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Interviewee: Richard Solberg

Interviewer: Jerry Michaels

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Jerry Michaels: We are talking with Dr. Richard Solberg, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and director of the University of Montana's Biological Station at Yellow Bay on Flathead Lake. The building we are seated in is apparently new, and is named Elrod Laboratory. Dr. Solberg, could you explain the origin of this name?

Richard Solberg: Well, in order to appreciate the origin of the name, you have to realize that the laboratory was just dedicated in August of 1967, and it was dedicated to Morton J. Elrod, the first biologist at the University of Montana campus in Missoula. Dr. Elrod arrived in Missoula in 1897, and soon after that founded the biological station on Flathead Lake. This was in 1899. Shortly after that he realized that he wanted to establish a station which would be large and lasting, and through the cooperation of Senator Joe Dixon at the time, he secured from Congress a grant of 160 acres of land—this was in 1907—and instead of taking just one large parcel of land, he took 80 acres of land on Yellow Bay, right here. He secured 40 acres of land on the south side of Bull Island, in the narrows, as we call it, 40 acres of land on Wild Horse Island, which was later traded for what we call the South Forty, located on Polson Bay. Later on, then, we received a gift of a couple of small islands off the end of Finley point that we call the Bird Islands. At the same time, Morton J. Elrod was intimately interested in students—he had a large following on campus, he was very popular. His classes were always some of the best attended. He was also intimately involved in the establishment of the National Bison Range at Moiese. He was also very instrumental in establishing Glacier National Park.

Now, back to the biological station, the original building on the station—and it exists today as our museum—is a homesteader's log cabin that was built sometime in the mid-1870s. That was the original dining room on campus for many, many years, and the students lived in tents. Then in 1912, under Dr. Elrod's direction, a two-story brick laboratory building was built. Now, at the time there were no roads up and down the east shore, so the bricks were made in Somers, placed on a barge, and pushed down to Yellow Bay, and the entire building was constructed more or less by hand. This served as the primary building on this campus until the post-war years—post-World War II years. Dr. Elrod had a rather drastic stroke in 1934 that left him almost entirely incapacitated, and he died in 1954. Now I mentioned the World War II period—shortly after that, through the old war surplus routine, the local faculty secured a number of laboratory buildings, wooden laboratory buildings, and through their own work, placed throughout the woods surrounding Yellow Bay a number of cabins, housing cabins—I believe we have about 45 of them to date—and then as the station program grew, and after I took over the directorship in 1962, I realized that we just had to have more modern facilities. And I, along with the help of many biologists on campus, wrote a proposal to the National Science Foundation of Washington, D.C., asking them to fund this present laboratory. Obviously they did. The total funding from the National Science Foundation for this laboratory alone right now

stands at approximately 150,000 dollars. It is designed as a year-round facility, and as we might mention later, it will be used as a year-round facility by professors and researchers.

JM: Doctor, I noticed several students working around here this summer. Can you give us any idea of how many there are and will they be here the entire school year? Or what will the policy be towards this?

RS: Well this is always a difficult question to answer. People want to know how many people are here. Well let me put it this way: I would estimate that there are 125 people on the campus here, and further I would estimate that there are 85 students. Now the reason I have to estimate this, and that the number is not very good, is because we do have students from the campus who are here for three days of a week. We have students who are here all the time but are enrolled in no courses because they are simply doing their graduate thesis research work, and so the number of 85 is a good round number. I could say that of this 85, about 20 are undergraduates and the rest are postgraduate students.

JM: Could you explain to us some of the duties these students perform while working here at the station?

RS: Well, the entire station program is designed toward the outdoors. In other words, this laboratory and the interior of the laboratory is designed to aid in the study of outdoor material. And if we were to read, for instance, the course listings in our Biological Station Bulletin, you'd see that the entire field of animal study and plants study is essentially covered, with a few exceptions. Our faculty—our resident faculty, the ones that are here all summer long teaching courses—numbers ten, and they cover such fields as study of mammals, birds, fungi, freshwater lakes and streams, vascular flowering plants, the general field of ecology, freshwater algae. So that by the time—if I were to expand this list, and also the interests of the students and the staff, we could almost say that everything that grows out of doors is studied here.

JM: At present, doctor, what is the major area of research being done here?

RS: Well there are a number of areas that are receiving attention, but probably the largest in terms of grant funding, personnel, students involved and so on, would be the area of limnology. And limnology is simply the complete study of freshwater lakes and streams. The program this year is under the direction of Dr. Arden Gaufin. Dr. Gaufin comes from the University of Utah at Salt Lake. However, when I say he comes from I mean that literally, because he has left Utah to join the Missoula faculty. He will be on the Missoula campus in the fall. Dr. Gaufin has a research team of about 10 graduate students working with him now, and they are studying various aspects of water pollution all the way from Glacier Park down to the Idaho border south of us. Dr. Gaufin and his team are attempting to not only check present levels of pollution, but they are also checking on baseline data, in order that they are able to describe what clean water really and actually is. Now associated with Dr. Gaufin's interests are the interests of Dr. [G. W.] Prescott and Dr. [W. C.] Vinyard. Dr. Prescott comes from Michigan. He has been on the

summer session faculty here at the Biological Station for the past 18 consecutive years, and he has now retired from Michigan and Montana has been able to secure his services as the first year-round resident researcher here at Yellow Bay. Dr. Vinyard will be with us for one year, having taken a leave of absence from Humboldt State College in California. But back to the original question, these two men, too, are interested in water and what grows in it. Their specialty is in the area of algae—freshwater algae.

JM: Doctor, one question that I'm sure would be of interest to most people is, "how does this research relate to all mankind, or all people?"

RS: This is a question that's always asked of scientists, and it's always one that is frequently difficult to answer, but I think maybe I've invented an answer in these many years. Mankind today is always trying to change the environment in one form another. They are either trying to get rid of insects, they are trying to log the hillsides, they are trying to dam the rivers, all for the use of mankind, and this is justifiable. However, in the past years many of these efforts have met with disasters, and the list is very, very long for these disasters. These disasters occurred largely because man, in changing the environment, had no idea of all of the side effects. Now what we are trying to do is to study natural environments prior to the time that they are to be changed. Examples of this would be that we want to find a clean lake and study that clean lake before it is surrounded by homes and industries. We want to find a river and study that clean river, supposedly untouched river, prior to the time that dams are put in, so that when the decisions are made for putting in dams, using insecticides, polluting waters, polluting the air, allowing radiation fallout and the like, before those things occur we want to be able to have baseline data to determine the degree to which this is allowable, or in fact if it should be allowable at all. And I think the significant thing about this Biological Station is that, first of all, there are 50 such in the United States, inland freshwater biological stations, and at present we rank fourth. Now, in other categories we certainly don't rank fourth. The University of Montana itself is a very, very small institution. But we do rank fourth in terms of biological stations. Now this is not due to the fault of any one person or any three people or the like, but I do like to give quite a bit of credit to the deceased Dr. Elrod, because back in 1897, when he came to Montana, he immediately recognized that someday in the far, far future, when Montana was becoming populated, as it is now, the University of Montana and the state itself would need an outpost, a Biological Station of this sort to perform the basic types of studies that I have described for you, and for this reason of establishing baseline data for environmental areas.

JM: Thank you doctor. We have been talking with Dr. Richard Solberg, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and director of the Biological Station at the University of Montana. This is Jerry Michaels speaking.

[End of Interview]