Dennis Dimick Oral History Interview, December 15, 2014

Title
“Bridging the Gap Between Science and the Public”

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National Geographic Society Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Summary
In the interview, Dimick discusses his family background and upbringing on a farm south of Portland, his involvement in agriculture as a boy, and his first experiences with photography. He then describes his enrollment at Oregon State University, the furthering of his passion for photography and photojournalism, influential contacts that he made with faculty and fellow students interested in journalism, and his activities as a staff member at the *Daily Barometer* newspaper and *Beaver* yearbook.

As he continues his reflections on his years at OSU, Dimick shares his memories of campus life, his fraternity, and working during the summertime. He likewise notes the advancement of his journalistic skill set while an undergraduate, comments on his early engagement with environmental issues, and discusses his employment with the OSU Office of Agricultural Information.

From there, Dimick recalls his graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, his hosting of a radio program while there, and his broader impressions of life in the Midwest. Dimick then outlines his past work at a number of newspapers in Oregon, Washington and Kentucky, as well as influential people that he met during those years.

The remainder of the session is devoted to Dimick's career at *National Geographic*. In this, Dimick recounts the means by which he came to be employed by the magazine, his initial duties at the publication, standout projects with which he was associated, and his increasing involvement in reporting on environmental issues. The interview concludes with words of advice for students of today.

Interviewee
Dennis Dimick

Interviewer
Janice Dilg

Website
http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/dimick/

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So today is December 15th, 2014 and I'm at the National Geographic Society's headquarters in Washington, D.C. And I'm here with Dennis Dimick, the executive editor for the environment for *National Geographic* magazine, and an alumni from OSU, class of 1973. My name is Janice Dilg, I'm the interviewer, and this interview is part of the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project. Good afternoon, Dennis.

Dennis Dimick: Hi, how are you Janice?

JD: I'm great; happy to be in D.C. and happy to be here interviewing you.

DD: Great, nice to be here.

JD: So this is where you are now, but I'd like to start by taking us back a bit to where you started out in Oregon; a bit of your family history.

DD: Sure. So I'm a fifth-generation Oregonian. My ancestors came to Oregon in the 1840s. Augustus Wright Dimick is buried in the cemetery near Hubbard. My dad grew up on what's now – it was a donation land claim, just east of Hubbard, near the Pudding River. So I have a long history in the state of Oregon.

My dad graduated from Oregon State in 1939. His cousin, Rolland Eugene Dimick, started the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Oregon State. I've got an older brother, John, who graduated from OSU in 1969 or '70.

JD: Expand a little on your family – where you lived, where you grew up, and some of your early influences.

DD: Sure. We grew up on a small farm that, at the time, was about thirteen miles south of the city center of Portland. It was about three miles south of Lake Oswego. It has since been taken over by Interstate 205, for those who are familiar with the geography. But what it was, it was – my parents, my mother, Mary Elizabeth Fitzgibbon, her father, John Fitzgibbon, was on the faculty of the University of Oregon Medical School. And she went to the University of Michigan. She and my dad both worked at what was then the Oregon State Game Commission; they were both fisheries biologists. They married in '47 and they bought this small place south of Lake Oswego, and that's where we grew up. There were five of us kids, and it was a laboratory, really, for us; a place where we could roam freely. It's not something that seems to be common these days for kids. But it was great – we had woods, we had fields, we could get lost in the trees, and there was, believe it or not, lots of old growth Douglas Fir there, and cedar trees. So it was a great place.

And we also raised livestock – we raised pure-bred Suffolk sheep, we had some cattle, we also had some pigs. Both my older brother John and I were in FFA, Future Farmers of America, the West Linn High School chapter. I was also in 4-H. Both of us exhibited livestock at the Clackamas County Fair in Canby and the Oregon State Fair in Salem, and when I was a freshman in high school I was the grand champion FFA exhibitor at the Pacific International Livestock Exposition, which at the time was held in north Portland. So we had a long connection to FFA.

I then, after high school, went to Oregon State and started out majoring in Ag Ed. – Ag Education. I was learning to ostensibly be a high school vocational ag teacher. My older brother John went on and then taught for more than thirty years – at Phoenix High School for a few years and more than twenty-five years at Crater High School at the north end of the Rogue Valley near Medford – as a high school teacher.

But when I finished my freshman year at Oregon State, I bought a camera, and that proved the change in my life's work. I shortly, after buying that camera – I was in the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity at Oregon State and my roommate the spring term of my freshman year was Kit Anderson; his full name is Nelson Christian Anderson III. He was the son of a county extension agent in Heppner. And he saw that I was interested in photography, but he was already a journalist. He was working at the Albany *Democrat-Herald* part-time. And he saw that I was quite interested in photography and he then introduced me, that next fall, to Quinton Smith, who was at that time the news editor at the Oregon State *Daily Barometer*, the school paper at Oregon State.

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And then, a bit after that, I started taking pictures for *The Barometer*, for Quinton, and then enrolled in – I kind of did it backwards, I started working for the newspaper before I knew what I was doing. So I went over to the Journalism department and introduced myself to Fred Zwahlen, who was chairman of the department, and told him that I had taken this position shooting pictures for *The Barometer* and was there any chance I might learn about what I was doing by enrolling in his photojournalism class? And he said, "well, the class is usually oversubscribed, but in this case we'll make an exception." So I took the class and that was actually the beginning of a life-long friendship with Fred, or he was commonly known as Casper. And he was very informative and influential in my college days at Oregon State.

JD: Chris Johns earlier mentioned the nickname of Casper, do you know what the origins of that are?

DD: I do not know the origins of Casper. I do know that Fred and I and likely Chris, we all hit it off because we were all farm kids. And Fred grew up on a dairy farm in Beaverton, near what is now the site of Jesuit High School.

JD: So you go off to OSU with desires to have a degree in agriculture and be a teacher, what inspired you to pick up a camera and what intrigued you about it?

DD: Well, what inspired me to pick up the camera in the first place probably was because I had been exposed to photography quite a lot when I was very young. And my mother's father, John H. Fitzgibbon, was an avid photographer – he had a darkroom in his house in Milwaukie and whenever we were over there for family events and things, he was always snapping pictures of us with his Lycos, and we would see albums of his prints. So I was always intrigued by it, but never really had developed it.

When I was maybe eleven or twelve, I actually had a brief experience – I had picked up some roll film cameras and was taking pictures with them. And, for example – I wish I knew where the negatives were today – there was, I think it was in 1962 on Columbus Day, there was a horrendous windstorm, the Columbus Day windstorm. It was very devastating to Oregon; lots of barns were knocked over. It was in the afternoon, milking time in the Tillamook Valley, and there were several barns in our neighborhood that were knocked over. We lost the roof of our barn. I spent the next week on top of the barn putting a new roof on. But what I did was I went around documenting all this damage, and I had taken pictures with this camera.

And I also had, when I was in 4-H, I had a 4-H potato project and so I put together an exhibit about the project for the Clackamas County Fair at Canby. And I thought that the best way to show my potato field would be to take a panoramic picture of it. So I used my, I think it was a Sawyer 620 roll film camera, and I stood in one place and then I went boom-boom-boom-boom, like this, with my camera, and made sure everything was lined up. And then I took the film to the drug store – that's what you did in the day – and the prints came back, and then I stuck them all together in this kind of panoramic view of the field. And that was really the first inkling of my interest in photography. But then it really kind of went latent for a few years, and once I was in college I was quite intrigued with it.

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JD: Talk a little about the general campus life. You were at OSU from 1970 to 1973?

DD: I came to Oregon State in the fall of 1969, I was a 1969 graduate of West Linn High School. And then went to OSU in the fall of '69. I stayed in Finley Hall; my older brother John was actually an RA in Finley Hall that year. I stayed in that dorm for two years and then moved to the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity in the spring term of '70.

I was actually quite deeply involved in my ag classes, because I liked the ag classes a lot. Once I got ahold of the camera the summer of 1970, I started spending a whole lot of time in the student union darkroom in the Memorial Union. And for me, a lot of my activity was going to various events around campus, photographing events, putting them in the *Barometer*. And then I was also a photographer for the yearbook, the OSU *Beaver*, my junior year. So a lot of my own activities around campus were connected to journalism and photography.

But I was also, despite the fact that I had changed my major to General Agriculture and I was no longer majoring in Ag Ed, I was still deeply connected to agriculture and those issues. For example, in my senior year – well let me see, I'll back up. In my junior year, I also worked in the greenhouses on campus, I would spend a couple hours a day watering plants in the greenhouse. And in my senior year at Oregon State, I worked in the Office of Agricultural Information. It was in the

Administration Building, and Sam Bailey was the head of that office, and Gwil Evans worked there. And I would write news releases, informational releases, about what was going on in the College of Agriculture at Oregon State. And that's what I did for my senior year.

JD: Was there a particular focus to the fraternity that you were in? What was the appeal and what sent you that particular fraternity?

DD: It was an academically focused place. They had, at that time, I think they had the highest grades of any fraternity on campus. And it was a good environment to be in because it was – well, it wasn't as transient as the dorm and you had a community of people there who were all interested in trying to do well academically. And we also participated in various intramural things. I was briefly on the track team at Oregon State, for about a quarter, when I was a freshman, and then continued that through when I was at the Sig Ep house, getting on the intramural track team. Inside of a big university, I think that living groups like that provide people with a focal point, a place to feel like they're part of some neighborhood within a larger city, which is really what that was. And for me it was a very positive experience.

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JD: It sounds like you were quite busy with a full academic load as well as your interests and your work for *The Barometer* and then *The Beaver* annual. Did you have time and ability to pursue other hobbies and interests that you had?

DD: Well, I think the one thing about the photography was that it became and remains a central hobby for me. So that was nice that there's been an alignment between what I actually am innately interested in and how I've been able to pursue a career. So that's actually been great.

As far as other activities, we would travel. I think we would go to the coast occasionally, or go up into the mountains. During the summers though see, when I was in college, I would earn the money to go to college by going home during the summer and working with my father. We had what would be called a custom hay-bailing business. Near where we were at that time, it was still a fairly rural environment, even though it was close to Portland. There were a lot of people who had fields and some people had livestock, and they needed the forage cut off their fields in the summertimes. So starting around Memorial Day – actually, the work started before we even got out of class for the summer from Oregon State, and so we'd actually be coming home on weekends, before classes got out, to start doing haying. And that would last through the end of July and then into August I'd still show at the fairs, at least through my sophomore year. But that's what I would do during the summer.

So it was like I was either at school, I was working as a photographer, or I was going home on weekends to help with the farm. We had sheep still, so I would help my dad. Or during the summer we would cut, rake and bail the hay, and that's where the income would come from really to cover the tuition and expenses at Oregon State. But that was pretty puny money compared to what it is now. I think tuition was like $136 a quarter.

JD: Yeah, I was just thinking that it was pretty remarkable that you could earn enough for the next year over the course of a summer.

DD: Right, yeah.

JD: Talk a little bit more about some of your assignments, or the general nature of your work for *The Barometer*. Did you have assigned stories? Did you come up with some of your own ideas? How did that work?

DD: Well, the work for *The Barometer* was, there were stories that were being written that needed photographs – I would work with writers and we would go out and take pictures of situations or people that were working with the words. Of course, there were the inevitable and non-stop sporting events that we were always covering, whether it was football, basketball, wrestling, track and field, or baseball. All that. And then there was always the obligation to find the feature pictures, which were the unscripted moments that people come across on campus, and sometimes they would call it, in the newspaper business, "wild art." Or weather pictures or you name it, but it was usually something that had some whimsical juxtaposition in it. Later when I worked at newspapers, it was called "cruising for art." We were out looking around trying to find interesting pictures. So that was quite a bit of it. Occasionally there would be maybe some in-depth project that we would do, but that kind of work more or less came later when I was working at newspapers.

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JD: But it sounds like this provided some kind of basis of learning how to photograph a variety of subjects.

DD: Oh absolutely, and I think the thing about it was, it was more than just taking a class. I guess I did it in reverse order – most people would have taken the class and then had a series of assignments over the sequence of the term, and that would be their work. But I dove into the daily news. I think the thing about it though was that, from the get-go, I was involved in producing pictures under time deadline. And that really was an important thing because it forces you to think about what you're trying to do, because you don't have a lot of luxury of time. So that discipline of thinking about what you're doing, and then trying to make something visual out of a situation, really was a great discipline to have to face up to early on.

JD: It seems that there's not only mastery of the technical side of photography, but there's also the – I'm not quite sure how to phrase this – kind of the humanistic side, or how you decided not only how to shoot something but what to shoot and what kind of personal thought goes into that.

DD: Sure. And I think that there's two parts to this that often gets overlooked when people are thinking about what it's like to be a photographer. I took writing and editing classes just like the people who spent the focus of their career putting words together on the page. And we are talking about photojournalism, it's not just art photography. There's certainly a photography that has a quality to it where the aesthetic appeal of the image itself is an end in itself.

But the power in the journalistic photography was, one, you were actually trying to capture situations in an aesthetically appealing way but, two, they also had to be relevant to the day. And they weren't some self-referential document of your existence, you were actually trying to be a witness and to report what was going on, in that case, on the campus. What were the activities? Who were the people doing what? How was it relevant to the lives of the people on the campus? So it was always about this coming back to more than just the visual aesthetics and the human interest part of it, which is all very important. But it still was, "well, how relevant is it? What does it have to say about what's going on in the campus today?" So really a lot of the core attributes – journalism is who, what, where, when, why and how. So that was always a central part of what it was we were about.

JD: And these were fairly heady times, when you were on campus, as far as national and international events that were going on: the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, the environmental movement was really starting to get its feet under it at that point.

DD: Yeah, it was. I would say though too, you do have to keep in mind that we weren't full-time journalists. One thing I did, and it kind of perhaps limited my involvement in other things, but I was taking, typically, eighteen credit hours every quarter. And so that, partly because I had decided later to change my major, I still was heavily interested in agriculture, but I was also deeply involved in and thirsty to get anything I could in journalism. So in essence, even though I graduated with a degree in General Agriculture, I also was taking as much as I could in Journalism. So a lot of my time was focused on academic pursuits. So sure, I remember there were, I think that there were some protests downtown. It was about the time of the Kent State protests. But I was not involved in a lot of the political activity.

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JD: Well, I think I was also wondering if there were groups or speakers or events – people that came through town that spoke – that started to influence you or get you to think about new issues that maybe you hadn't before.

DD: Yeah, well I think I had always been interested in environmental issues, partly because I had been exposed to quite a lot of that as a child because of my parents both being connected to nature with their work in fisheries biology. My dad had been involved in a lot of the trout introduction work in high Cascade mountain lakes. And he was involved also, in the early 1950s there was, at Diamond Lake – which is just north of Crater Lake, it's in the Umpqua National Forest near the summit, it's near Mount Thielsen – and in the early '50s, Diamond Lake was one of the most popular trout fishing lakes in the west, but it had become overtaken by minnows or some kind of trash fish that actually took over the trout population. So he was involved in one of the very first projects where they actually used rotenone to get rid of trash fish, and that kind of technique, I know, is controversial to this day.

So I became connected to that. And also just the fact that, for example, since I was five, Diamond Lake was a favorite place to go. East Lake and Paulina Lake and Newberry Crater, southeast of Bend, were fabulous places – we went there a lot, camping. We spent a lot of time in the foothills of the Cascades, southeast of Molalla. So it was like I was already sensitized to these kinds of environmental issues.

JD: Your agricultural and photography worlds came together – I think you had talked about doing haying during summer breaks – but at some point you worked on a project in the Hermiston area?

DD: Right. So when I was a senior, I was working in the Office of Ag Information at Oregon State, and the summer after I graduated, actually I stayed on and worked for the Office of Ag Information and was involved in a project to go up and document the emergence of irrigated agriculture in Umatilla County. And that was a time, early on, when water was being pulled from the Columbia River; it was a way that they were able to grow crops essentially in the desert. It was largely a dry land or sagebrush kind of environment. By using water from the Columbia and by using these large center pivot irrigation systems, they were able to grow tomatoes and alfalfa and lots of stuff in the desert. And so I went up and because the Extension Service was involved in a lot of that, and the Extension services in the College of Agriculture are all connected, I went up and documented that as part of my summer work.

JD: So by this time you had changed your major, you graduated, you had a minor in Agriculture?

DD: I had a major in Agriculture and I don't think I ever had a minor in Technical Journalism, I can't remember, but I certainly had more than enough hours to meet the minor requirement. Then what happened though, in my senior year, when I was working at the Ag Information office, Sam Bailey – who was the head of the office at that time – in the fall of my senior year at Oregon State, he called me into his office late on a Friday afternoon. You know, usually at that time of day, people get fired, and I was going, "what's going on?" And so he sits down and he says, "so, what do you plan to do with yourself when you graduate from college?" And I said, "well, I haven't really crystallized my career trajectory." And he said, "well, I have an idea for you – how would you like to go to graduate school?" And I said, "well, that sounds great." And he said, "well, let me see what I can do."

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So he contacted some of his friends at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Sam was a 1948 master's graduate from the Department of Agricultural Journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. So he was able to actually get for me a full-ride scholarship to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Ag Journalism, as a master's degree candidate. And so then the summer of '73, after I left Oregon State, I drove to Madison and spent a year there. As part of my graduate assistantship, I was involved in producing and announcing for a daily half-hour radio program on WHA in Madison.

JD: And what did that program involve?

DD: That program involved quite a bit of communication theory. For me, it was a two semester program. I once again took as many hours as I could. I, for some reason, was impatient, and so I finished my master's degree in two semesters and a summer. I was involved, actually, in taking classes in things that I was unable to as an undergraduate – radio production; as I said, communications theory. There was feature writing. I took classes in advertising and publication relations. It was a broad range of subjects and then, the first semester I was there, I was also writing news releases for the College of Agriculture. And then my second semester was when I was able to do the radio program, and that was great. We would go out and talk to scientists on the campus and interview them about their research and distill out of them what were the relevant points of their work in a way that was understandable to the public. And we'd have tape recorders and microphones and, believe it or not, how we edited, we would edit our tapes for air. And what that entailed, actually, was sitting in front of tape recorders with seven-inch reels of tape with aluminum trimming blocks in the middle, and with rolls of Scotch tape, and we would actually literally cut tape to edit our interviews. That was in 1974.

And actually I think one of the most interesting parts about that summer, I did a radio show during the spring semester and then the summer of '74, that was the summer that the House Judiciary Committee was investigating President Nixon on the Watergate break-in. And since WHA was a National Public Radio affiliate, NPR was also broadcasting live all those hearings of the House Judiciary Committee that Peter Rodino was chairing. And that summer, I had no idea most days

whether I would even get on the air, because those hearings would often go way past the lunch hour in Washington, and we're in Central time in Madison. I was on the air at 12:30 Central time and often those hearings in Washington wouldn't break until 2:00, so then I'd lose my show for the day. But you had to, every day, go in and prepare all your tapes, write your news, and be ready to go every day. So it was, just like the earlier work with photography at *The Barometer*, it was a great exercise in trying to go, "ok, if I'm going to do this, I've got to do this, this and this, and get all organized and be ready to go, even if it doesn't happen."

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JD: Had you ever been to that part of the country before?

DD: No.

JD: Any comparisons or experiences about going to school in the Midwest and in that particular program that you have?

DD: Well, I was aware, having gone – our farm was eighty acres, and I knew that agriculture was said to be big, and so were the schools, and I had no idea how big. It was a great experience. The University of Wisconsin-Madison campus at the time was about 36,000 students; that was pretty big. I think Oregon State at the time I graduated was maybe 14,000, I think, I'm not sure. So it was quite different. I liked Madison quite a lot; Madison's a great town. And I don't know if they had it then, but they sure have a wonderful farmer's market every year on the capitol square. I have friends that I still am in touch with from when I was there. Larry Meiller, who was my advisor and coach in radio, a professor when I was a graduate student in Madison, is still in Madison. I was back a few years ago when the Department of Agricultural Journalism had its centennial observation, and I was one of the speakers during that semester of celebrations, and it was great to see everybody.

It was a really formative and important year in my life, because it allowed me to actually – I think that, until that time really, I was within the sphere of influence of family and peers from childhood. And having grown up in Oregon and having gotten into my Volkswagen and driven from Portland to Madison, it's sort of like, "ok, it's up to you now." And I'd never done that before, but it was a great thing to do. And it certainly taught me the value of self-reliance.

JD: So you successfully finish your program and your master's degree, and then you were a staff photographer for a series of papers, kind of coming back to the Northwest again.

DD: Right. After I left Madison in August of 1974, I drove back to Corvallis and was hired on temporarily to be a photographer for the Corvallis *Gazette-Times*. I was hired to fill in for [phone rings] Tom Warren, who was a staff photographer; he was on medical leave. The news editor was Rod Decker and he hired me. And I moved back into a house and I stayed with Dave Nishitani, who worked at the Bookstore, the OSU Bookstore, for over forty years. He just retired last year or the year before.

I also stayed with Chris Johns. And one thing I didn't say about living in the fraternity was that Chris and I were also roommates in the fraternity. And at the time I was working as a staff photographer at the Oregon State *Daily Barometer*, he was coming to school and he became interested in my cameras. He then got involved in photography, and then he studied it. I think he ended up – he may have ended up majoring in Technical Journalism, I can't remember. But he and I both had similar interests. We both met each other in high school when we were both in FFA; we were at some state FFA meeting and we met each other at what was then the old Imperial Hotel, down on Broadway, for some state FFA meeting. We stayed in touch and he went off to become a state FFA officer; he took a year off from college and was state president of Future Farmers of America, and that required a lot of going around the state and doing ambassadorial work. Then he came to Oregon State a year later, and I think he was in the dorm for a while, and then he too joined the same fraternity. So we connected up on the photography and obviously we've stayed in touch ever since.

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JD: So when you were being a staff photographer, you were at the McMinnville *News-Register* and the *East Oregonian*.

DD: Oh right, let me get back to that. So the first thing was the temporary job with the Corvallis *Gazette-Times*. Then I was able to get a job in January of '75 at the McMinnville *News-Register*. Jeb Bladine, who was the editor then, hired me.

And my job was, I was the sports editor and the farm writer. I wasn't the staff photographer. And so it was great; it was a great experience because not only do you write, not only do you take pictures, not only do you edit your own copy, you're laying out the pages, you're developing the film, you're cropping the pictures, you're laying out the page. You're doing the whole thing. So that was good. And I worked across from a women named Yvette Sarin who actually was the cousin of my next door neighbor when I was growing up south of Lake Oswego in Stafford.

And when I was sports editor in McMinnville, a young man from Yamhill-Carlton High School came in one day, wearing his blue FFA coat, asking me if I would be interested in having him report sports scores from his high school, Yamhill-Carlton, so that we could put them in the *News-Register*. And I said, "absolutely, that would be great." Well that young man's name is Nicholas Kristof, who later went on to work for the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, and has won several Pulitzer Prizes for his work.

And after that time at the *News-Register*, I then moved to Pendleton and worked at the *East Oregonian* for, that would have been the summer of '75 to the summer of '76, at the Pendleton *East Oregonian*. And I was a staff photographer there, worked for Mike Forrester, the Forrester family that owns the – they were involved in the original *Willamette Week*, they own the Pendleton *East Oregonian* and the *Daily Astorian*. And so they were a family-owned, Oregon family publishing company, and I worked for Mike for about a year. He was the editor and publisher, and I also worked with Steve Clark, who was the city editor at the Pendleton *East Oregonian*. And Steve was a fellow OSU grad, and after he left the *East Oregonian*, I know that he went to the Portland area and was publisher for several newspapers in the Portland area, and recently has joined the staff or the faculty at Oregon State.

And then from there, I went to – in the summer of '76 – I went to the Walla Walla *Union-Bulletin*. And I moved to Milton-Freewater, I lived in Milton-Freewater in northeast Umatilla County; I wasn't quite ready to give up my Oregon citizenship yet. And so I worked at the Walla Walla *Union-Bulletin* for two years as a staff photographer, and the editor of the Walla Walla *Union-Bulletin* at that time was Kit Anderson – Nelson Christian Anderson III of Heppner, my former college roommate. He hired me to be a staff photographer, and then I worked there for two years. I think a year after I got there, Kit went to the *Seattle Times*, and he worked up at the *Seattle Times*.

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And then in '78 I applied for a job at the Louisville *Courier-Journal* in Kentucky as a picture editor. And that was a newspaper that was well-known for its photojournalism and had received several Pulitzer Prizes for its public interest work; it had received a Pulitzer for its coverage of strip mining in the late '60s. And so it was a place where photojournalism was valued, and it was a family-owned newspaper, and it was a great place to be. I worked there for two years from 1978 to 1980.

JD: So in all these assignments and jobs, were you mostly doing assignments or did you start to develop some specific focus for the photography that you at least liked to do, if not were able to do?

DD: When I was working at Walla Walla, I had the good fortune to work with a fellow named Ethan Hoffman, who was a University of Missouri master's grad in photojournalism. He had come out and, at that time, everybody knew that the University of Missouri was the place to be for photojournalism, but I never had gone there. And so it was like importing my own personal Missouri School of Journalism. And it was great. I worked with Ethan for a year and we did several big projects. His girlfriend at the time, Rebecca Collette, he and they put together a project on migrant laborers that won a Robert F. Kennedy Award for Coverage of the Disadvantaged. Ethan did a project at the Washington State Penitentiary that resulted in a book called *Concrete Mama*, and he won the World Understanding Award in Pictures of the Year, which is a big annual competition. He got that award.

And I did a big project on, it was sort of like looking at agriculture in eastern Washington – the focus of a lot of my work was on agriculture – but I did a big project that looked at grain exports from the Northwest, and how the Columbia River barge system was so essential to that whole business, all the way from Lewiston to Portland, the barges and the dams, and how they provided the economic lifeline, but also how they transformed the ecology of the river.

JD: So after building this resume and your skillset, you had the opportunity to move to *National Geographic*?

DD: Well that was an interesting moment, how that all came about, because I was working as the picture editor at the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, and that involved – when I originally went there, I was the night desk guy. It was a morning paper and so I was dealing with all the news pictures that were shot during the late afternoon and into the evening, and also laying out pages and section fronts. But then there was a change and I became the day editor – the picture editor during the day. So I was involved with not only editing pictures but coming up with the daily report – what were the subjects and the projects that we were working on.

And anyway, there was a young fellow from, I guess it was Bellevue, Washington, his name was Rick Parry. When I was in Walla Walla, Rick came to Walla Walla and was a summer intern, a summer photography intern. He was a student at Ohio University in Athens and was a photojournalist and photographer. So I met Rick then when we worked in Walla Walla, and then when I moved to Louisville, Rick Parry also happened to be a summer intern. So both he and I had been exposed to what it was like to work on a smaller community daily paper, and also on a larger metropolitan paper that had four editions a day and had a much bigger news appetite, and also things like regional, national and global news were a bigger part of the agenda.

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Well, I got a call from Rick once, he was starting his senior year at Ohio University, and he said that "Terry," meaning Terry Eiler who is the head of the program, "said he would give me an A in my senior reading and conference class" if Rick could convince me to come up to Athens and talk to the classes about what it was like to work at both a small paper and a large paper, because we'd both been there together. And so I had lots of page layouts from both places, and I went up there for a couple of days and had a great time, great lectures. We put page layouts on each side of the classroom and talked about what it was like, similarities and differences.

And I went back to Louisville and one day in April of 1980 the phone rang, and it was a fellow named John Agnon who was a picture editor in the book group at *National Geographic*, saying who he was and that they had a job opening up there and would I please send in my resume? And so I said, "oh, well that's very interesting, how did you get my name?" And he said, "well, I got your name from Terry Eiler, who's head of the Ohio University vis comm program." Terry had been an intern at *National Geographic* during his college days. So it's amazing how the world works; yes, of course, it is what you know, but it's also helpful who you know. So I sent in my application and came up here Memorial Day weekend and interviewed. And then was hired and I started here just after Labor Day in 1980.

JD: So you moved through working in the book section and then were editor for the youth magazine?

DD: When I came on board in the fall of 1980, I was hired originally to be a picture editor for the youth magazine, which at the time was called *National Geographic World*. It has since been renamed *National Geographic Kids*. So I was involved in organizing and assigning coverage for feature stories in the kids' magazine. And then shortly after I was hired, I was asked by the director of the division if I could also edit a book. And it was a book that ended up taking, gosh, it must have taken almost two years to do. It was on deserts of the world, it was called *The Desert Realm*. It was a fabulous project; we had lots of photographers going to the deserts of the world and I got to organize and edit this project, and it was fabulous. So I ended up editing, as a picture editor, about a dozen books, in the book group. And then, in early '84, I moved to *Traveler* magazine, early in its days, and worked there for a couple of years, picture editing stories.

And then, I think in early '86, I got involved in this *World Encyclopedia of Geography* that was being published by the book group. So I was asked if I would come back and work on that project too. It was six-hundred pages, single volume encyclopedia, and I also wrote the outline for the book. I did the whole thing – it was a 128-page outline. I used an Apple IIc computer and a dot matrix ImageWriter printer, and it had 5 ¼" floppy disks, and that's how I wrote the whole thing. And quite literally at the end – it was published in 1989 – from the day I started working on the project until the day it was published, in fact I spent more time on that project than I did going to undergraduate school, from beginning to end. And it did literally have exactly 1,001 pictures in it. It was a wonderful thing, partly because it allowed me to explore so many subjects and ideas about the world and how it worked. So I was able to get completely lost in arcane subjects about geology and population and climate and science and weather and estuaries and you name it. It was like I'd kind of died and gone to heaven, as far as a project.

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I then did a couple of more books, and then in 1990 I was asked to move to the staff of the magazine. And then starting in 1990, I became a picture editor and worked on many stories. The first story that I did for the magazine was on the Colorado River; it was a story that was already underway, I picked it up from another picture editor, Ellie Rodgers. The photographer on that project was Jim Richardson who, in fact, was a former colleague of Chris Johns when Chris and Jim worked together at the Topeka *Capitol-Journal*. And I have then since gone on to work with Jim Richardson on a variety of projects at the *Geographic* for more than twenty years, including one that was published in our "Future of Food" series this May. So Jim and I have worked together a very long time.

The focus of my work really, when it comes down to it, when I look back and think back on the agricultural background and the environmental awareness in Oregon and the journalism education, they've all come back together for me in my work as editor on the magazine. Because starting in about the mid-'90s, I started proposing a series of projects that essentially have been the core of what I've done ever since. Most of my work for the magazine as an editor has been projects that I've proposed. There was a story that we published in December of 1995, on the sustainable agriculture movement, that predated the formal recognition of the National Organics Anortech [?].

I have since then been involved in a range of stories on public lands, national forests, wilderness systems, natural resources in the west, climate change, the carbon cycle, looking at energy, different stories about the National Parks System. And then, in the last decade, we started pushing more coverage of the climate and how the system was changing. And in 2004, there was a big project that we published in September 2004, called "Global Warning Bulletins from a Warming World." That was a project that I originated and orchestrated.

JD: Can I just ask a question about that real quickly? I was really intrigued when I saw the date of that and just wanted a little more detail about your, and therefore *National Geographic*'s, concern and interest in that topic. Because 2004, I think most people were thinking about global warming and relating it to Al Gore, and not really having a very coherent sense. And how you saw that as being important that early on.

DD: Well, by 2004, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which by that time had put out three reports, six years apart, on it, documenting the link between our use of hydrocarbon fossil fuels and the climate. And I think that what we were also aware of was that, perhaps in an earlier day, *National Geographic* was as much about exploring the world and bringing people to parts of the world and the people of the world that they might not otherwise witness. And then perhaps in the latter part of the last century, then along came the jumbo jet and telecommunications and cable t.v., and a lot of that earlier reason for *National Geographic*, the lure of the far-away place, people were going there themselves.

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So then there became a need to help explain the world and how the world works. So this became a great intersection where we were able to combine science – awareness of science, scientific knowledge – and helping people understand that the climate that we have today is not the same climate we've always had. So it was more than just scientific discovery, but it was also – actually, that original project also dealt with the fact that, why there had been ice ages that had started and stopped. And so it was actually an interesting way to help people understand the human role on the planet and how we were affecting the planet.

JD: You've received a variety of awards and recognitions over the years, but one that caught my eye, and particularly with something you said earlier in this interview, was the Sprague Memorial Award from the National Press Photographers Association that you received in 2013. And one of the quotes I pulled from that was that you had been able to create "manageable and compelling narratives on complicated environmental issues." And I think that's a real skill and something important. If you have any elaboration, I guess, on how you take these very complex issues and make them available to the average person.

DD: Well, the first thing I would say is that people need to understand that this was not done alone; it was done in collaboration with a whole team of people who were interested in telling the same kinds of stories. And not the least of whom was Chris Johns, because by 2005 he had become editor of the magazine and was essentially a great patron and supporter of this work. And I think that the idea of making these ideas accessible to people, I think the one thing that we

have had in our favor as a magazine is the power of images. That has helped a lot in helping draw people in to some of these ideas.

But also I would say that, for me, it was also going back to when I think about what I learned at Oregon State in Technical Journalism, what I learned at Wisconsin about trying to make things simple and direct. And that's really what I feel like my whole career has been, is trying to bridge a gap between science and the public, and trying to make complex concepts palatable and simple, not simplistic. And I would say also that that kind of work also requires somebody to have a good grounding in science themselves. You can't simplify it if you don't know what it is you're trying to simplify.

And so when I look back, and I look at all the classes that I took in science and agriculture, those were terribly important. And in one sense, agriculture to me is one of the most integrated sciences there is. Because when you think about it, you're dealing with soils, you're dealing with hydrology, you're dealing with nutrition, you're dealing with weather, you're dealing with climate, you're dealing with marketing and economics. It's the whole ball of wax all in one. So it's a discipline that, by its very nature, is horizontal; it's connected to other disciplines. And that really, I think, has been a really – that background that I learned at Oregon State was really essential in helping me think about these kinds of things.

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JD: So I think that was a wonderful recapturing of your experiences at OSU, but since we're not only doing this as a historical document but also for future attendees – students at OSU or people affiliated with the school – do you have any thoughts or advice that you would offer to current and future students at OSU?

DD: Sure. I think a couple of things that cross my mind is, the Sprague Award also came from my devotion to trying to help inform a new generation of people about these issues. I've been a faculty member at the Missouri Photo Workshop for many years, and trying to help open people's eyes to these issues. But I would say for those who are now trying to figure out what they would like to be, I think it's more than just doing. That it's like, who do you want to be? What is your place and station in this world? Find something that is in harmony with who you are; if you like what you do, that really helps. I've been very lucky in that.

But I also think that, when I think about photojournalism and documentary photography – an area that I've been deeply involved in my whole career – and also my awareness of and connection to environmental issues and environmental journalism, I think that there's a really interesting space that's emerging now as we're dealing with increasing global and environmental change. We continue to remain on a track of burning coal, oil and gas, the climate system continues to change, we're continuing to see an uptick in things like extreme weather events, the Arctic ice cap is disappearing. We're seeing significant environmental change all across the world.

And I think that, for those who have the passion and the commitment, that this field is wide open for those who are really wanting to combine environmental journalism with photojournalism. Because trying to help people understand all these – what's happening on the planet today and what it means – this idea of environmental photojournalism is a great place to be focusing on. And I hope, before I hang it up, I would love to do some sort of book or some sort of course, something on that. Because I think the intersection now between environmental science and visual communication is really a great place to be, especially since everybody now, we're so empowered as individuals. We all walk around with these publishing devices in our pockets, right? Cameras, movie recorders, audio recorders, publishing – they're right there. So no longer do you have to wait for the publishing company to give you permission, you can do it yourself.

JD: Well Dennis, it's been great hearing your recollections and thanks so much for your participation in the project.

DD: Thank you so much, it's been a great pleasure.

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