

ASEH Founders – Oral Histories

Interview with Thomas Dunlap by Lisa Mighetto

College Station, Texas

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LM: Well, good afternoon. Let's start at the beginning. What attracted you to environmental history?

TD: I stumbled into it. When I got out of the army in 1970 and went back to [the University of] Kansas to get started as a regular graduate student in American history, I went to see Bill Tuttle--because I had taken a graduate seminar with him just before I got drafted--and asked him what I ought to do for a master's thesis. And he said, "Well, with your background in chemistry [a B.A. and two and a half years of graduate work in high temperature thermodynamics], the history of DDT would be a natural." Now, this was two years before the national DDT, which made it pretty early. I was a bit dismayed, because I was trying to get out of science, but I went to the library and after digging around for a few hours decided this was a neat project. It opened up all kinds of questions about how science had affected the way people thought about nature. In 1945 DDT had been the wonder of the age, the greatest thing since the atomic bomb, and evidence of progress in Western civilization. By 1970, it was the worse thing since the atomic bomb, evidence of decline of Western civilization, and so on. What had happened? I decided to find out. At the time I had no idea there even was a field of environmental history, did not in fact find out until 1974 or early 1975 when Paul Glad, my advisor at Wisconsin (where I went after getting an M.A. at Kansas) told me about a job in that field just as I was finishing my dissertation.

LM: And you didn't know what it was?

TD: No idea. Absolutely no idea. Never even heard the word...

LM: And where was the job?

TD: It began as a one-year job at Virginia Tech that I got by accident. I applied late, since I was not even sure I would finish the dissertation that spring, applied in fact as they were bringing people in for interviews.

LM: Were you interviewed?

TD: No. I only found out about the job in April, when I was working on a revision of my first draft. The two people the department invited in bombed, and the chairman panicked because he did not want to tell the Dean he spent all that money interviewing two people and then didn't hire anybody. So he picked up his phone, and without ever seeing me, offered me the job for one year, literally the day I defended my dissertation.

LM: And you hadn't met him in person?

TD: No, and it was a good thing I hadn't because he hated beards and never would have hired me. When I showed up in the fall, he was disappointed and, I think, a bit shocked, but was one of these people who couldn't admit he made a mistake. I took over a course John Ross had started three years before and that Dick Vietor taught for a year before he got a job at Harvard School of Business.

LM: So this environmental history course was already being taught?

TD: They had a two-quarter course on the books, already being taught. And I just had to step in and decide what the field was.

LM: Did you use their course outline or did you develop a new one?

TD: I don't remember. I think I got stuff from Vietor, but mainly I worked out my ideas, using Sam Hays's *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, which supplied a political model, and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, an intellectual history that gave me a set of thinkers and controversies and other things to work off of. And of course, I could give a couple lectures on DDT.

LM: How many students did you have? Do you remember?

TD: About forty, forty-five.

LM: Wow.

TD: It was pretty well attended. It had been popular because of environmental interest. So, I got started and things worked out all right.

LM: Well, this was the mid-70's. Do you think that the political turmoil in the 60's and 70's influenced your teaching of environmental issues, the history?

TD: It probably did, but not in the way it hit most people. They were in history and the environmental issues were there, so they merged personal and professional interests. I was stumbling along as a chemist and a semi-working class kid going to college, a situation that did not encourage attention to politics or issues like that. My dissertation drew me into environmentalism. I read Rachel Carson and, more important, all the people who were against Rachel Carson, and got an education in just what sort of idiots some of these people were. So I became an environmental historian around an issue, pesticides and environmental pollution, that converted many, but I came late and by this odd, scholarly, route.

LM: How did your students respond? Were they familiar with Rachel Carson, or did you introduce them to her?

TD: I got a range of students. Some took the course because they were interested in the environment, others because they were fish and wildlife majors or science majors, still

others because they needed a history course for a requirement and their own requirement was that it meet at ten o'clock on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—or whenever I taught it. And I've always had that range, from the really interested to the walk-ins.

LM: Can you describe the interaction you had with others that were anti-Rachel Carson?

TD: Interviewing people for my dissertation I called up the losing lawyer of the DDT hearing when I was in Madison, Willard Stafford, a high-powered courtroom lawyer who had been hired to represent the forces of DDT at the Wisconsin hearing after their corporate lawyer floundered, and told him I wanted to interview him about DDT. And he boomed back at me, "What do you want to talk about DDT for? That's history." At which point I explained I was doing a dissertation of American history. It was a great moment. Interviewing Louis McLean, the man he had been brought in to assist, I got a full-bore treatment in the mentality Carson had faced.

LM: Can you describe the founding of ASEH? That is, you're at Virginia Tech in the mid-70's. You're teaching a course in environmental history, and I assuming other courses as well. . . .

TD: I first got involved with environmental history when I gave a paper to the Duquesne History Conference, which at that time was easy. You applied and they found a slot for you.

LM: And you were on the one-year appointment at Virginia Tech.

TD: I was on a one-year appointment, but this was a second year and I then on tenure-track (with that first year counting on the clock). So I went off to Duquesne in the fall of '77 and after the session a slightly rumpled man I did not know came up, introduced himself as John Opie, and told me he was trying to get a new journal going. Could I turn my paper into an article? *Could I?* I was a junior faculty member, and he wants to know if I can turn my paper into an article. Of course I can. How long do you want it? When do you want it? And so that's how I got my first article in what was then *Environmental Review*.

LM: Was this in '76?

TD: It was. And after that, every conference I went to--OAH, AHA--there was John Opie organizing breakfast and sessions and talking about a society. The joke, and I repeated this to John, was that in the old days we caucused with him in a phone booth. I was as involved as my travel budget allowed and came to all the meetings I could. In the early days it was a one-man band, with Opie running the journal out of one hip pocket and the society out of the other.

LM: And how many people are we talking about? You mentioned conferencing at a phone booth . . .

TD: A very small group. . . I remember one breakfast of the AHA when something like six people showed up, and I recall joking that a session could be considered successful if there were more people in the audience than up on the platform. I met Sam Hays at one of those sessions, as well as a lot of other people. But it was still a small crew. I'm sure I wasn't there for at least one of the original meetings, but I recall about dozen or fifteen, twenty people. Once John got the *Environmental Review* going, and then the society got organized, it was a matter of trying to get critical masses together for sessions.

LM: So, what were you guys talking about in these first early groups? How to mobilize people?

TD: How to do it. How to mobilize people, forming professional society.

LM: How did you know that there were others out there that would join you?

TD: I don't think we did. Except we figured there had to be an interest. People came out of the woodwork. In those days everybody had been trained in some other field, become interested in environmental issues, and developed a course either to become an environmental historian or add the field to what they taught. But there were no graduate programs, and many of the courses were experimental. Nobody really knew what was going on.

LM: And these were young professors? They weren't students?

TD: No, there weren't really many students. There were interested students but established, mainly tenured, people formed the core. Junior faculty had neither time nor experience. We couldn't do much. It was the generation who became, like Opie, interested in the middle of their career who did the heavy lifting.

LM: Do you remember, generally, what the main goals were when ASEH was formed in 1977?

TD: Aside from forming an environmental history organization, an academic environmental history organization it would be hard to say. Partly, certainly, the need or desire for a place to publish played a role. A fair number of us had found the Forest History Society, but that was forest history and conservation history and FHS was not an academic professional organization. We wanted conferences, something beyond having environmental history sessions at other people's conferences. I remember the Western History Association as one of the early venues, and there were a few at the OAH. I was on one panel there in 77 with Vietor, who was a Sam Hays student. Having our own conference seemed, at the time, an impossible dream but one we wanted.

LM: What was the journal like in the early years/

TD: You should really look at the early issues. They had pages stapled together through the back, and in the issue with my first article I guess Opie had somebody new doing

graphics, and they had interesting ideas--interesting for a professional journal anyway. Pictures of bugs marched around the edges of my article on the history of DDT. It was really, pretty much, amateur hour, but we wanted to get something out, for that was the only way to get things moving.

LM: What was it called? Can you describe the evolution of the titles?

TD: It was called *Environmental Review*, and some years later, it became *Environmental History Review*. Opie, I think, had originally shied away from calling it “environmental history” because at that point we had geographers, scientists, all sorts of other people who wanted to somehow get in on this undefined field, and John wanted to keep it open rather than making it definitely history, though it always had a lot of historical content, Opie’s interests and interest in a wide audience meant other material came in as well. I think a lot of people in the beginning weren’t sure whether it was going to be environmental history or environmental studies or whatever. But the interests of the historians, and our numbers, moved the group into, or created, an environmental history niche within the professional discipline of history. Anybody else could contribute, but they were gonna have to write history papers.

LM: It sounds like you had an interdisciplinary vision from the outset.

TD: John did from the outset. John was very interested in interdisciplinary cooperation in the early years.

LM: What about the conferences?

TD: Well . . .it was incredible. . .

LM: . . .1982?

TD: There I met a lot people whose books [I knew]; I remember meeting Susan Flader there and asking her about her work, and having Rod Nash get up and give a paper and mention various people who had written stuff, including Dunlap who had written this book on DDT, which , *wow!* Somebody mentioned me. It was the first conference which was really all about environmental history, and that was the important thing. Still, we had a ways to go. I was program chair for the ’83 conference, in Oxford, Ohio held just after the OAH meeting in Cincinnati and association, as I recall, with an American Studies group, an arrangement designed to draw people by making it easy to just stay an extra day or so after the OAH. The proposals ranged from environmental history to folk dances and folk customs, and when I found two papers on the same topic, the Indiana Dunes, I was just delighted—a session I could put together without even thinking about it. For the rest, we were juggling papers and commentators and hoping things fit. We lacked a critical mass but things were, by then, developing, and each successive meeting looked and felt more like a real history conference.

LM: How many people roughly attended the early conferences? In Ohio, for instance.

TD: Somehow, I think we had maybe fifty to a hundred.

LM: And where did you meet? You met in...

TD: We met at Ohio University in Oxford.

LM: In their facilities?

TD: In their facilities. But it was all new, and everybody pretty much was junior except for a few established people, and [you] begin to see the field sort of developing around that.

LM: And then you and I met in 1984.

TD: We met in '84 at the American Association for Environmental Education Conference at Banff.

LM: Which had an ASEH group.

TD: It had an ASEH group.

LM: Including you and John Opie.

TD: And Hal Rothman. I showed up to give two papers on environmental history to the people in environmental education, and after that explored the land. One afternoon Hal Rothman and I walked around Lake Louise, talking all the time about environmental history--an exciting day.

LM: I remember a lot of energy there, and I was a student at the time. So obviously, it was a mix of students and professors.

TD: Oh, it was crazy. And it was this incredible, gorgeous venue. I remember telling my chairman that I could "spend a week at the Chateau Lake Louise." Since he was a good friend he said, "No, you're not staying at the Chateau, not on the department's nickel. You can stay at the Antler's Motel with all the others down the street!" But of course I did stay at the Chateau.

LM: Was this the same guy who didn't like men with beards?

TD: No. No, this was a new chair, from outside.

LM: Had you already moved to Texas then?

TD: No I hadn't. This was still in Virginia Tech. The chair was my friend Harold Livesay, a business historian. We were already friends, and he loved to kid me—still does.

LM: When did you move to Texas?

TD: I came to Texas in 1991.

LM: So it was after the [first] Houston conference?

TD: Well, yes.

LM: And you've attended just about every conference, you thought?

TD: To my knowledge, I've been in every single national environmental history conference held by the ASEH.

LM: So in Olympia in '89?

TD: Oh yes. I also showed up at a conference in Manhattan, Kansas, where I met John Perkins.

LM: Oh what year was that? I don't know...

TD: I don't remember, but I remember sitting around, talking with John [Perkins]. I think that is where I met John Perkins is about '78 or '79.

LM: He was from Evergreen. [In Washington].

TD: Yeah he was from Evergreen.

LM: Did the conferences get bigger each year?

TD: In my memory, they got bigger, and they got more historical. But it wasn't until the Durham conference that I really felt that we'd matured, that the depth of conversations, the numbers of people and all the rest had reached a takeoff point, and I found it really exciting. Not just because there were lots of other people in the field but because the field had reached the point of intense internal conversations about big questions, not just a few people but a lot.

LM: And by that point, we were meeting annually.

TD: By that point we were meeting annually.

LM: Instead of once every two years, which indicates how you had grown.

TD: Every time the energy grew and the debates became more intense and deeper, though that may have been a personal feeling. In 2000 [Tacoma; first annual conference], I recall being excited, and it was not just interest in the field, but interest in particular work being done, and questions being raised and debated. By that time we had enough people educating graduate students that you could begin to get a lot of the kind of energy you want to see.

LM: That critical mass you were talking about.

TD: Critical mass. It was a critical mass, it really was. And one of the great things about being in this field has been watching it grow and develop. I've spent thirty-two years watching us move from a bunch of people scrambling around with John [Opie] cheerleading and trying to do everything by himself to a professional field we can all be really proud of. And it is just so wonderful to spend so much of your career and see all this stuff coming out and all this work being done. That's really the great payoff.

LM: What do you think were the most significant challenges in founding ASEH and developing it?

TD: That's hard to say. The journal was a struggle because you had to get submissions, not just from the junior faculty willing to try any place but from enough well established people to make the journal one people had to read, but the worst was the organization—finding resources and an editor, getting a new editor, and working out relationships with each new place the journal went. It was not until we began co-publication with the Forest History Society, which put the journal in an established office, run by an organization not just sympathetic to us but committed to the field, that things really began to take off. Then we had to build enough of an infrastructure that we could begin holding our own conferences on a regular basis. With the journal and regular conferences people met frequently enough that the intellectual energy really built.

LM: Do you remember if the journal or the society were promoted actively, and if so, how?

TD: Oh man. I remember getting flyers to put on tables at other conferences, or handing them out at the end of a session where we presented papers, buttonholing audience members, and all that. I think everybody who was interested tried to spread the word.

LM: Did John [Opie]? Was he involved in recruitment?

TD: In the early years John recruited a lot of people. He began on me by asking me to send in an article, but he also lobbied at conferences, talking the society up, organized breakfasts, and I do not know what all.

LM: So it was a person-to-person sort of thing?

TD: A lot of it was person-to-person, with John the main cheerleader and organizer.

LM: Did ASEH have any influence in getting environmental history programs going or courses being established at universities that weren't already teaching it?

TD: I don't know, but I don't think so. I think that tended to come from individual faculty pushing the course at their colleges or universities.

LM: And in your particular instance, you were hired to teach environmental history so...

TD: No problem.

LM: Was that the case at Texas A&M or no?

TD: Yes. I came to Texas A&M. I replaced Don Pisani, who'd been called to a chair at Oklahoma. I never had to campaign.

LM: Let's see, you spend sixteen years at Virginia Tech. Do you remember which books you used when you came to Texas? That is, how did you change?

TD: How did I change? The mechanism of change was to pick things up, the intellectual guide came from my own evolution. I early on assigned a paperback edition of *Sand County Almanac*, which I have kept in the rotation, but other books came and went. It depended on what I could find and what was going on, particularly in the 70's and the 80's. You could pick a controversy, find a book, and get the students interested. As things came out I'd try them out in the course. I remember environmental justice books coming out and trying them. I used Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, also Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. I constantly trolled shelves and bookstores, taking academic monographs but also memoirs students could relate to which I could use as handles in the course. I've also used Thoreau, collections of nature writing, books on environmental politics, and a lot more.

LM: How often did you teach environmental history at Texas A&M?

TD: I've offered the course once a year every year that I've been teaching. I've always had the course going; I've always kept it.

LM: Have you noticed any developments in enrollment, up or down?

TD: It's tended to fall off a bit, for various reasons. The geography department puts me on the list of preferred courses their majors ought to take outside their department, and I get a certain number of fish and wildlife majors, people interested in environmental studies. What I've lost is that generation of students who are really enthusiastic about the environment. The granola quotient has gone down, but I still, generally speaking, get a higher proportion of students who have been hiking or camping or been on wilderness expeditions that I do in the survey classes. I found that out by asking various classes about this kind of experience.

LM: In outdoor activities?

TD: Part of it is outdoor activities.

LM: Do you do field trips?

TD: No, I've never managed that. I do not like them because it causes problems for students' schedules as well as mine. I tend to avoid things that complicate their lives because it discourages them.

LM: You mentioned the granola quotient went down in your courses. Was the granola quotient a factor in ASEH? Was it ever a substantial . . .

TD: Well, it's hard to say. I use the granola quotient here as a sort of short hand for enthusiasm, but there was a strong component a generation ago that has gone, a certain naïve enthusiasm that vanished with more experience. The ASEH struggled with questions and advocacy, with the general line from the days of [James] Watt being that individuals were free to take positions but the society as a whole would not. So you can pass around a James Watt petition and people will sign it to fire James Watt, but the ASEH, would not. That came up and Sam Hays made a strong statement, and at one meeting I made the same argument as well. We can take positions on academic programs and problems, but not on public policy.

LM: Do you remember which conference you stood up in?

TD: In my memory it was Irvine.

LM: So that would have been the first one?

TD: That would have been the first one.

LM: So from the outset this was an issue?

TD: Right. Environmental historians have always had a personal interest in the subject and often a commitment to political action. Besides getting dirt on our boots we have, as a group, also wanted to get something done about saving the land. In the early years the society was really very much committed to wilderness, natural resources, and those issues, to the point that Joel Tar and Marty Melosi for a while had a quorum of two as the people interested in the urban environment. But ASEH was willing to see that as part of the environment. All they had to do, and they did it, was to do interesting and significant work. There were people who didn't like the idea of taking to the sidewalks, but in general the society was open to it.

LM: Well you've mentioned John Opie several times of course. Were there other individuals that stood out? You also mentioned Sam Hays. . . .

TD: Those were the two I remember, John for his work for the society and Sam for that because his work provided the model (political history) for my first two books. In both a problem arises, is discovered, and people use society's political mechanisms to try and solve it. And Sam was around. I could talk to him, and he provided a model for me. But I talked to a lot of other people. I met John Richards at the conferences and Al Crosby, and had quite a few conversations with Al when came. For me, and I suspect for a lot of us, the conferences let us talk with people whose work we knew about topics we could not discuss in depth outside the gatherings. For a young faculty member it was wonderful to talk with really accomplished scholars who were doing great work, and everybody was willing to talk.

LM: Do you think that's still the case?

TD: I hope so. I'm doing my best now that I am on the other end of those conversations, as graduate students come up to me and want to talk. It is doubly enjoyable because I do not have graduate students of my own, just the occasional person. So conferences provide me contacts, and I'm always happy to talk to these people. And I think that we all ought to do it, and I think generally speaking, we are.

LM: What do you think are the most significant developments in more recent years in ASEH?

TD: It's hard to say . . . Okay, we've got enough of an infrastructure that we can offer our own conferences all the time. We've put the journal and the publications program on a continuing reasonable, effective stable basis. We have a place and a functioning, movable, gathering site.

LM: With the joint agreement?

TD: The joint agreement with Forest History Society has been all to the good. But of course, I was one of the first advocating it, so of course I'd tend to think that. Still, I think that's worked out very well. In some ways it worked out better than I thought. Other areas that I hoped to develop didn't develop quite as I thought they would. Sometimes things just hadn't started out yet.

LM: Such as?

TD: Well, I was hoping more people would immediately get interested in writing for the issue series or *Forest History Today*. There are opportunities out there that people haven't yet taken advantage of. But I think, basically, within the society itself, we've got the intellect. We've got the physical and social infrastructure for intellectual conversation. And that I think has been a major accomplishment in the last few years.

LM: What do you think are the most important issues that ASEH will face, say in the next five years?

TD: We have to expand our interests and our area. We began pretty much in the United States studying natural resources, conservation, and preservation, and moved outward, geographically and also intellectually. We now consider the cities and suburbs, and the interactions among people, wildlife, and the land. And frankly, I think we're in good shape because we are open to new approaches and topics. Demographically, middle-aged white men still dominate, but there are women and minorities—not enough, though. We have a core of senior women who can take on any job in the society, but we, like all professional societies, could do more to give talent some experience.

LM: Nancy Langston is now President.

TD: Exactly, and Nancy's not the only one in the cohort, and the group coming behind her has more women, at least that is my impression. In some ways we're reflecting the opening of academia to women. And we ought to take that topic, of opening the avenues of research and offices very seriously. People of color and various interests ought to be able to find ways to enter the society, not just as hangers-on or people fighting for a place but as part of the group.

LM: Do you think ASEH is becoming more ethnically more diverse?

TD: It had to become ethnically more diverse. We started out with just a bunch of middle-aged white men or young white men. There was no way to go but become more diverse.

LM: Where is there anything you'd like to add about the founding of ASEH and its development?

TD: I've had a lot of fun and I did a lot, mainly bits and pieces, but it has been great to see the society and the field develop.

LM: Most recently the internship program.

TD: Most recently working on the internship program, but that has been only one development. I did a variety of things and the real payoff has been watching things develop and people get good work done. It's a lot of fun to see grow and change and to feel you had some small part in helping their careers.

LM: It's nice to know that you can have an influence?

TD: Nice to know that you can have an influence. It really is. Now it is fun to look back on the days of [conferencing] with John [Opie] in a phone booth, but the fun comes from seeing how far we have come. You can say we started small and we have come to this and ain't it great?

LM: Look what you built.

TD: Well, I had a hand in the building.

LM: Well thank you very much.

TD: Glad to talk.