Interview with Dr. John Russell  
Interviewers: William Wakeman and Kate Cronin  
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William Wakeman (WW): Hello. This is William Wakeman and Kate Cronin, and we are interviewing Dr. John Russell who was a chemistry professor here at Humboldt State University from the years 1956 to 1992. I think we should just get right to the questions.

WW: First I would like to ask you where did you go to school and what degrees did you obtain?

Dr. Jack Russell (Dr. R): I was an undergraduate at Oberlin College which is in Ohio thirty miles southwest of Cleveland and I got an AB degree there, and then I went to Cornell in Ithaca, New York and got a PhD in inorganic chemistry there, and from there I eventually, not too much later, I came here to teach.

WW: What exactly brought you to Humboldt State?

Dr. R: That’s kind of an interesting question. I was in the East—Ithaca is almost on the East Coast—and we had a terrible, terrible winter. We didn’t see the pavement in front of our house from about November until April and we decided we wanted to get as far away from the East as we possibly could. So, I put in applications to various places and one of the places I applied to was Chico State—it was Chico State College in those days—because they had advertised they had a position. I got a letter from them saying the position had been filled, but they knew of a position at Humboldt State College. Would I like them to pass my application along to Humboldt? I said, “sure, might as well” and so they did and very soon after that I got an invitation to come here and teach. I got some other invitations too but for various reasons, Humboldt being all the way West, I decided I could always come back, but I started teaching here in 1956.

WW: What is your specialty in chemistry?

Dr. R: Inorganic chemistry

WW: And that is the…?

Dr. R: That’s the chemistry of…it’s kind of hard to define but it’s the chemistry of compounds other than the compounds of carbon. That’s not a rigorous definition, because there are exceptions to it, but it’s about as close as you can come.

WW: Did you ever receive any promotions or rewards in your tenure at Humboldt State University?

Dr. R: Well, I came here as an assistant professor and was promoted to associate professor and then to full professor. All of the other things are fairly minor.
WW: Such as…

Dr. R: Oh, little awards for doing special presentations. A couple of us did a show in what is now Van Duzer Theater on chemical magic and things like that, and we got an award for that. Basically, I stayed in the background.

WW: What changes occurred in the way the chemistry program operated at Humboldt State University?

Dr. R: When I first came, there was no chemistry major at all. You couldn’t major in chemistry. We didn’t have the faculty; we didn’t have the courses. So, it was a matter of teaching chemistry primarily to people who were majoring in other sciences: biology, zoology, botany plus some of the students in natural resources. Eventually, we applied for and were granted the permission to offer a chemistry major and were given the ability to hire enough additional people. When I came, there were three people teaching chemistry, including myself. When we bumped up to five people, we began offering a chemistry major. We did very well at first. Our students went to highly acclaimed national universities after they left here, most of them to get PhDs at other schools. Also, they went around the state of California doing very well, some of them teaching and some of them working in industry. So, we felt rather encouraged that for a very young department we were doing pretty well.

WW: What classes did you teach and do any stand out in your mind as particularly fun, or perhaps, I hate to use the B word, but boring to teach?

Dr. R: I never taught any course that was boring. I started out by teaching General Chemistry which is the introductory course and everybody starts there. Eventually, I taught physical chemistry. I was actually a physical/inorganic chemist so I had a background in both physical chemistry and inorganic chemistry. I taught physical chemistry, and let me think now. I taught some advanced inorganic courses including one called inorganic synthesis where the students learned how to synthesize or prepare various inorganic compounds. And they were all … I mean, I just love to teach. They were all fun. I was never bored in anything.

WW: What were class sizes like at the beginning, middle, and end of your tenure at Humboldt State University?

Dr. R: Yes, at the beginning they tended to be very small, frequently under 20 for a general chemistry course. Now today, or when I left, the general chemistry course had 80 or 100 students in it, so there was a big, big expansion in that particular course. It was good and it was bad in a way, but it made it a little harder to teach because you were trying to communicate not just to 15 or 20 students. Teaching is communication and when you get 80 people and you’re trying to communicate with them all, you’ve got to look at their faces very, very closely to see if you’re getting through. When you see these blank looks then you know you’re not getting through and so you have to try and figure out what to do about it.
WW: Were there any other like changes in the department…any other changes…anything you know you’d like to…?

Dr. R: Well, we eventually grew to something like 10 or 12 faculty members and of course that meant trying to figure out who was going to teach what, which was somewhat a problem at first mostly because the student body grew in size and we were not restricted to small classes. Now, that eventually changed of course. In terms of the way we taught I think as the University grew, most of us who were teaching chemistry found that more and more students really weren’t interested in chemistry. They were taking it because it was a requirement for a degree. Many of us found this depressing. We didn’t expect everybody to be and it would be a terrible place if everybody were fanatical about chemistry. It’s good to have diversity and a variety. But we seemed to have more and more students who were just going through the motions, and that for most of us in the department was a little bit disappointing. We were a very self…a coherent department. We all had pretty much the same ideas and the ideas about teaching chemistry were surprisingly enough consistent with the whole concept of the liberal arts. People sometimes think, well, how can chemistry which is a science have anything to do with liberal arts? Well, it really does. It has a lot because the term liberal arts originally included all of the sciences. So, we hung in there, did the best we could, and I think we did a fairly good job.

WW: What was the tenure process like?

Dr. R: Oh, the tenure process, originally, you mean? Originally, the tenure process was a very, very simple thing. A couple of people who were your superiors—they were the chairman of your department and maybe the Dean of Instruction who is now called the Vice President for Academic Affairs—got together and discussed a person who had been here long enough to be considered eligible for promotion. It was a very informal thing. The person who was eligible for promotion didn’t have to do anything. They just sort of sat around and waited to see what would happen and eventually you were informed that if you were promote-able that was the case; you became promoted. Now today, in fact long ago, it changed and became much more complicated. So the person who is eligible for promotion today must allow an infinite number of pages of stuff about himself and get people to send in written recommendations. It’s very complicated and very agonizing. Back in the early days it was very informal; in fact the whole University was run on a much more informal basis than it is today, and that was reflected in a lot of places including the promotion process.

WW: Why do you think that was?

Dr. R: Well, partly because in the early days the school was much smaller. When I arrived in 1956, there were I think only 1400 or 1600 students and everybody knew everybody else pretty much. All the students knew, by the time you’ve been here a couple years you knew all the other students and you knew a lot of the faculty members who you didn’t take any courses from and so it was all very informal because it was a
very friendly close atmosphere. And part of that informality sort of was spun off on the promotion process. It became informal too, and then the pressures mounted to become more like other universities, etc. All the processes for promotion and other personnel matters became more cast in concrete, more rigorous, and to my mind more annoying.

WW: How did the atmosphere of the University change? There are so many events that happened during your tenure. What effects did things like the Cold War, Viet Nam, the high profile assassinations of the 60’s, and any other inflammatory events have that you can remember?

Dr. R: Oh, that stretches my memory a little bit. There was a great deal of interest in all of the national and international events of this type among all the students pretty much. I would say at the very beginning there was less interest. People were more interested in what was going on here on the campus. There was for example a mashed potato fight in the cafeteria. I don’t think there’s anybody that remembers that. At any rate silly little things like that used to happen. But, as things on the national and international level began to become more important, there began to be more interest and sometimes more conflict on the campus. Students used to disagree with each other more. There was one department who—I won’t name any departments here—but there’s one department who was very much in favor of the Viet Nam War, let’s say, and many other students disagreed and so when this department staged a march, there were a lot of students who were opposed to this and so they got up and tried to counter-march and that was really the beginning of the involvement of Viet Nam, not Korea so much. But the Viet Nam War was the beginning of the interest that students had in national and international events. Before that it was mostly local, on campus and in the City of Arcata and what not.

WW: O.K. How did the budget affect the learning environment? How did that affect faculty relations? How did that affect students’ relations?

Dr. R: Well, of course we’ve always been very much interested in the budget. Some of us got very frustrated when certain funds were cut and certain programs had to be cut back. I can remember when they built what is now the major portion of the science building. It’s spread out now much more, but when they first built that section that’s nearest to the physical education facilities, we went through, jumped through all the hoops to justify facilities for this course or for that course, or this program or that program. We got everything approved until finally at the very end all of a sudden, they cut back on us. We never got a good reason for it, but they cut back about 20% and they said it’s up to you to figure out how to absorb the cutback, and it meant that we had to shrink the sizes of our rooms, of our laboratories, of our stockrooms, and that really hurt. I went to see Homer Balabanis who was then Dean of Instruction—it’s the position which is now the Vice President for Academic Affairs—to ask him if anything could be done. I explained to him what this meant to our program and how it would hurt us and he couldn’t do anything for me. So, we had to cut back and the building ended up, as I recall, 70 or maybe 80 % of the originally planned size and that was very depressing and we just had to absorb it and it meant that the labs had to be smaller and that the stockrooms had to be smaller and it hurt us. So when things like that happened in those
days—this was chemistry that I’m talking about; but I know that it happened in other departments too—it was partly a result of the fact that originally the state colleges, as they were called, were part of the Department of Education in the State of California which is in charge of high schools and elementary schools and so forth. Finally we broke away and the Chancellor’s office was established and we became completely separate from the other pre-baccalaureate programs. The people who were in charge had a hard time understanding what college education could be, what university education could be. So it was a rough transition there for awhile, and we got caught up in part of that.

WW: You said “what college education could be.” What do you think university and college education could be?

Dr. R: What it can be is an experience which teaches students how to think clearly and that’s more important than anything else in my opinion. Now, you can’t get a job and make money by telling the person who interviews you, “I can think clearly.” Obviously, you have to have specific skills, and so it’s a matter of combining this need for specific skills to get a job with the ability to think clearly, clearly and critically. This doesn’t happen in very many colleges and universities. It does happen here to a considerable extent, not as much as it used to. We’ve lost a little bit of that. There’s much more emphasis now on getting a job, the details of what you have to…facts…learn the facts; learn how to do this. But, if you learn how to think clearly, you can do almost anything because you can figure your way out of a problem. It’s really a better way to go, but it doesn’t happen at very many schools. It still happens at Humboldt to a great degree. There are still many faculty members who understand this and incorporate this point of view in their teaching, but I’m sorry to say it isn’t as strong a goal as it used to be.

WW: Now, previously you mentioned about the construction of the new science building. In what other ways that are significant to you did the campus evolve physically? Did the construction interrupt any of the classes? Did the administration adequately deal with the building closures, in your opinion?

Dr. R: I think so. I think most people did everything they could possibly do. We were a team. We started out as a small team; we ended up as a much larger team. But if there was a problem with the construction, or potential problem, the administration and faculty dug in and tried to solve it. We were never seriously interfered with in our teaching with the … oh let’s say…the noise of construction and what not. We were occasionally, but we knew what was going on and were always informed ahead of time if there’s going to be a problem during these days. We hope you will understand that we will try to interfere with your teaching as little as possible. Most of the faculty and most of the administration were really quite understanding. So I can’t really remember when there was a serious problem. There were noises and funny smells and things like that, but chemists are used to funny smells.

WW: What clubs or organizations, if any, were you affiliated with during your tenure at Humboldt State University?
Dr. R: I was not affiliated with very many clubs or organizations. I’m trying to think … I did get involved in a … it really wasn’t a Humboldt State University organization. It was the Boy Scouts organization. There were a number of us that got involved in the Arcata Boy Scouts, but that really wasn’t Humboldt State. That was more community. I’m trying to think of other organizations. It’s been awhile. Oh, I was on a number of committees and organizations that had to do with the interaction between the sciences and the natural resources people. I worked a number of years on that, but other than that, not too much.

Kate Cronin (KC): How did the technological advances in your field change the way you taught at all?

Dr. R: Oh yes, yes indeed. When I came most of the teaching was done with glassware in the laboratory: test tubes, beakers, flasks, and so forth. Now there’s an awful lot of electronics that is used and really high tech equipment, and most of these things were not used at the undergraduate level for quite a number of years and we were among the first to use things…devices…such as nuclear magnetic resonance and other devices that are now very commonly used in chemistry, but they were never used at the beginning level or even at the undergraduate level. So, we worked very hard to get grants and Natural Science Foundation and other sources to be able to acquire these pieces of equipment and to incorporate them in our teaching and now we use them a lot and so things have changed, and test tube chemistry, glassware-type chemistry is mostly limited to the first year, the freshman year, with even some of the electronic equipment used there too. So, it’s all changing; it’s been changing; it’s still changing.

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KC: What would you say is the single greatest advance in your field?

Dr. R: I think probably, that’s a hard question to answer, I think probably the single greatest advance is our present-day ability to model not only on the molecular level for individual molecules but actually to model chemical reactions and show how molecules change. Now, we have to be very careful because you can develop a model and put it on a computer screen, and you can see how the atoms of molecules change places or change in one way or another as a reaction takes place, but really all you’re looking at is the computer screen and you have to be sure that that is a realistic procedure that you’re looking at. Some people have gotten stung by deciding that a reaction occurred in a certain way whereas in fact it did not. All they were doing was following a program that was wrong. But the use of computer animation really has changed things because now the bugs in the programs are pretty well worked out and people can use computers to predict what’s going to happen without actually running the experiment. This doesn’t mean that they don’t run the experiment, but they get from the computer what they think will happen and then they go to the lab and run the experiment. But, I think computer animation and modeling have changed things more than anything else since I’ve been teaching chemistry.
KC: Was there a noticeable difference when the administration changed from the Siemens administration to the McCrone administration?

Dr.R: Oh yes, there was. It’s kind of hard to describe. Siemens had a … I knew him pretty well and he had his own way of running things which was a little bit unusual. I would say McCrone was more traditional as a college or university president. Some of the things that Siemens did really … some of them made us laugh. I remember he took a sabbatical and went to Europe and went to the big, major, old universities and he came back and gave a talk, an hour talk to the faculty describing what he had done, and what he had learned, and one of the things that most of us thought was very funny was the fact that he said something like this, “I don’t really understand how they can do a good job of teaching in Europe when their buildings are so old.” Most of us just sort of snickered to ourselves over that one. Siemens started out when the college was much much smaller, and he had a hard time I think adapting to the growth. When McCrone came in we’d already grown and we grew some more but the basic nature of the school didn’t change a great deal. A lot of little things did. McCrone was much more sympathetic to those faculty members who wanted to do some research as part of their tenure here than Siemens was. Siemens didn’t think that we were a research university. He thought that we were a teaching college, and there is quite a difference there. So, I would say if there was any major change that occurred it was that: the emphasis on research increased and the emphasis on teaching, I don’t want to say decreased, but there certainly wasn’t this emphasis on research before McCrone came.

KC: How did the student population evolve while you were here?

Dr.R: Well, when I first came the students were not really very mature at all; they were kind of like overgrown high school students. And, like the mashed potato riot that I described earlier, that kind of thing took place. Then they seemed to grow up as time went by, and I think that was partly because of the courses that were being offered. The students realized that that there was much more to a college education, or could be more to a college education than throwing mashed potatoes around. So the students really got better in terms of their perspective on education. One of the things that … and at the same time something else happened which discouraged me personally and that is that the students’ idea of education they got mostly from being in high school, and high school education changed. It got so that what happened in a high school class was something like this: the teacher would say “Well class on Friday you’re going to have a test on such and such and such and such and such and such and you must be able to answer all of these questions.” So, the students would study just those questions but nothing else, and they were really very narrow, but that was encouraged by the teachers in high school. Well, they came here and sometimes the classes were taught that way here, and sometimes they weren’t. But, if I taught a class and didn’t tell students exactly what questions were to be used as a basis for an examination, the students, many of them, felt that they were not being taught well, you know. You’re supposed to tell them what the exam’s going to be about and I never did that. Well, this meant that the exams were harder for the students, because they had to think more, and I got some really interesting comments from my students. I gave a quiz in lab one day and then at the end of it, after I
turned it back to the students, one student came up to me and he was really quite irate and he said, “Why did you ask this question? I didn’t study this material. I wasn’t told to study this material and yet I was supposed to answer these questions.” I didn’t say anything, I just looked at him and all the sudden he said, “Oh, you wanted me to think,” and I said “yes, exactly,” and he suddenly saw there, something happened to him at that point. He suddenly realized that this wasn’t a game, this wasn’t all true and false, this was a matter of learning how to think and I was pleased, I was pleased, because he learned something at that point. I would say that things have changed along some of those lines. I think there are more classes now being taught, particularly at the beginning level, say freshmen and sophomore level, where the students are not really required to think. They are required to memorize, and memorization doesn’t really get you very far in my opinion.

KC: Were there any women in the chemistry field when you…

Dr.R: Do you mean in the classes?

KC: Yeah, when you had, especially after it became a major here.

Dr.R: Yes we did have women. I’d hate to put a number on it but I’d say at the beginning, as soon as we opened the chemistry major up, I’d say 25% of our students were women. Which is, I thought, pretty good for a beginning. It’s more now. Yes.

KC: Um ok. Was there a difference in the transition from Humboldt State College to Humboldt State University?

DR.R: Not really. They changed all the letterheads on the stationary and things like that. And that caused a little bit of an uproar, but anyway, because nobody knew who we really were. But the university didn’t really change for a number of years. For one thing that funding wasn’t there, and the funding increased a little bit after a while and we were able to do, I think, a better job. There were a lot of faculty who really wanted to be able to tell other faculty that they taught at a university, that they were a university professor, not a college professor. I didn’t feel that way. In fact I went to, my undergraduate school Oberlin College, at Oberlin we were very proud of the fact that we were a college because there was a big emphasis on the liberal arts there and not on research. There was research going on, but the emphasis wasn’t there. So I couldn’t get upset about the words college versus university, although some faculty members were very very concerned about it and thought it was the most wonderful day in the in the year when we became a university. I didn’t feel that way.

KC: What were the relations with the community like?

Dr.R: I don’t know, I really don’t know what they’re like right now. When I was, during the first ten years or so that I taught, my primary relationship, other than this work with the boy scouts, was going out to high schools in the community and talking to them and telling them what college was all about. Many students in high school, even today, they
don’t really have a feeling for what it’s going to be [like], how’s it going to be different. So, I tried to talk to them and to tell them what it was all about. I gave talks at night and evenings for parents as well as for students and I would say that most of my involvement was along those lines—trying to help students prepare for college. Most of the college, what are they called, advisors or something like that, didn’t seem to really prepare the students for college. What they did was they prepared … they tried to help the students get in, there was the admissions problem, but there wasn’t much emphasis on what do you do once you get in, you know. How do you succeed? And I felt that was too bad so I tried to help along those lines.

KC: Did you think that the people you were speaking to appreciated that?

Dr.R: I don’t know. I really couldn’t tell. I think, probably, they didn’t at the time. It’s the kind of thing that may come home later, but at the time I’m not sure that they really understood what I was saying. I’m hoping that some of it would come back later.

KC: Is there anything else that we haven’t covered that you think is memorable or important about your time here?

Dr.R: Well of course there’s always the aspect of the the change in the appearance of the campus. When I came here if you stood at the top of the steps leading up to Founders Hall and looked out there was no library. If you looked down there was a Quonset hut—do you know what a Quonset hut is? It has a curved roof, it was developed during the Second World War, and so this was a war surplus Quonset hut which was the bookstore. Behind the bookstore was a tennis court, you know look right out from Founders Hall and there’s a tennis court, or maybe there were two of them I don’t remember at the time. And over where Natural Resources is now there were a bunch of war surplus barracks buildings and more Quonset huts. We were scrambling, we were scrambling, we didn’t have much money, it was a very difficult time for the college and the buildings were quite a bit different. None of this, where the library is now, where we’re talking at the moment, there were miscellaneous houses, people living in them not part of the university, just houses. Eventually the university acquired them. The state bought them and they had to be torn down in order to build places like the library. The appearance of the campus was just completely different: old buildings, second hand buildings, Quonset huts, all kinds of different things. When I came, Founders Hall was in place. Before I got here the hallways going around the inside of Founders Hall were open; they weren’t glassed in. So, when the rains came you got wet going from class to class because it would blow in that way, but that was before I came. When I came they were all glassed in. They’ve changed Founders Hall since I came but it’s very similar to my first experience here. When I came here the library was in the Green and Gold room, that was the library and then it changed and they built what is now part of the engineering facilities, and that became the library and then the library, the new library, the one we’re in now, was built and then expanded. So, it's been a long growth process in steps and stages.

KC: Did any of the community members object to the expansion of the school?
Dr.R: There’s always, every, every, every, town or city that I’ve been to in the United States exhibits the town versus gown controversy where the goals of the town or city don’t always coincide with the goals of the educational institution, college or university. There was some of that here particularly, in the early days here when Arcata was strictly a logging town. It was a rough-and-ready type logging town. If you went down to the plaza on a Sunday morning, let’s say, there would be cars all around the plaza Sunday morning. The first time I did this I couldn’t figure out why and then I looked around and I saw that there were about eight bars around the periphery or ten bars around the periphery of the of the plaza and that’s where all the loggers went on Sunday morning. And that kind of thing developed into various conflicts, nothing big, but there is still a lot of people in Arcata, a lot of the older people, who have it in for college students you know. They don’t like college students for one reason or another. So, there was the town versus gown controversy but nothing really serious happened, no pitched battles or anything like that.

KC: Is there anything else you would like to share?

Dr.R: No. I appreciate the chance to unburden my soul with some of my observations and I think you folks are doing a good job by doing this.