

Interviewee: Short, Robert B., Ph.D.
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
Date of interview: March 3, 2004
Category: FSU
Status: Open
Tape location: Box #48

Sellers: Dr. Short, are you aware that we're tape recording this interview?

Short: Yes, I surely am.

Sellers: And we have your permission to do that?

Short: Yes, you do.

Sellers: Why don't you start out by telling me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

Short: This doesn't seem to have too much to do with the growth of FSU, but I was the son of missionary parents in China, and I was born in Changsha, China, in a Norwegian hospital. I was born in 1920, so you see how old I am.

Sellers: How long did you stay in China?

Short: Only sixteen months, so I don't remember a thing.

Sellers: Your folks came back to the States?

Short: Yes. I had an older brother who came back with us. He was a small child, too.

Sellers: Where did you do your growing up then in the States?

Short: In Pennsylvania, a good bit of it in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Then during high school, that was during the Depression, and my father worked in Pennsylvania for the Anti-Saloon League. Anti-Saloon – he was fighting against the return of selling alcoholic beverages. Before that he taught school here in the States. He was an educational missionary; he taught boys in a prep school in China. Taught them English, I guess, and other things, too.

Sellers: That sort of explains your educational bent, does it?

Short: I don't know. I always had a desire to learn. I grew up through junior high in Harrisburg and then moved up to a small town in Pennsylvania, up the Juniata River, where the Tuscarora Creek meets the Juniata River at a small town called Port Royal. My dad became

County Superintendent of Schools in that county, and that's the reason we moved. It was a pleasant high school experience there. Then in 1937, I graduated from high school and went to college, Maryville College, in Maryville, Tennessee. And the reason I went down there was because it was a northern Presbyterian college, I think. I know it was Presbyterian, but the Presbyterian Church apparently was divided during the Civil War. I went there four years and enjoyed it. I played baseball on the team; that was the only intermural sport I participated in.

Sellers: So you would have graduated from there about 1941?

Short: Yes, I did.

Sellers: Were you at all interested in getting involved in what was coming?

Short: What do you mean?

Sellers: I mean the coming war – World War II.

Short: No, I got a job after I graduated from Maryville, teaching in a military academy – Suwannee Military Academy in Suwannee, Tennessee. It's ceased to exist, I think now. But anyway, it was in a sort of barracks-like building and it was part of the University of the South at Suwannee – an Episcopal school. I taught there two years and then took a job in Virginia Episcopal school in Lynchburg, Virginia, and taught there. I taught math. I taught high school age kids. Then I went to the University of Virginia and got a master's degree and ended up at the University of Michigan where I received a Ph.D. in 1950.

Sellers: The University of Michigan was giving a lot of biological sciences Ph.D.s in the late '40s and '50s. Was that why you went there?

Short: No, I went there because a major professor was an expert in what I was interested in. I was interested in parasites, and he had a number of good graduate students there at the time. I took an academic year between the ... before I went to Michigan, I took an academic year at Tulane University in New Orleans studying tropical medicine and parasitology. I then went to Michigan. And in 1950, I came down to Tallahassee, and I've been here ever since.

Sellers: How did you end up coming to Tallahassee? Did someone at Michigan tell you there was a job here or were you recruited from here?

Short: I was not recruited. They didn't know anything about me. A friend of mine, a fellow graduate student, had an offer from here and he had thought of coming but then he got an offer from Iowa State at Ames, Iowa, and he decided to go there. So he told me about this and I made contact with the lady, Dr. Ezda Deviney, who was chairman of the zoology group. I came down for a visit June 13 in 1950, and it was hot as Hades. I came in, landed at the airport. You should have seen the airport then. A little white board building. So I came there one hot

summer day, June 13, and I was dressed up in my coat and tie and so forth, going for an interview for a job. Nobody was there to meet me, and I thought, “Hmmm, what’s going on here?” So I waited and waited and after a while I decided I’d just take a taxi. So I took a taxi and he let me out there at the entrance into Westcott. And I looked around and I didn’t see anybody ... well, I saw one fellow, and I said, “Where is the biology department?” And he said, “It’s over there in the History Building.” So I lugged my heavy suitcase over there and went up to the third floor and looked around. I didn’t see anybody, and Dr. Deviney’s office was closed. I thought “What sort of a welcome is this?” So I heard a typewriter going and walked down the hall, and here Dr. Ruth Breen was typing and she said that Dr. Deviney went out yesterday or the day before on a new boat ... they had gone out to the marine lab and they didn’t get back. So she was out on the boat at Dog Island. But there were some guys there, too. So she was very embarrassed. After a while she came walking down the hall in her field clothes and we met and so forth. So I had an interview and they offered me the job. And I did not accept ... I don’t think I accepted. Dr. Noka Hood was chairman of the microbiology or bacteriology group; there was just her and two other ladies. Anyway, Dr. Hood lived in the same neighborhood on Palm Court. I went over there for dinner one night and after dinner I went out on the front porch to get some fresh air and it just poured rain. I thought, “Geez, I hope I don’t come here.” But it cleared up and then I flew back to Michigan and my wife in the meantime went to her home in Greenville, South Carolina. We got married three years before I graduated from Michigan. So I’ve been here ... well, I was on the payroll for forty years.

Sellers: You said you didn’t take the job, but yet you ended up here.

Short: Well, I don’t think I took it on the spot.

Sellers: You had to seriously think about it?

Short: I think so. And I’m not sure whether I said, “Okay, I’ll take it.” I did go to see the dean and he offered me \$4,500.

Sellers: That was pretty good for back then.

Short: Yes, it was, it was – for twelve months. And then a couple years later (I think Reuben Askew was governor), instead of giving us a salary raise for twelve months, they gave us the same salary (\$4,500) for ten months; then the two months in the summer you could sometimes get summer employment. Some of us had research grants, so we could pay ourselves salary for two summer months.

Sellers: When you arrived, was it in September of 1950 when you came back?

Short: Yes, my wife and I drove down here and landed on September 1, 1950.

Sellers: You said your wife was from Greenville, so she was a little bit more familiar with

the South than you were. What did you think about ...

Short: Oh, I went to Tennessee to school, so I was in the South four years and then in Suwannee, Tennessee. So I'd been in the South. But not in the deep South, no.

Sellers: What did you think about the little town of Tallahassee?

Short: Oh, I thought it was all right, I guess. Some of the streets weren't paved. When I was teaching at Suwannee in 1942, my roommate at Maryville for three years was in medical school in Atlanta, at Emory, and we decided to come down to Florida State College for Women to a dance. I liked his cousin. So I hitchhiked down to Atlanta and then slept in his fraternity house and we drove a Model A Ford from Atlanta down here. Seemed like it took a long time. Spent the weekend and then we drove back and I hopped on a train at Chattanooga, I believe, and I just got back about nine o'clock the next morning in time to teach a class. But it was worth it.

Sellers: When you and your wife first got here, did they have some housing for you or did you have to find something on your own?

Short: We found something – it was on Palm Court. That was where Dr. Hood and Dr. Deviney lived. They did not live together but they lived near each other. We took a ... I won't call it a "basement" apartment; they called it a garden apartment. You know, around at the back of the house they had an apartment there which opened up at that lower level in the back. We took that for a year or so, and then we bought a new house on Dellwood Drive. Sy Deeb was building some new houses, a small modest house; I think they cost about \$14,000.

Sellers: That was quite a ways out from the city at that time.

Short: Yes, it was. And wasn't there was a restaurant called the Talquin Inn out there – that seemed like it was way out in the boondocks. When we came to FSU, the biology was separated into four departments. I think I told you this before.

Sellers: Tell me where you were housed and what the individual departments were and who was in them.

Short: In the History Building. And I had an office lab right above the entrance, on the second floor. We also shared the upper floor with Physiology. At first I moved up with Ralph Yerger. Ralph Yerger was a new Ph.D. from Cornell. We were pretty crowded, we had a room together for a while. It was up on the third floor, underneath the tiles on the roof. That September was hot! When we wrote with a pen on a piece of paper the sweat would run down our arms on the paper! No air conditioning except in the president's office, I think. Dr. Campbell was president. But I soon moved down into the second floor above the entrance. It had air conditioning because I was raising snails which came from near Chicago and they had to

have more temperate climate. Wasn't that convenient? Paul Reynolds was in the office there, and he moved down into the dean's office – he became assistant dean or associate dean.

Did you know Dr. Walker, Ed Walker?

Sellers: No.

Short: He was the dean that hired some good people. He hired a lot of good chemists – and he hired Ralph Yerger, Lloyd Beidler, and me. Ezda Deviney was chairwoman of the Department of Zoology; she had been here for a number of years.

Sellers: She was from the women's college.

Short: Yes.

Sellers: Did you know Grace Madsen?

Short: Oh, yes.

Sellers: How about Anne Pates?

Short: Yes.

Sellers: The work that you were doing ... did you have support from the university for it?

Short: No, not much. I think they built me a rack – maybe I paid for that – a rack to have a number of aquaria on them in my office, and I bought aquaria. That may have been with a grant. I got an NIH grant soon after I moved in there, so I had a little bit of money, but just a little. I think it was \$17,000 – my first grant. And the overhead was not much, either. Now overhead is over 50% sometimes.

Sellers: Take me through a little bit of, as the years went on, how the department grew and how you functioned with the new people coming in.

Short: There was Ezda Deviney, chair, and there was another lady ... I forget her name – she didn't stay more than a year. Then there was Irene Boliek, who recently died. And there was Henry Stevenson, he also died.

Sellers: He just died a couple years ago.

Short: Do you know his wife, Rosabel?

Sellers: No, I've not talked to her.

Short: They lived out on Tharpe Street, almost ... I think it was Mitchell. Anyway, they were nice enough to have us to Sunday dinner the first week we were here, my wife and me. We met their family and so forth. Then there was Archie Sharer, but he left after a while. I think that's about it. In Bacteriology was Dr. Noka Hood, Loretta Ellias, Anne Pates. Grace Madsen was in botany. She and Ruth Breen and another guy, Chester Nielsen (he died of a heart attack), and a couple other people. But there were just a few. Oh, Herman Kurz, he was head of Botany. And then there was Ruth Breen. The dean got rather strict ... the new dean ... and he did not encourage people to stay if they were not interested in doing some research.

Sellers: And who was the dean at the time?

Short: Ed Walker. But then later on he got at odds with the vice president from Texas ... I forget his name. President Campbell brought this fellow from Texas and he and I think Harold Humm did not get along together, so Harold quit and went somewhere else. He was in charge of the marine lab, Harold Humm. Ed Walker had the lab built at Harold's request, I think, and he supported it. It was a nice little lab; I used to take my students down there sometimes to study the parasites of birds and fishes.

Sellers: Is that where it is today?

Short: No, it was at Alligator Point, on the bay side about halfway out the peninsula. Yerger and I went down there the first time, I think, and we went in the road from the main road, a little road going out to the bay. A big alligator was in the middle of the road. He must have been about eight feet long. We didn't bother him. I think I ran and hollered or something and he just jumped into the bushes and went away. Things were wild in those days. Dr. Lloyd Beidler was in Physiology. He was a famous taste specialist and he was really an outstanding man. He became a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He was first class. He died of a stroke here about six months ago. He and I were good friends. He was good; he had no trouble getting money.

Sellers: He worked a lot with Jim Smith in Psychology.

Short: Yes, yes. Jim Smith worked with him. He and I have been friends for maybe thirty years. We used to live one house and one lot from them. Out on Miranda Avenue next to Jack Ice. Then he divorced Betty and she's got a good husband now. Jim Smith's boy, Jimbo, he was one of our son Tim's best friends; they went to school together through kindergarten up through high school. And we got to know them well, Jim and his wife, Liz. And then Francis Hunter was chairman of Physiology; he went to Stockton as the chairman of the department there. He was a physiologist, studied blood or something like that. I think chicken blood.

Sellers: You said your particular interest was parasites. Tell me a little bit about your work.

Short: Well, the students' work, some of them, was examining wild mammals and birds and also fish and snails. You know, birds are animals. Don't say birds and animals – they're all animals; so are fish. We would go out and shoot some birds or catch fish at the coast ... one day on the way to the coast we picked up a bobcat that had been killed recently by traffic. We'd take the animals to the marine lab at Alligator Pointe and examine their intestines and maybe heart and other organs to see if there were any parasites, any worm parasites. We got some good ones. We'd make microscopic slides of some and then try to identify them. Sometimes they were new species, and we'd describe the new species in the literature. I got a couple from the heart of fish. Can you imagine that? Little bitty worms. Stingrays have some nice parasites. This gives the students training in collection and identification, using literature and what to examine and how to prepare them, things like that. And I also did work also on blood flukes – schistosomes – they are parasites of various mammals and birds, and there are three species, at least, which are important parasites in people in Africa, South America, China, and Japan. They used to be in Puerto Rico. The larvae live in snails. That's what I was raising the snails for. They come out of the snails and they penetrate the skin of a person or another mammal or bird that gets in the water, they penetrate the skin and finally get into the blood vessels and lay eggs. The females lay eggs and they cause all sorts of trouble with the liver and intestine. It's just a bad disease in different parts of the world.

Sellers: What would your research be used for? Medicinal? Prophylactic?

Short: I got grant money to study the sex chromosomes. In other words, the males and females are different, and they're the only flatworms like that which do have separate sexes; the rest are hermaphroditic. But Margaret Menzel was a faculty member here; she was in the Botany Department. She and Winston moved here from Texas and she was an excellent researcher on chromosomes, so she and I collaborated on a number of papers. Good work had never been done on the chromosomes of these worms, so we did a pretty good job. But it was the method of sex determination that we sought ... if you do something to prevent the females from laying eggs, that would eliminate most of the disease. You know, it's the biology of parasites that we were interested in and hoped it would give you some clues as to control.

Sellers: You weren't trying to save the world

Short: We had to make some sort of case for it when we got money from the National Institutes of Health. Some of the guys on the NIH panel knew as much about schistosomes as we did. Also I got money from the NSF – National Science Foundation – the NSF is more interested in just pure science.

Sellers: You retired in 1990?

Short: That's right.

Sellers: So you were here how many years?

Short: Forty.

[some unrelated conversation not transcribed]

Sellers: Can you think of anything anecdotal or any peculiar things that went on that you'd like to put in the interview?

Short: Godfrey came. He was a famous botanist. He was done a lot of work on the flora ... he's studied the trees and the flowers and things and has written an excellent book or two on the trees of this area. He was chairman for a year or so. One summer it was, I was appointed as acting chairman of our department – zoology. I didn't want the job but the dean made it appear that I'd better take it or else not expect too much in the future. That was Charlie Davis. Godfrey grew a beard, and then when he had his identification picture taken for his card – FSU card – he put his sunglasses on and, with his beard, had his picture taken. You couldn't see who he was from Adam. So that was great stuff. Then he also had a sign on his door that said, "If you don't have anything to do, don't do it here." He died, too. A lot of these guys have died. Several other people ... Anne Thistle came and she knows more about the details of some of this stuff than I do. She's been a very good help. Not many professors have a Ph.D. in linguistics to do the typing of their papers. I'm not sure she's fully appreciated in the department.

Sellers: Did you know the vulture lady, Anne Pates?

Short: Yes, Anne Pates studied vultures. We kept them on the roof of the Conradi Building. We moved from the History Building into the Conradi Building, I think, in 1957, or '56, I forget. Anyway, there was no air conditioning in the building the first year. My family and I went to the University of Michigan Biological Station, which is pretty far north, and then came back. But then they got air conditioning; that made it better.

But a number of other people were on the faculty then ...

Sellers: When the transcript comes, you can fill it in.

Short: And we had some very excellent people ... some of them have already left. So then we joined the four departments – Zoology, Botany, Bacteriology, and Physiology. I was acting chairman for a year, and I didn't like it very well.

Sellers: Why not?

Short: Well, what the heck. I would rather do research and teach people.

Sellers: So you liked teaching better than administration?

Short: Well, yes. I didn't want to spend time doing administration. One time Paul Reynolds ... he was assistant dean or associate dean ... he said, "Bob, I want you to look at the salaries in your department members and come up with figures about how much raises they ought to get and what their salaries ought to be next year. So I worked on that. The next day I

came down and Paul Reynolds was sitting there in his office, and the dean's office was off to the right behind the door, and the door was shut. And I walked in and I had the salaries all sized to what I thought fair, and I said, "I've done what you told me to do." Just then Charlie Davis, the dean, came out of his office, he saw me and said, "Bob, come on in here." And he said, "Look at this; this is what the salaries are going to be for next year." So you know, it doesn't make too much difference what you do. That sort of thing.

What else would you like?

Sellers: I think you've pretty well covered ...

Short: I a lot of it didn't have too much to do with the development of FSU. We moved into the Conradi Building ... we heard that this building was originally intended to be a building for some other department, and who was it? The associate dean (I forget his name) ... biologist ... he convinced President Campbell that they ought to move our departments of biology into that building, otherwise a number of us would leave. So we moved in. Then the push went on to join the departments and make one big biology department. What happened, they took a vote among us people to how many people wanted to join the departments and how many did not, and there was only one fellow who voted for joining them ... no, two of them. I was one, because I didn't want to be acting chairman or chairman. But this other fellow wanted to be the big chairman of all of it. And the dean, of course, joined us. He didn't pay attention to the great majority of voters. I mean, that's all right; that's what the dean should do. He should do what he thinks ought to be done. I'm glad he did. So then we all joined and I think it was '57, we got Lee Shanor as head. I forget where he was. But anyway, he was the brother-in-law of Paul Reynolds. Paul Reynolds was dean then and Charlie Davis had left. Lee was a pretty good chairman. Then he left to be chairman of the botany department at University of Florida. Then we elected Bob Godfrey; I think he was the next one. Godfrey served as chairman until Bob Hull came ... he got a Ph.D. at Northwestern, I think. He was a biologist; he studied bird malaria. He came down and took over as head of the department, the big department. And then he died. He smoked cigarettes. Oh, then Godfrey took over ... no, he had lung cancer, Bob Hull did, and it finally got his brain, I think. Then I think Godfrey was chairman for a year or so, and then Ted Williams for a year, and Gib DeBusk for several years. So DeBusk was chairman then for several years. And he was generally liked pretty well, but some people didn't like him, you know. He and I got along pretty well.

Sellers: Were there any deans that worked better with botany and biology and the whole biological science field than others?

Short: I don't know. Werner Baum, probably.

Sellers: He was in meteorology, wasn't he?

Short: Yes. When I first knew him, he was a young meteorologist, just starting.

Sellers: He came the year before you, I think.

Short: Or the year after; I don't know.

Sellers: I was thinking he was a '49er.

Short: He might be; I don't know. But he was another brilliant young fellow. Anyway, he then went into administration. But he had a heart attack and people thought that would really slow him down; he could not realize his ambitions. But he went on and he moved on and he became dean of the graduate school. He went down to University of Miami, and later he was president of at least two other universities before he returned to FSU.

Sellers: He was Dean of Arts and Sciences for a while.

Short: Oh, he was! But then he went down to Miami, yeah. He went down there as vice president. And somebody said that he was hired down there to be a hatchet man or something, to sort of get rid of some of the other people. Maybe I shouldn't put rumors into this conversation. Werner Baum lived out near us, on Domingo; corner of Domingo and Perez. So we got to know them sort of, and his wife Shirley is a real dear. She's living out here now at Westminister Oaks. I always thought Werner was the smartest administrator we've had here.

[conversation about Westminister Oaks not transcribed]

End