Interview with Thomas Clark  
Interviewers: Stephanie Pekarek and Carolyn Brady  
March 23, 2004

**Pekarek:** Your name and what department you worked in at HSU?
**Clark:** Ok, my name is Thomas Clark and I worked for the chemistry department.

**Pekarek:** And do you have a doctorate?
**Clark:** Yeah.
**Pekarek:** In what?
**Clark:** Chemistry.
**Pekarek:** In chemistry. And did you feel that you needed a doctorate to get your position?
**Clark:** Oh, sure. Yeah.
**Pekarek:** And where did you graduate from school?
**Clark:** I did my undergraduate at the University of Chicago and my PhD at Harvard.
**Pekarek:** And, um, who did you study under?
**Clark:** I worked for a guy named Peter Yates, who didn’t stay at Harvard. He went to Toronto and that’s where he spent most of his career.

[Feedback]

**Brady:** Why is it getting feedback?

**Brady:** Why did you want to become a professor?
**Clark:** Um. Oh, when I was in college I just observed professors at work and I thought that be something I’d like to do.
**Brady:** Did you, um, the professor who you studied under, did you feel like you wanted to teach like him at all?
**Clark:** Um, yeah although by that time I had already decided I wanted to be a professor before I ever met Peter and, he’s one of two people that I try to model myself after. I had a professor at Chicago named George Weland that I liked very much.
**Brady:** When did you decide you wanted to become a professor?
**Clark:** I’d say when I was at Chicago.

**Pekarek:** Why did you choose to teach at Humboldt?
**Clark:** Uh, [pause] well they offered me a job, that’s one. But, I really was not interested in coming to California at all.
[Laugh]
**Clark:** But I saw the notice about the job saying that it was near Eureka, and I had seen a picture of the Carson Mansion once, and thought, “why, that’s interesting I’ll go look on the map and see where Eureka is.” And, uh, saw where it was and I decided that sounds like some place to investigate. And then, Homer Balabanis was the man who did the hiring at that time and he was a very enthusiastic, persuasive person. He had a real vision of what he wanted Humboldt to be like and he was very effective in recruiting faculty at that time.
Brady: So what classes did you teach at Humboldt?
Clark: Um, General Chemistry and Organic Chemistry.

Brady: Are those a mix of upper and lower division, or just upper division, or...
Clark: General Chemistry is lower division.
Brady: Oh, ok.

Pekarek: Um, what did you like about your job as a professor here at Humboldt?
Clark: Well practically everything. I enjoyed the people I worked with, the other people in the department. I enjoyed the students.

Brady: Did... was there a nice atmosphere with the professors and students?
Clark: Oh yeah yeah.

Brady: And was it the same when you started to what it was when you retired?
Clark: Oh no.
Brady: How did it change?
Clark: I came here when Humboldt was very small, it had about seventeen-hundred students and the Chemistry Department was in the basement of Founders Hall.

Brady: [laugh] Wow.

Pekarek: So do you feel, after, near the end of your retirement you’ve gained more respect as a department in the school? Do you ...
Clark: I don’t really understand what you’re getting at.
Pekarek: Like being that you were in a small area in the beginning do you feel that you moved up in respect at school, or...
Clark: Oh. It wasn’t that, I mean everything was small.
Pekarek: Ok, so...
Clark: The Chemistry Department was a big department. And we had, when I came, I and Roger Weiss came the same year, and we became the fourth and fifth members of the department, which made it one of the bigger departments on campus.

Brady: Um, what did you like about your job as an.... Oh wait, we asked that. Sorry. What research projects did you work on at Humboldt?
Clark: I found that I really couldn’t do too much research during the regular year, so I would always do my research during the summers or during vacation.
Brady: What were they on?
Clark: Uh, I’d say for the last thirty years of my career, nuclear magnetic resonance was the primary part of the research.
Brady: Did you write any books about it?
Clark: No.
Brady: No. You just studied, or what exactly did you do with the information you gathered?
Clark: While, I mean I published articles, but I didn’t write a book.
Brady: What did the articles show up in?

Brady: Oh.

Pekarek: Um, we learned that you won an award for outstanding professor in the year 1981-82. What did you do to get this award? Was there anything special?

Clark: While, I didn’t do anything for it, I mean, I got nominated by a former student and got elected for it.

Pekarek: What did the award...what did the award entitle?

Clark: Well, I got a medal, uh, delivered to me at commencement. And, I didn’t have to make a speech. People who got the award in following, in later years, had to give a talk. I was lucky to get it before that was part of the deal.

Brady: And did you get any promotions over the years in the Chemistry Department?

Clark: Oh yeah, yeah. I started as Assistant Professor and became Professor.

Brady: And how did the Chemistry Department evolve while you were a professor at Humboldt?

Clark: While the original, I’m going back before I came, a fellow named Art Smith was the first full time chemist; he came in 1948. And then in the mid-fifties a fella named Bill Wasserman was the second, he was an Organic Chemist, and then Jack Russell, one of my close friends, came in 1956. Then Wasserman left and a guy named Karl Widmer, a biochemist, came. And then in 1959 Roger and I arrived. Karl moved to South America, and Bob Wallace, a biochemist, came in ‘62. So that was the old-line chemists. Then in 1965 Mervin Hanson, who graduated my first year at Humboldt, came back from Cornell as a professor. And then we gradually rose to be about twelve people by about 1976, and then it stayed steady that way. Then all of us started retiring, and, from about 19...Art retired in 1968, but the rest of us all stayed on until 1989, Roger retired. Then for the next thirteen years, next ten years, we had thirteen retirements.

Brady: What year did you retire?

Clark: 2000

Pekarek: Why did you choose to stay in Humboldt if you never wanted to come to California?

Clark: Oh, I mean once I got here, I mean, there was nowhere else in California I want to live, but uh, this is a delightful spot.

Brady: Did the environments around us, with the redwoods around us and the ocean, help you decide to stay...

Clark: Oh, yeah, yeah. That’s why I came and why I stayed. I can’t imagine anywhere else as nice.

Brady: On campus did you participate in any of the college clubs?

Clark: Uh, no.

Brady: Were you interested in any of them?

Clark: Not really. I mean I had a lot of student friends, I did things with students, but I never, none were ever in a club.
**Pekarek:** What were some of the main political movements that affected the Humboldt campus, when you were around?

**Clark:** Well, by far the biggest thing was the Vietnam War, and uh. [Pause, Feedback] Is everything ok?

**Brady:** I hope so.

**Clark:** [Feedback] And after the Kent State shootings was a fairly active time. Humboldt students did very well during that episode. And groups of two or three students would go around the neighborhood and speak to residents, describing what their own attitudes were.

**Brady:** Sorry about the feedback I tried to get rid of it and it didn’t go away. So try to continue with it unless it gets really bad.

**Clark:** So anyway the Vietnam War definitely was the biggest thing … and other things, the establishment of the National Park, Redwood National Park, was popular among certain people on the campus, I mean most faculty, but it was unpopular in general in the community because people thought it was going to cut, you know, destroy jobs by taking away productive forest land. So that was the second biggest. And then in recent years the rise of the Green Party, I think.

**Pekarek:** Do you feel that the students on campus tend to have a different opinion with the community a lot.

**Clark:** Not any more, but that’s mainly because the community has changed. An awful lot of the community is now Humboldt graduates, and so Arcata is different from the rest of the county. If you think from the recent election and recall election, Arcata went against the recall by 80% where as Fortuna was for it by 60/40, and Arcata used to be more like Fortuna.¹ But now graduates are the homeowners. In my neighborhood for example the people next door are Humboldt graduates, across the street is a Humboldt graduate, the corner is a Humboldt graduate, so it’s mainly people who came here, liked it and wanted to stay.

**Pekarek:** Um, did you participate with any of the political movements yourself?

**Clark:** Not, not anything that the students were involved in, no. I was somewhat active in Democratic politics, but not in a leadership role.

**Brady:** How were you active with it?

**Clark:** Oh, I used to go to meetings, to meet candidates, that sort of thing. One of my close friends, Lynn Polley, was a member of the central Democratic committee. Her husband was a member of the Republican committee, but he eventually had to leave because the Republican group became very extreme, so he’s no longer associated with them.

**Pekarek:** How did the administration feel about the professors taking part in political protests, or movements?

**Clark:** [pause] In the early days I think Dr. Siemens didn’t want anyone to create friction with the community, and so he was quite opposed to it. I think that’s why Bill Wasserman left really, he was an organic chemist who was here from ‘54-‘57, or something like that. But, within ten years he had learned quite a bit, that it was

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¹ A reference to a recent attempt to recall District Attorney Paul Gallegos.
worthwhile having an active faculty, and that if you were going to have good people, they
wouldn’t take dictation at all well. And so I think he improved a lot, and McCrone was
always quite supportive of the faculty and community

**Brady:** Do you keep in contact with any of your students?

**Clark:** Well some of them that work at Humboldt I see quite a bit, and then occasionally
I’ll get an e-mail from a former student, or someone come back to Arcata to stop by and
see me.

**Brady:** Do any of them ever stop by for help on chemistry?

**Clark:** Uh, no.

**Brady:** No. [Laugh]

**Pekarek:** In your opinion are you well liked by your students?

**Clark:** [laugh] Um, yeah my student evaluations were pretty favorable, yeah.

**Brady:** Do you know if any of the students were telling their friends to take you classes
at all?

**Clark:** Oh, I assume so, yeah.

**Brady:** Um...

**Clark:** Most people didn’t have a choice, if they were going to take organic chemistry
they would either take it from me or they would have to wait a year, or maybe even two
years to get somebody else.

**Brady:** And, are there any highlights you can remember in any of the classes you taught?

**Clark:** Oh, yeah, a lot of nice things.

**Brady:** Would you like to share a favorite memory?

**Clark:** [chuckle] Oh, gee, [pause] oh a couple of times, at the end of my organic course
students gave me a gift. That was always nice and unexpected.

**Brady:** What type of gifts did they give you?

**Clark:** Oh some of them were gifts certificates to buy plants, or I got a gift certificate to
buy a sweater over at the Irish Shop. I got a watch one class.

**Brady:** What was your style of teaching? Did you do a lot of reading out of the book, or
slides, or activities?

**Clark:** No, it was lecture. My idea was to give a little lecture and then at the end of this
small portion of lecture stop and ask for questions if there were any and handle those, but
mainly it was lecture. I drew a lot of things, a chemist has a lot of diagrams to draw,
formulas and so forth, so I drew a lot of that on the black board. The thing that I did best
was—this was in general chemistry—when I taught general chemistry I would have
Sunday afternoon study sessions where students would come and I would just answer the
questions they had until everyone sort of gave up and go away. It would last one hour or
two hours; we would do that every Sunday.

**Brady:** Did your teaching style ever change over the years?

**Clark:** Oh, yeah, sure.

**Brady:** How did it start off and how did it end up being like?

**Clark:** Well, I don’t think the, I don’t think there’s any major shift. I was following, as I
said I had George Weland and I thought was very good and so I was trying to model
myself after him, and after Peter Yates. And they were both straightforward lecturers, and not showy or anything and I certainly was never that way. But one of the things I did take up, this was something a student suggested once, that I was handing out information so fast that he suggested I give out maybe a mimeograph—which was an old style type xerox thing—hand out a mimeo of some of the things I was going to do, so they wouldn’t have to be copying and could listen to my explanation and then not worry about having it down, because I’d give it to them. And so I then started doing that quite regularly in all my courses, I had maybe oh, maybe 100 sheets a year that I would pass out to students of the variety.

Brady: Um, besides in the classroom, outside the classroom did you, um, have any friendly relationships with any of your students?
Clark: Oh, yes.
Brady: So, um, did you ever meet after class just for, I don’t know, coffee or something?
Clark: Well, I’d say in the early days we’d probably go down to this bar called the Keg, which is on 18th St. That’s where many people hung out. Then later in my career I would go down to Toby & Jacks on the Plaza.

Pekarek: Have you noticed any change between the ratio of men and women in the chemistry department?
Clark: Oh, sure. Oh my yes. My first organic class I had only seven students and two were girls and five boys. And then some years I’d have maybe just one or two women, and you know fifteen guys. But as the years went on the ratio evened out so now it’s about fifty-fifty in the end.
Pekarek: Was there any change in the faculty? Are there more women in the faculty now teaching chemistry?
Clark: Well, there’s not very many. There’s two right now. We’ve had, ahead of these two we had one full time and one full time temporary and a couple of part time. So by the time there got to be a lot of female candidates the department was sort of tenured in. I said we all came around ‘56 to ’70 is when all these guys came in and it wasn’t until a few years later that there started being large numbers of women PhDs available. We do have in the department now there’s Carol Lasco, who is a full professor, and Kjirsten Wayman who is an assistant professor. She’s the one who’s hired to take my place.

Brady: Could you explain the tenure process to us and how professors are able to get that and what it is exactly?
Clark: Well, all that means is that once you become tenured they can’t fire you except for cause. In other words you have to do something bad in order for them to get rid of you. When you’re not tenured they can fail to rehire you for any number of reasons. When I got tenure it was really quite easy. I think it was 1962 that I became a tenured professor. And then I became full professor in 1968.
Brady: So...
Clark: So then that meant for the next 32 years they couldn’t fire me, but I still worked real hard all the time. I worked every weekend and I did my summertime research up there, so it’s not that I was just lazing around once I got tenure.
Brady: How do you get the tenure? What did you have to do to get that?
**Clark:** It was quite relatively informal, nowadays there’s quite an elaborate procedure that other faculty have to go listen to your lectures and give reports on how they work and there’s committees that, there were committees in my day that evaluated me, but it was not nearly so formalized.

**Brady:** It’s still doing the feedback. Why did you decide to retire?

**Clark:** Well, I, actually I reached the point that my pension would be greater then my salary. The way they calculate your pension is you multiply the number of years that you worked, by a factor depending on your age, and actually I had worked the last three years for almost no money at all. ‘Cause that age factor maximizes at 63 and doesn’t increase after that, so I knew I wanted to keep on working even though I was making barely more then what my pension was. But I decided that I would quit when my pension exceeded my salary. And that’s what it did when I was 66 and I retired.

**Brady:** Why did you decide to stay at Humboldt after you retired, or in Arcata?

**Clark:** Oh, I mean once you found paradise, why do you move from it?

[Laugh]

**Pekarek:** Do you still do research?

**Clark:** Uh, no … They don’t, I think they would have allowed me if I had you know the real urge for it. The space is very tight up there, there’s really very little space and so they wouldn’t have been, they wouldn’t have liked having me up there. I do occasionally get called as a consultant on NMR—which is my specialty—because I know the machine better then anyone else. So if it is having spell of some sort or another I go up and see if I can help.

**Pekarek:** Do you miss teaching?

**Clark:** Huh?

**Pekarek:** Do you miss teaching?

**Clark:** Not so much any more. The first year yes, it was a hair-wrenching experience not to be actively doing it.

**Brady:** On your free time what do you do now?

**Clark:** Oh, I read and watched a lot of Turner Classic movies and [pause]. How about yourselves, you’re history majors, is that...

**Brady:** Umhm. Well...thinking about going into history major, but pursuing it [laugh].

**Clark:** How many years have you been here?

**Brady:** One. Counting this year. This is second semester for both of us.

**Pekarek:** This is...

**Clark:** Why did you come here?

**Brady:** Small campus with a lot of beautiful things around it, good diversity. I’m guessing these are all also some other reasons why you came here.

**Clark:** Oh, sure.

**Brady:** Did the small campus also attract you?

**Clark:** Oh, I, yeah that was my plan. When I knew I wanted to teach, I knew also that I wanted to teach at a small college, even though I had not attended one, I had only gone to major Universities, but my brother and sister had gone to small colleges and so I knew that was the sort of thing I wanted and that was the sort of place that I applied.
Brady: For the diversity here at Arcata, how has it changed from when you first came here?
Clark: Well, there were very few oriental students when I came, there were very few black students, there already were quite a few Indian students, Native American Students, when I first came. I think that the big change is the much larger number of oriental students. At least in my classes.

Brady: Were they widely accepted on campus when they first started coming here?
Clark: Oh, I think so, certainly. Or the ones in my class seemed to be happy and interacted well too. See in a lab class, when I had organic chemistry, I would lecture 3 times a week, but I’d have 2 three-hour lab periods with the students each week, so by the end of the year I got to know those kids pretty well, and got to recognize how well people were getting along with each other. I do remember one student who was just one year away from Vietnam—I mean he came to this country and had one year in American high school—came up and he was really very shy and withdrawn when he first was here but he quickly got to be part of the group and it was amazing how much he enjoyed Humboldt. From a start where he could barely wait to be done so he could get out of here to liking it very much.

Brady: How did the diversity of the faculty change over the years?
Clark: Well, let’s see, I don’t think there were any orientals or blacks when I first started. But again that was true in practically every institution in the country. We hired, in the sciences we hired quite a few orientals in the 60s and also some Indians. In the chem department we had (M.G.) Suryaraman, an Indian.

End of tape one.

Brady: So you got cut off taking about, in the middle of diversity of the faculty. So you talked about orientals coming here and also Native Americans.
Clark: Right, so it’s, it’s still overwhelmingly white faculty, but there’s getting to be a reasonable diversity throughout the University I think.

Brady: And the chemistry department in itself was that very diverse, uh near your retirement?
Clark: Well I mean as well, at the time we had this whole tenured department 12 guys uh and one Indian uh and 12, 11 white. They were just beginning to retire when I was retiring and since then we’ve hired in [pause] don’t think, there’s no one who’s considered minority in the department. There’s Ralph Martinez who’s a Hispanic, but he’s a second or third generation.

Pekarek: Do you think you feel the lack of minorities just has to do with the fact that most teachers were hired before they were hiring a lot of minorities?
Clark: Yeah, I mean certainly in the chem department that was true, by the time the affirmative action came along Humboldt, this was true throughout Humboldt, see Humboldt had a strange growth pattern, being very very tiny, and then during the 50s it
started growing. When I came here in ’59 it had 1700 students. And that grew quite rapidly passing 4000 students say in roughly 1970, then say getting up to about 7500 within the next 5 years. And then it’s just stayed, it hasn’t grown any since roughly 1975, by the time [pause] affirmative action got well under way Humboldt had reached its essentially present size and there just wasn’t very many available spots for the minorities. They’ve hired, they made certainly a valiant effort to find them. It’s difficult, trying to encourage to get, especially blacks to come here because there’s so little social uh so few blacks in the area that they feel sort of isolated. All their social contacts are down in the Bay Area.

Brady: How did the campus layout, buildings, change during your years at Humboldt?
Clark: Oh, well the year I came, Humboldt had just finished a big building project. So in the Spring of 1960 they had a massive dedication for 8 new buildings and uh those new buildings were the theater, John Van Duzer Theatre, Siemens Hall, Redwood and Sunset, the swimming pool, the field house, and I can’t think what the eighth one was. But all those are older buildings now on campus. The science complex which has A, B, C, D, and E had only about 1/3 of Science A was the only thing that was there and the chemistry and physics moved into the building that was built and opened in 1962, which was the other half, the other part of Science A. Science B, the Biology building, was built maybe about 1970 and the Green House and Science E were built around uh 1990, I suspect, something like that.

Brady: Keeps coming and going that feedback we’re getting. Um, is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience at Humboldt as a professor?
Clark: No I can’t think of anything that would add an awful lot to this interview.
Brady: All right.
Clark: I thoroughly enjoyed my work and I had a very happy productive life here.
Brady: Sounds like it. Thank you very much for your time and for letting us come to your house and interview you.
Pekarek: Thank you it was really nice. That’s it.

End of Interview.