

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Robert C. West

COLLECTION: 4700.0903

IDENTIFICATION: [1913-2001] Boyd Professor of Geography at LSU

INTERVIEWER: Katherine Anderson

SERIES: University History – Distinguished Faculty & Administrators

INTERVIEW DATE(S):

September 21, 1992; September 25, 1992; September 28, 1992; October 2, 1992; October 5, 1992; October 9, 1992; October 19, 1992

FOCUS DATES: 1948 - 1992

NOTE: Tape number succession does not match the chronological order of interview sessions

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1295, Session I

Note-taking during fieldwork; time at University of Wisconsin, Madison as a teaching assistant; introduction to cartography course; starting graduate study at University of California, Berkeley; low salary for teaching assistants; his mother thought higher education was unnecessary; higher salary for assistant job at Berkeley and saving up for his PhD fieldwork in Mexico; recollections of student life at Berkeley; being kicked out of his rooming house for having a loud party; Berkeley faculty Carl Sauer, John Kesseli, John Leighly and Jan O.M Broek; coursework at Berkeley was mostly seminars; Sauer seminar on French and British colonial settlements; students had to develop their own techniques; West joining in on a Saturday field course with Sauer; Sauer and his wife hosted dinner parties, Sauer liked to preside; Sauer's work as a government consultant and work on the soil survey in the Southeast; in one of Sauer's seminars, West presented a paper on the role of certain government departments and realized that Sauer wanted him to criticize their work; Sauer tried to explain everything and he was often wrong; difference between Sauer's idea of fieldwork and the techniques West develop for himself; need for students to understand various languages to read article on geography; Broek's work as an economic geographer; Leighly's influence on West; having to read German in one of Leighly's seminars; another seminar led by Leighly where they examined all the major geography journals; important German geographers Oskar Schmieder and Otto Schülter; another German [Zuppa?] who explored Central America and wrote beautiful descriptions of landscapes; West started at UCLA in 1931 enrolled in pre-commerce, he wanted to work in the consular services; his knowledge and love for Spanish after working with Mexicans in the fruit groves to earn extra money; pre-commerce courses were economics and he became bored; his father was a butcher and owned several farms; West's older siblings helped put him through school; got into

geography through a course in economic geography, he had always been interested in the landscape; move to California and geography of the San Fernando Valley; switching major to geography; initial interest in Latin America from experience with Mexicans and a faculty member named George McBride who had missionary background in Bolivia, got his geography degree from Yale University; courses he took at UCLA; influence of environmental determinism, a theory that was popular at that time; various geographers' arguments for or against determinism; determinism paradigm was later beaten out of him at Wisconsin and Berkeley; ecological aspects of human geography; UCLA professor for fieldwork was Clifford Zierer, West learned mapmaking and landscape observation; West used Zierer's techniques when he taught fieldwork at LSU; West's research into Spanish settlement routes through Northern Mexico; thesis was rejected due to his poorly made maps, re-made maps during time at Wisconsin, submitted them again and passed; West isn't sure where he got the idea to retrace Spanish settlement routes through Mexico, through reading or interaction with professors; enjoyed doing fieldwork; impressive geography of Mexico, explanation of various zones at different elevations and vegetation found there like valuable black grama grass.

Tape 1296, Session II

Biography of Ellen Churchill Semple; document outlining West's academic background and influences; West's interest in historical geography of mining and Sauer's attempt to dissuade him; phenomenal archive in Chihuahua, Mexico; archive came about due to provincial governor who conducted military operations in the 1600s; West thinks Sauer wanted credit for advertising the archive; West's thesis focused on Spanish settlement near silver mines; archive organized by editor of local newspaper; West's dissertation drew heavily from archived materials; some mines were still in operation; Sauer's approach to working with students, few comments given or guidance offered; Sauer practically forcing students to pursue certain topics, example of George Carter being interested in early man and being pushed by Sauer into an agricultural study; Sauer and West's interest in works by German geographer, Eduard Hahn, on animal domestication; much of Hahn's work is not translated into English; Sauer introduced students to subject matter, would not teach field techniques, students had to develop that themselves; Sauer's dissertation advisor Rollin Salisbury who assigned a research topic to Sauer with no further guidance; West thinks it's good for students to think for themselves and develop their own techniques for study; students returning from fieldwork were closely criticized; West taught field methods at LSU but it was mainly mapping techniques; West learned about photography from Clifford Zierer and from a class offered at Berkeley; he carried on much of what he learned from Sauer; work for the Smithsonian in Mexico on Tarascan Indians; work with the Office of Strategic Service [OSS] as a cartographer allowed him to defer his military enlistment; he made maps of anything the army wanted, maps used for making military policy; West's group made the map for the initial invasion of North Africa; West was a map designer, not a drafter; worked for the OSS two years in Washington, D.C. and two years overseas in Algiers, Italy and France; he was in Paris during the Battle of the Bulge and could hear bombs dropping; his brother survived the Normandy Invasion and visited him in Algiers; OSS was a spy operation using French-speakers to report on German military encampments by radio; West was assigned to survey the map collections in libraries, universities, etc. in London; West was a civilian in the military with simulated rank which he found funny; needing to buy clothes in London after losing all his clothes in France; got to see some of France when he was assigned to collect maps, part of the State Department's map collection effort; head of OSS cartographic division was taught by same person who taught

West; with the Smithsonian, spent two years in Mexico studying Tarascan Indians, he did the cultural geography portion; Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City influenced studies of Tarascan Indians; he worked on the geography of the Tarascan area, six months later came back to teach in the museum; when West returned from Europe, Sauer sent him to see Julian Steward at the Smithsonian about a job, Steward couldn't hire West because he didn't have a PhD yet; West returned to Berkeley and finished his dissertation in six months after putting it on hold for four years during the war; West became interested in chinampas farming and other techniques with pre-conquest roots; started working with a former student from his Smithsonian teaching stint, Pedro Armillas, who was also interested in chinampas; Armillas fled the Spanish Civil War and had been imprisoned in France before seeking refuge in Mexico; Armillas did an article on chinampas that was published in *Science*; not much work is being done on chinampas now; visit from Jonathan Sauer and investigation of amaranth crops; chinampas areas were wiped out when they built the boating course for the Olympics; West won't return to Mexico due to health problems; Sauer's regret that the regional approach he discussed in *Morphology of Landscape* was so misunderstood by Eastern geographers; West was interested in regional studies by German and French geographers; geographer Otto Schlüter's theories on landscape development from pre-human times through the present "cultural landscape"; French geographers were more interested in the present; British geographer Herbert John Fleure promoted the simultaneous study of geography, history and anthropology, West was struck by this idea; students didn't necessarily discuss theories amongst themselves because certain theories were frowned on at the time; John Leighly got West interested in the history of geography and helped him become versed in reading foreign geography journals; interview conclusion.

Tape 1287, Session III

Carl Sauer suggested LSU to West; Fred Kniffen was at Berkeley, too; Alfred Kroeber taught anthropology at Berkeley but West didn't get much from his course; Kroeber was very formal, didn't always treat students well; exchanges between Sauer and Kroeber, Kroeber becoming upset when Sauer said his son wasn't doing well in class; Sauer and Kroeber's influence on each other and on students; Sauer got George Carter interested in aboriginal agriculture; West and Anderson discuss the difference between cultural geography and cultural anthropology, the divisions in the fields are artificial; West's interest in anthropology of the Lenca and Choco could also be called ethnogeography; his studies on Tarascan Indians in Mexico; West did fieldwork in the summers; obtained grants from the Office of Naval Research to conduct fieldwork in Colombia; first course taught at LSU was physical geography, hired because of his experience with Latin American geography; he also taught a field methods course and a seminar that covered periodicals; Bob Fuson, West's first graduate student; Kniffen had many more graduate students than West; seminar on periodicals changed into a course on the history of geography; *All Possible Worlds* textbook; reaction to the advent of New Geography and its quantitative methods; he came about when regionalism was the main paradigm, he felt there was agreement within the discipline; influence of French geographers on West's thinking; his interest in agricultural techniques of pre-industrial groups; recent reading on link between plant and animal domestication and human disease, food poisoning from grains; diseases like smallpox passing from animals to humans.

Tape 1288, Session IV

Recalls last fieldwork in South America working on salt marshes; fieldwork was for a paper he would present at the International Botanical meeting in Sydney, Australia, in 1981; meeting with local experts at various locations in South America when he went to study the marshes; marshes in Bahia Blanca and tidal marshes in Uruguay; Chiloé area of Chile was beautiful, few inhabitants; he travelled up and down the west coast of South America in only five months, much of the information he collected was never published; he was already retired at that time; Anderson knows someone who knows the location of mangroves in Louisiana; West's interest in descriptive geomorphology came from John Kesseli; West's chapter in the *Handbook of Middle-American Indians*; West's use of geognostic maps in various publications; West did extensive research on the geography of French and Spanish surnames in Louisiana and wrote a book; he picked names based on frequency and his interest; he used biographies, church records, works by Rev. Donald Hebert, phone books; book was priced too high and not enough copies were printed; also looked into the use of "bayou" as a place name; he considers himself a generalist, most geographers from his era were generalists but now people are specialized; Carl Sauer and James Parsons were generalists; plenty of work left to do in South American geography, especially agriculture techniques; terracing techniques in Mexico in narrow canyons using dams on small streams, you can see these features in aerial photographs; in Peru they grow mostly potatoes in terraced fields; Isabel Kelly did all of her archaeological work alone with just guides; revival of amaranth as a crop in Mexico; amaranth mixed with molasses makes a cake, sold like popcorn, government encouraged growing it; rural Mexicans' love of flowers, mostly European varieties; West doesn't know if this was the case in pre-conquest times or if brought about by the church; various explorers who documented Mexico and Central America might have descriptions of flowers, documents are a wealth of information; article by Karl Butzer, "Americas Before and After 1492"; use of some flowers and plants for food; prior to 1950, amaranth was only grown in the chinampas, used to make cakes placed on graves; Pedro Armillas' "Gardens on Swamps"; West and Armillas mainly walked during their fieldwork in the late 1970s, few drivable roads; West recommends a book to Anderson, articles on landscapes, soils, planting, etc.; Butzer is now interested in colonial Mexico; West think there was over-population in the pre-conquest Americas and also people didn't eat well; Woodrow Borah's high estimates of Mexican population size; West reviewed William DeVevean's book on population, said we will never know how many people there were in pre-conquest times, although it is important to estimate; use of terraces to cultivate food in central Mexico; planting maguey to border terraces fields; idea that landscape was ruined by Spaniards is misleading, native people's actions were also detrimental; West has most of his field notes, had some of them typed up; interview interrupted by conversation about potential speaker coming to campus; end of interview.

Tape 1289, Session V

West provides Anderson with photocopies of some of his work; chinampa towns in Mexico, many are now dried up; towns were called chinamperos; expanse of Mexico City and surrounding towns; main chinampas areas around Mixquic; West's work there was focused on current agricultural practices; question of where flowers were grown, likely they came from the chinampas; sixteenth century writers may have information on flowers; West's interest in coastal vegetation emerged from his study of mining; his paper on the Tabasco Lowlands is an example of his interest in vegetation as a natural part of the landscape; based his Tabasco maps on aerial photographs and field notes; working in Tabasco with a grant from the Office of Naval Research

and the Coastal Studies Institute, spent three seasons there with students; a student, Norbert Psuty did his PhD fieldwork in Tabasco; most of West's work there was on vegetation, Psuty concentrated on the beach and Bruce Thom looked at mangroves; Thom continued his studies of mangroves in his native Australia; West has been to very few conferences, he finds them boring; in Tabasco they travelled by car and had boats; one student on the trip wanted to train a monkey to collect vegetation samples; fieldwork base camp at a beautiful hacienda in Comalcalco owned by a German physician West befriended; area was mainly cacao plantations, even in pre-conquest times; they would ask anyone around for the native names of plants; hacienda pulque area northeast of Mexico City in Apan; explanation of ex-haciendas where most land had been taken over by the government, people could live there and cultivate but had no ownership rights, people still produced pulque; Barney Nietschmann, a student of West's from Wisconsin that Anderson visited in Costa Rica; Nietschmann studied pulque, he sent West a draft of that paper, he did his thesis on hacienda complexes; West lost track of him, thinks he got mixed up in politics; students on the trip with West would go to Puebla for fun, West did a vegetation survey; West and Hugh Iltus planned a monograph on vegetation, West still has all of the information and the plants he collected are all at Wisconsin; he would collect specimens in pine or oak forests, on the plains, etc.; he has photographs and maps of all the areas he collected from; Iltus lost interest in the project and West could not complete the monograph without a botanist; most recent botanist working in Mexico [Rudolfski?] uses color photographs; while in Mexico, West made a makeshift dryer for his plant specimens; customs inspector had studied botany and let West through with all his plants; a particular plant that is fire-resistant and grows on hillsides; location of various plants on the edge of cultivated fields or in dried lakebeds; many flowers, many red dahlias; a specialist thought West had discovered a new species of dahlia but was mistaken, it was a natural hybrid; Anderson recalls some anecdotes about Iltus; West can't travel back to Mexico but he would like to see if those areas have changed; West's advice to become acquainted with what is dominant in the landscape, to keep an eye on what people do, to interview farmers who love to talk about their crops and how they cultivate; you have to learn on your own what works in the field; Anderson wants him to elaborate on his note-taking practices; trip with Jonathan Sauer to Costa Rica to teach a field course; students with them were to stay in a horrible hotel in Fortuna, Doris Stone got them other accommodations; he carries a small pad for writing during the day and writes fuller notes in the evening, a double note-taking procedure; looking at some of his field notes, information on salt marshes was not published; marking areas on a map if available; train yourself to take in all that you see, take notes even if you never use them, they may still be important; his wife assisted him when he studied house types in Mexico; end of interview.

Tape 1290, Session VI

West doing fieldwork on house types with his wife in Mexico, he drove and she took notes; West's photographic collection; the Leica camera and types of film he used in the 1940s; camera was primarily used for photographing documents, he would bring all his own lights and supplies to take photos in the archives; he didn't print all his photos, used a film reader; he had another camera for color film but mostly used black and white because it was cheaper; Kodachrome prints have held up over time; interviewer impressed with detail captured in West's photos, he didn't use a tripod; showing photos of Copán, Honduras; photos of a glyph he took for the purpose of using in the first course he taught at LSU in 1948; took a trip to South America before teaching to expand his knowledge of the subject; strategy for photographing pottery indoors; he's

working on labeling all of his photographs; difficulty of taking landscape shots in black and white; he just took snapshots instinctively, didn't take a lot of time to set up shots, if lighting was bad he took multiple shots; man doing photo printing work for him is named Lyle, he does photo work for all departments in the building; West is paying him out of pocket to work on his collection; West incorporated photography into the field course he taught, students had to include photos with a written report; special envelopes he uses to store photos; Lyle enters office and all discuss West's Leica camera which is malfunctioning; Lyle notes parts of camera and explains various functions and the camera's collectability; lake in the chinampa area that is fed by springs; photo showing the abundance of water, wildlife and plants; a photo of seed beds; chinampas varied in size; process of collection soil for seed beds; straw used to cover beds was procured from dairies; process of making soil blocks for seed planting, photos of various aspects of the process; information on photos would be in West's notes; not all seeds that are planted end up growing; willow trees growing at edge of chinampas; roots don't interfere with gardening; article Anderson brought with a map of Mixquic, Mexico; more photos that Anderson thinks are very well done considering the conditions; photos of corn drying, granaries, compost piles; people used to collect bat manure for use in composting; people now live right by the chinampas, used to live at the lake's edge; language spoken in the area was primarily spoken by women; areas that used to be chinampas but are no longer because water level has dropped; people planted other crops like maize and vegetables on former chinampas has mixed results, the soil is still good; photos of abandoned chinampas and vegetation; chinampas could be used year-round and produced multiple crops per year thanks to use of seed beds; mules pulled plows and are probably still used; photos of agricultural tools; iron blades used in the area were made in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, locals didn't have materials to make them; photos of other tools and one showing possible corn fungus called smut; Anderson once ate corn smut and asks about edible seaweeds; West says seaweed is eaten in Chile and often seen in big bundles; he has captioned only about a third of his black and white photo collection; explanation of how he plans to get black and white copies of his color prints with help from Lyle; captioning all the photos is time consuming because he has to refer to his notes frequently; unclear what the chinampas areas are like now; composite aerial photos of chinampas area taken in the 1940s; a company that may have more recent aerial photos; Anderson asks West if he's seen a recent film on chinampas; tape cuts off.

Tape 1972, Session VII

Anderson and West review a list of West's publications and discuss his book, *Sonora: Its Geographical Personality*; disagreement with someone at the university press about the book's title; university presses are becoming money mad; his book may be part of a series on Latin America; fieldwork for that book conducted over many years since 1972; book covers basic geography and history, West focuses on present boundaries of Sonora; Sonora's dual personality, eastern part is still colonial, western part is developed and successful in agriculture; working with the press on page proofs and correcting typos; another book coming out soon is a corrected second edition; West and Kent Mathewson's work on "Selected writings of Jim Parsons"; Parson and West's trip to walk the Topia Road, an old colonial road used in the sixteenth century; Bill Davidson came up with the idea of the West Grants to fund student research, West himself had no role in how the funds were distributed, doesn't know much about projects completed with those funds; doesn't know of similar funding at other schools; West had a role in hiring new professors in the days before they had selection committees; during that time came Davidson,

Roland Chardon and Miles Richardson; West was retired when Carville Earle came; other new professors were Jay Edwards, Sam Hilliard, Richard Kesel, and Phil Larimore who took over West's cartography course; West's year as acting chairman was the worst of his life; other professors hired like Lewis, Miller, Walker; department was small back then, changes started gradually; as a joint department of geography and anthropology, cultural geography was their strength; after Fred Kniffen retired, move towards urban geography and emphasis on culture was somewhat lost; R.J Russell was a prominent physical geographer and founded the Coastal Studies Institute, Kesel took over where Russell left off; Hilliard's interest are similar to West's; Davidson's work is very specialized; West doesn't know of other departments that teach using his and Kniffen's approach, they represent the old Berkeley school; geography now has no central core, it started fracturing in the 1950s and 60s; potential for a new regional geography; Bob Muller had his own little empire; the point of departments is to attract graduate students and make money; department had trouble attracting students during economic depressions, e.g. the 1950s; cancelling classes because too few students enrolled; West's experiences with Peter Herlihy as a student in the department and assisting West with fieldwork in Sonora; Herlihy and Dan Gade do not get along; Herlihy didn't know much when he assisted West but he was good at camping and cooked all their meals; a fieldtrip with Herlihy and his soon-to-be-wife Laura to a CLAG [Conference of Latin American Geographers] meeting; touring in Mexico after the meeting; Herlihy talks to West all the time and it bores him because Herlihy repeats himself; everyone thought that Herlihy and Laura's marriage would not last; West thinks Laura is a good interviewer, he helped her with maps for her thesis; some research West did on fishing boats, West says Clint Edwards did more work on boat types on the Peruvian coast; Martin Pasqualetti did research on the fishing industry around Lake [Chapala?]; many of West's former students have retired already; Anderson mentions a map on cattle ranching and her experience trying to explain her interests to strangers on an airplane; West enjoyed John Winberry's dissertation on log homes in Mexico, West suggested that topic; Winberry went on to teach at University of South Carolina and was later department chair and editor of *Southeastern Geographer*; Winberry carried on some of West's teaching but then focused on local geography; West would often suggest topics to students but did not force them to pursue things; Winberry travelled a lot and West once got a grant that included travel expenses for Winberry; comments on Winberry's thesis; recent thesis on pirates by one of Davidson's students; West can't stand the presidential debates, he and Anderson discuss politics; Anderson tries to get at West's procedures, he says his ideas come from what he sees and themes come about in the field or while writing; as a geographer he focuses on what he can see and what calls his attention, similar to some of Otto Schlüter and Carl Sauer's tenets; to explain what you see, you have to explore fields other than just geography; importance of interviewing to get information; learning how to determine when people are giving you good information or saying what they think you want to hear, people being leery of you; must be careful with phrasing and you may get in trouble with some lines of questioning; Anderson attempts to explain her purpose for interviewing him, wanting to learn how he fits in with geography as a whole discipline, how he adopted his approach, how his outlook has shaped others'; Anderson's difficulty in separating herself from her research; West has done a good job of tracing his influences and crediting others' West says Anderson should interview others in the field; the Berkeley School or the Sauer School no longer exists; Sauer's like-minded colleagues; Sauer would often make mistakes but would hold onto them, he was vocal and vulnerable but could also be friendly and encouraging; interview conclusion.

TAPES: 7 (1287, 1288, 1289, 1290, 1295, 1296, 1972)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 7 hours, 16 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 114 pages total

T1287 (Session III) 23 pages

T1288 (Session IV) 44 pages

T1289 (Session V) 47 pages

PAGES INDEX: 30 pages total

T1295 (Session I) 8 pages

T1296 (Session II) 7 pages

T1290 (Session VI) 6 pages

T1972 (Session VII) 9 pages

RESTRICTIONS: None