with him on his...some of his publications on ants. I know that.

MS: Yeah. So, what role she played I don't know. The only person who would know the answer to that is Ed Wilson. Have you talked to him?

CAF: We have tried to contact him, but have not gotten a response.

MS: He might know the answer to that. I don't.

CAF: Yeah.

DPS: Do you have any suggestions about how we might reach him? We tried the way...

CAF: We tried email and a letter.

MS: I don't know what his physical or mental state is. You know we're all getting on...

DPS: Yeah, we too.

MS: I would suggest if you could find someone else in that Harvard Department. But not Jim Watson. And ask what is going on with him.

CAF: Oh, maybe Steve Pinker

MS: If you go online you can probably find who the head of the department is. And see if you can find out what's going on with E. O. Wilson

CAF: Right.

MS: Do you learn anything if you just Google him?

I haven't done that so I don't know. You might pick up something. But I think you may just have to go to the department, call the department head.

DPS: It's been quite a while since I googled him but all we got was the Laboratory of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, I think, when we did that.

MS: Did you call there?

DPS: We didn't call them.

MS: I would call, because even whoever answers the phone might know. But, if not, whoever the current leader is would surely know.

CAF: Well, that relates to another question we had. Can you think of any other people that knew him that are still living that we could also contact besides EO Wilson?

MS: Interesting question. So...I'm trying to think about the Yale Corporation in those days...So Kingman [Brewster?] is no longer living. Cyrus Vance is not living. Is Paul Moore still alive? Do you know? [died, 2003]

CAF: Paul Morse?

MS: Yeah. The Bishop. Paul Moore.

DPS: Oh. Moore.

MS: M-O-O-R-E. First name Paul. He was the Episcopal Bishop of New York and he was on the Yale Corporation then.

CAF: OK.

MS: Vance is dead. Dick Dilworth [?] is dead. Yeah most of them are gone. Who would know him? Trying to think now of Carnegie people who might know him at all. It might be worth talking to Joe Gall.

CAF: How does he spell his last name?

MS: G-A-double l. Hold on, no probably not. Because Joe didn't come to Carnegie til Phil Abelson was president.

CAF: OK.

MS: Don Brown might know. So Donald D. Brown. Hold on. my computer screen has gone dead, so I need to reboot it. OK. Let me see. He is retired. He was the director of the Carnegie Department of Embryology in Baltimore, and it could have been Caryl who appointed him director. Maybe it was Phil Abelson. But Don might know. Yeah, so...He is still connected to the department at...And you might try...If you google the department of Embryology or go to the Carnegie site and click on that department you'll get the department phone number. And I would call and see if you can get in touch with him.

CAF: mmhmm.

MS: There's an email address for him, but I'm not sure if it's still functional. But you could try it. It's brown@ciwemb.edu

CAF: OK

MS: Yeah, he might know more. He might have something to say.

CAF: OK. Great.

27:43

DPS: We know that Caryl Haskins had an association with the Rand Corporation. Do you know any thing about that?

MS: No. Whatever it was it was not helpful to me. When I tried to raise money with them.

DPS: Ok. He was a member of their board for a while.

MS: It could well be that,by the time I came around, when I talked to them, he was long forgotten. I don't know.

CAF: OK.

MS: Yeah, I mean it was a long time ago, right?

CAF: Yeah, yeah.

DPS: He was also on the board of the Dupont Corporation, according to his obituary.

MS: Yeah. So, those were the days of the closed world, you know?

CAF: Right.

DPS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think of him as sort of an ultimate insider who was very much a member of...

MS: So it's interesting. He was, and he was an insider. He fit all of the WASP-ish requirements. And it was a different world from the world we have. You know, completely different.

DPS: We can be glad for some of the differences.

CAF: Right.

MS: Pardon me?

DPS: We can be glad for some of the differences.

MS: Absolutely, absolutely. Without any question. I'm just trying to think who there is who could tell you more about that situation at Cold Spring Harbor. Without going and asking Jim [Watson] which would be a mistake, because you'd get a completely biased report. And Jim, brilliant as he is and done so much for science, he's a biased person, so you won't get very far with it. Yeah, I think most of the people are gone.

CAF: Yeah, that's what we're finding.

DPS: Let me just ask you one other thing about....whether he [CPH] took part in any of the ethical debates regarding science. I mean you were engaged in debates

MS: Yeah. I don't think so.

DPS: You don't think so.

MS: I don't think so, and, to be honest, I don't think that Caryl ever understood what was going on. His approach to biology was highly productive, but it was history at that point. It was not my impression that he kept up with stuff.

CAF: OK. So our last question is: In the thinking that you did about Caryl Haskins after we contacted you. Is there anything we haven't asked you that you know that you could tell us.

MS: I know one very funny story that you haven't asked me about.

CAF: Excellent

MS: I'm not sure that I should tell you. But it tells you something. When Caryl and Edna died, they still had this apartment here. Caryl was at a home in Connecticut someplace, right? I forget where. I went to visit him there. And Edna was there. By that time Edna was really; I don't think she was so physically sick. But she was a very challenging person to deal with at that point. Her personality was very difficult; she was ill for sure.

CAF: She had dementia, didn't she?

MS: Pardon me?

CAF: She had dementia, didn't she?

MS: Yes, and it came out in difficult ways. Anyway, when everything was done...I should tell you also that: We planted a dogwood tree in the front yard at Carnegie in her memory when she died? And it's blooming right now.

CAF: How nice!

MS: Somebody from Carnegie went over to the department...to the apartment to help clear it out, and there was a closet full of dozens, several dozen, brand new shirts, in Caryl's size.

CAF: We know about that.

MS: You did. Who told you about that?

CAF: Alice Dadourian.

MS: Oh, OK. How is she?

CAF: She died, in November, I think it was.

MS: Oh dear. OK. Yeah. Because I could have actually heard the story from Alice.

CAF: We talked to her in September. And one of the things she said is that when Edna was fairly deep in her dementia, she would call Brooks Brothers. And it wasn't just shirts, but suits; she would order by.., you know, 3 or 4 suits all at once. And: "Caryl needed them"; and of course he never even wore them.

MS: Sure.

CAF: Yeah, and their apartment, as we understood from Alice, was really four apartments

MS: yeah.

CAF: put together so it had four kitchens

MS: Yes, and they never really fixed anything up or anything. But I know that from Alice, so its really the same thing.

DPS: We were very sad at one of the things that Alice told us that most of his papers ended up in the dumpster, because their home in Westport had to be cleared out in jig time or something.

CAF: So most of his personal papers I guess are lost forever.

MS: Wow. That is thoroughly too bad.

CAF: Yes, it is, it's very too bad.

MS: I don't know if they have anything at Carnegie. Have you checked with Tina or John?

CAF: no, who?

MS: So there are things that get saved, official stuff. So the person to talk to I guess is Tina McDowell and her email is tmcdowell@carnegiescience.edu

DPS: That's mac with mac or mc?

MS: Mc

DPS: Mc

MS: Mc The other person who has sort of unofficially overseen the archives to some extent without any real support is John Strom S-T-R-O-M. And he is probably jstrom@carnegiescience.edu

DPS: S-T_R-O-N

MS: S-T_R-O-M as in Mary

DPS: Oh M as in Mary. Got you

CAF: That's great. We had not had those contact names before.

DPS: That's very helpful

MS: They may know stuff. Edna made herself quite unpopular.

CAF Did she?

MS: Yes, because she was very demanding of people at Carnegie. She seemed to think long after Caryl had been President that she could still demand favors of different kinds. And it was probably inappropriate for her even to ask those favors when he was President. And surely by the time they were...[...]it was inappropriate. And she was difficult about it. So it was probably the beginning of her dementia.

CAF: I know Alice lived probably 40 miles or more away from them and would get a call from Edna saying that the newspaper hadn't been delivered; would she get them one.

MS: That's exactly the sort of thing. Yeah She expected those kinds of services of people. I don't know why. I don't know what it was in her upbringing that made her think that people do things like that for you. Even when he was President, right?

CAF: mmhmm. Well, this was helpful. You didn't think you could help, but you've been very helpful

DPS: You certainly have. We have... We also appreciate the book of his essays that you edited that was [helpful] to us.

MS: OK Well he was a wonderful writer , that's for sure. But of an era, right? Of an era.

CAF: Yeah Apparently.

MS: OK

CAF: DPS: Thank you so much.

MS: You're welcome. Bye.