

Interviewee: Thistle, David, Ph.D.
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: How about starting out by telling me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

Thistle: Born in Lowell, Massachusetts. Grew up in Tewksbury, which is a suburb (at the time) of Lowell; it's since grown up and become a suburb of Boston, but that doesn't affect my time there. Went to the public schools in Tewksbury, was salutatorian of my high school class, and went off to college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at Harvard. My years there were 1967 to 1971.

Sellers: Your interest in biology and oceanography, elements of biology, began much earlier than college?

Thistle: Oh, I think the interest in the ocean stemmed from family vacations to Cape Cod when I was in high school – junior high school and high school. We would go down to Eastham – it's been a while – and rent a cottage on the bay side. One of the things there was to do when the tide was out (and it went out a long way on the bay side of the Cape), was to walk along the sand flats. I found myself doing that a fair amount and wondering what all the little mounds and tracks were and what was going on. And I think that was a fair starting point. Then at college, became a biology major and then got more and more interested in marine biology; did a senior thesis on a little crab called *Upogebia*. But it was called – it had a great common name, like ghost crab or something like that. Again, I'll have to look up to be sure. And spent what at FSU it was called a DIS, a directed individual study – I think at Harvard it was called Independent Studies – for three semesters, doing research on the museum collections of this crab and got a paper published out of it on a taxonomic revision. In the course of that, I had some in an aquarium and did some field work as well. And so, I was pretty well hooked by the time I graduated.

Sellers: Sounds like it. Scripps Institute of Oceanography?

Thistle: Scripps *Institution* of Oceanography, in San Diego, California, part of the University of California system. '71 until '77. My major professor was Robert R. Hessler.

Sellers: What drew you to Scripps, clear across the country?

Thistle: Two things. First, as an undergraduate, as a senior, I got to meet Dr. Hessler and

had what amounted to an interview for graduate school with him at Harvard because he was friends with the fellow I was doing my directed individual studies with Dr. Herbert Levi, and had come East for his own purposes and stopped in to see my professor, and my professor knew of my interest in Crustacea and arranged for me to talk with him. I can remember the incident; I have no idea what we talked about, but I think I expressed an interest in working on crustacean taxonomy and systematics. He at the time was interested in that field himself, and so we got along. And he certainly kept his eye out for my application as it came through. I also was talking to — being in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, doing my undergraduate project, I got to encounter graduate students, which is not otherwise very common for an undergraduate. I talked with them about what I was interested in doing and to ask them where is a good place to go to graduate school. And they immediately said, “Well, the best places in the country are Woods Hole and Scripps, not necessarily in that order, and you should think about applying to them.” Well, I didn’t want to stay close to home, so I didn’t apply to Woods Hole. I applied to Duke, and Scripps, and one or two other places – University of Rhode Island. I got in everywhere I wanted to. Oh, I applied to Dalhousie University, which is an excellent place in Canada for this sort of work. Got into Scripps and it wasn’t much of an issue. They promised me a scholarship, and I decided to go out there.

Sellers: Are you the only child in your family?

Thistle: No, I have two younger sisters.

Sellers: So there wasn’t any problem with going to college or anything like that?

Thistle: No, my parents were both first-time-in-college people, came from working class backgrounds and they were very much — and they both became educators and were very much sold on the idea that if we were capable, we should go to college and go to best one we could get into and afford.

Sellers: So it wasn’t if you’re going, it’s where you’re going?

Thistle: Oh, yeah. That was one of their threats: “If you’re not good, this will go in your permanent record, and you won’t get to go to college.” You know, we were in second and third grade at the time.

Sellers: We’re the same generation – I heard that a lot, too. How long were you at Scripps, and what did you work on there? Tell me a little bit about that.

Thistle: I was there for six years. The first year was taken up with class work and sort of getting your feet under you. I got to go to sea for a couple of day trips, and that was interesting, to see whether I got seasick or not. I found out I did.

Sellers: You had not been to sea on the East Coast?

Thistle: On little boats, for short periods. But you know, going out on a research vessel for prolonged – far away from shore – in the weather that you catch, you know, whatever – you’re on the ship for a day, so whatever the weather was, within reason, you went out. And so it was very different from the pleasure boating that I’d done before. And I got familiar with the side of the ship and which way the wind was blowing.

Sellers: All important elements.

Thistle: Ah! Very good training for a young oceanographer. At that same time and throughout the six years, I had a research assistantship with Dr. Hessler, so I was doing research on a project that he had gotten National Science Foundation funding for that involved identifying and classifying and describing species of deep-sea isopods, which are crustaceans. The familiar terrestrial ones are the “pill bugs,” but they are mostly a deep-sea radiation – that is, most of the species are in the ocean. There aren’t really sort of familiar examples of isopods, except the giant one, *Bathynomus giganteus*, and it’s a huge scary-looking creature about 30 centimeters long. I didn’t work on anything like that. I worked on animals that lived in the sea bed that the biggest one was probably two millimeters long. But it was good, good for someone with an eye for detail like I have, and a liking for order. It was very pleasant because you are figuring what evolution lineages go together and publishing that and describing the new species and the new genera and families that are required to make that available for other scientists to look at.

Sellers: So you’re not spending a whole lot of time underwater?

Thistle: Well, for my research assistantship, no. It was all collections actually made in the North Atlantic by some people – and we’re told that we were working up for a systematic and biogeography reasons. And I published in the end, oh, I think five papers from that work. So that was quite a nice benefit for essentially earning my living, but also learning my trade.

Sellers: So you received your Ph.D. in ‘77?

Thistle: Right, but for a very different work. Dr. Hessler wanted his Ph.D. students to work on their own projects for their Ph.D., not his projects. And so, although I worked fifteen hours a week for him, the rest of my time I spent doing my own project, and that was a study of ecology in marine sediments at 1200 meters depth off of San Diego. The sampling involved several other people, and we got to use a device called a remote underwater manipulator, which is essentially a robot with tracks to allow it to move around like a tank, and a robotic arm to allow it to take samples.

Sellers: So it moves on the floor of the ocean?

Thistle: But it’s tethered back to a mother ship and has lots of TV cameras on it and film cameras, so you can see what you’re doing and take pictures and take samples. So I had a chance to use that. And my interest at the time, and the community’s interest at the time, was

what were the arrangement of species in space on small scales. Because that turned out to be something that is very hard to do by sampling from a ship, so having this new piece of technology allowed us to take a look at that. It turns out that you could sample fairly easily on the scale of a few centimeters because you caught that many in a single sample you'd take from a ship. Or you could take samples that you didn't really know but guessed were a kilometer apart, because at the time there wasn't good navigation and good ability to control your sample as it made its descent through half a mile or a mile or more of water. And so what was happening at tens of centimeters and meters scale, scales of which animals interact, was unknown. And so with the remote auto-manipulator, as we could drive along and stop every few meters, then —.

Sellers: So you were actually inside this?

Thistle: No. We're on the ship.

Sellers: You were on the ship, and you were watching what it was sending back to you from its cameras.

Thistle: From its cameras, up through a cable. And then when we filled up our cores, we'd bring it back up, take our samples off, and put it back down again and do some more.

Sellers: And being seasick, how long were you able to do that?

Thistle: I was out for, I think, a week at a time for six weeks. The whole program was six weeks long, and I was out for half it, every other week. But it was on a special ship that was actually anchored to the sea floor, and so the platform was quite stable. And so I was only green for about the first twelve hours, then I got my sea legs. There's a wonderful picture of me lying in my bunk with very pale face — that's still on the wall in the lab back at Scripps. That's great "*pour encourager les autres.*"

Sellers: What did you know about Florida State while you were at Scripps?

Thistle: More than you would expect, actually, because there was a very famous professor in my field here at Florida State. His name was Robert Menzies, and he had made a good part of his career as an expert in deep-sea biology, and as it happened, an expert in deep-sea isopods, one of the groups I was quite familiar with. So I had read his papers, used his taxonomic work in doing my own. And so, yeah, I knew about it. Now, I had never visited it before, but I knew it was in Tallahassee.

Sellers: But did you know where Tallahassee was?

Thistle: Well, I knew it was the capital of Florida, because I had learned my state capitals. But, no, I didn't know anything about it, to be honest.

Sellers: Did the department here contact you, or did you put out feelers to them? How did you get here?

Thistle: Well, as it happened, Dr. Menzies died about the time I was finishing my degree, and the department got permission to hire a new person here to fill that slot, not necessarily replace him, but to fill that slot. That was advertised in *Science Magazine*, which as a finishing graduate student we all read religiously. I saw the ad and applied, as I did for 24 other places. And was asked – and you went through the various stages of making the short list where they ask you for letters and I sent letters from Dr. Hessler and from several other people as well known as I could find who knew me and liked my work. And then was interviewed in February, when it was nice – had one of those lovely Tallahassee weekends in February where spring has sort of come but it's still crisp. The sun was out. Just seeing it at its best – I don't think the flowers were in full bloom, but still it was very nice. And then was driven around and saw the city and saw an apartment and liked what I saw.

Sellers: Bit of a change from San Diego and southern California?

Thistle: Well, see, it didn't seem so much, you know, because February in San Diego is a little bit cool.

Sellers: But I mean as far as the size and the closeness to larger metropolitan areas.

Thistle: Oh, yes. But as a graduate student, I didn't use much of San Diego, having minimal money and less time. And so, while we lived in a city of some distinction, basically we hung out with other graduate students and enjoyed each other's company and the beach.

Sellers: You hadn't really graduated to the real world yet.

Thistle: No, we went to a few concerts towards the end, but we just were kept very busy as graduate students. My wife was a graduate student as well.

Sellers: You had already married?

Thistle: We married between college and university – I mean, between undergraduate and graduate. So in the summer of '71, we married on Labor Day weekend and then drove to California.

Sellers: And so did Anne go to graduate school?

Thistle: In San Diego, but waited a year. She worked for a year and then applied to what we called upper-campus, University of California - San Diego proper, on top of the mesa; Scripps is at the bottom, on the beach. Anne studied linguistics and got her Ph.D. in linguistics the same time I got mine in oceanography.

Sellers: So when you accepted the position to come here, did Anne (and I'll get this from her, too), but was there an opportunity for Anne to be employed here also?

Thistle: As a professional linguist, no, because there was no Department of Linguistics here. At the same time, my memory of that time was that Anne was heartily sick of linguistics, because she had a rocky road that she can tell you about. And so the idea was to come, at least one of us would have a job, get our feet on the ground, and Anne would decide which of her many talents she wanted to use.

Sellers: So your acceptance of the position really didn't hinge too much on her having an opportunity?

Thistle: No, there were very few positions in linguistics at that time globally. It was a field that had made a big splash when Chomsky wrote *Sound Patterns of English*. A lot of places founded a linguistics department, filled their staff, and all those people were there for careers, and so there was not much turnover in the late '70s because those jobs were all filled.

Sellers: So she came along?

Thistle: So she came along.

Sellers: You settled in, and you had interviewed here, so you had met people in the department. Do you recall some of the people that you met?

Thistle: Oh, very well! Paul LaRock was my host, which is usual. There's usually one faculty member that's assigned to make sure the logistics work out, and so he picked me up at the airport and drove me to the Marine Lab, I'm pretty sure that very night, because the interviews tend to be short – just a few days and a lot to be done. He took me to the Marine Lab and showed me around it.

Sellers: And the Marine Lab was at Panacea at that point?

Thistle: To where it is now. It's present location. And I was impressed; it seemed a very nice facility. We stopped and had supper on the way back, a place that isn't there right now but it's near where the Oaks was. The building is still there – it's a real estate agent's office now. And so he hosted the party for me, a social, where I met more of the department and also some people from Biology. I remember Dan Simberloff came to the party. Perhaps Larry Abele, I can't actually be sure of that. One tends to be sort of overwhelmed with impressions. I think to this day I'm still recognizing places in Tallahassee that the only other time I'd seen them was when Paul drove me around my first day. At the time, in the department, the people sort of interviewing me were: Tony Sturges, as chairman; Winston Menzel, as the senior faculty member in the group, Rich Iverson, was another biological oceanographer faculty member; he's still here. Paul LaRock moved to Louisiana State University, and, of course, Winston Menzel

died some years ago.

Sellers: So you got here, you found an apartment. When did you actually move, “lock-stock-and-barrel,” to Tallahassee?

Thistle: It happened we came Labor Day weekend. That first semester I wasn’t given a teaching assignment, and so I didn’t have to get here particularly for the start of – well, it wasn’t semesters then – we were on quarters. So I had the first quarter off, but I had a meeting in Europe that I went to, and we had to move from San Diego to Tallahassee. We needed to see parents because we’d been more or less in California the whole time. So we made a tour and got all that settled out. I wrote a proposal, and got to Tallahassee the Labor Day weekend, which wasn’t the best choice, because although we were able to rent an apartment, we couldn’t get the electricity turned for four or five days. So we were here in Tallahassee in the rain and the heat.

Sellers: Had the weather that you left in San Diego been as oppressive as what we get here?

Thistle: No, San Diego is a Mediterranean climate. It’s never very hot on the coastal belt where we lived, and never very humid. So Tallahassee was a bit of a surprise to me, since I’d been here in February and was from New England. Whereas my wife, who grew up in North Carolina, found it, you know, not unexpected. But, you know, I was very happy to have a job and was excited about a new place, new people. So we got through that little episode. But our first apartment we rented for a year was out near Lake Jackson. Then we moved into our present house in ‘78, Labor Day weekend of ‘78.

Sellers: Labor Day weekend for you.

Thistle: A lot of things happen on Labor Day weekend.

Sellers: You said you were off that first quarter. When you came back, did you actually take on some teaching duties?

Thistle: Well, I was here in residence, I just wasn’t teaching. I was finishing up papers based on my dissertation research and my research assistantship out there. I found, waiting for me, two students who had Dr. Menzies as an advisor, and when he died, they decided to wait for me to come. I inherited two going students, which turned out to be very good. Ordinarily a professor has to wait a year to recruit students. So I had two students with me right from the beginning, Will Ravenel and Bob Dennis.

Sellers: What did you find that might have been unexpected about your teaching and research duties once you were here?

Thistle: Well, that proposal I wrote on my way to Tallahassee was funded in the first part

of January, and so almost from the day I walked in the door I had funding, and I've had funding continuously since. In one way that was a surprise because I thought it was going to be harder and it wasn't. As it turned out, it wasn't a surprise, because it is hard. It's been a constant struggle, but at least I had my feet on the floor with the Office of Naval Research and was able to support students and get my summer salary and all those things that are often difficult for an assistant professor trying to get established. I had a research program going, in shallow water as it turned out, not a deep-sea program at all, for those first years, which was meant a lot of diving and a lot of working at the Marine Lab, which made a nice change. New techniques to learn, and new logistics problems to solve. That was great. The big surprise was how hard – not how hard it was to teach but how hard it was to prepare a quarter's worth of lectures from zero. I was teaching graduate students, didn't have a text, so every lecture, every 50 minutes – or 45, or whatever the quarter is, less than 45 – 30 lectures, I guess – was written as a separate essay, and often from zero. You know, having to master a portion of the literature, synthesize it, write it out. They taught me back at Scripps that six hours of preparation for one hour's lecture was a reasonable estimate. If anything, that's an underestimate of the amount of work that was required.

Sellers: They're assuming that you're fully versed in the topic, I think, when they say six hours.

Thistle: So that was a big shock; that kept me working nights and weekends through the next three quarters. So I had to teach winter, spring — I had to teach a new course winter, spring, and then the following fall in a three-course rotation.

Sellers: Then were you able to teach them again?

Thistle: I was able to teach them again for a while, and then it became clear that some of these courses were — that the graduate students didn't come through fast enough that the demand for them was there every year, and so I started teaching them every other year, and so ended up with at least four courses that I taught in regular rotation. I taught marine benthic ecology the first quarter, and that was relatively easy because that was stuff I had – that was my field – and I had taken a class at Scripps that provided guidance. And I had a reading list from a professor named Paul Dayton, who was quite a respected ecologist, marine benthic ecologist, and it filled out in shallow water the things that I was weak on, that I was more versed in the deep-sea issues. But the spring semester I had to teach zooplankton, because at the time we had no zooplankton biologist, and that was much harder. I had, again, the sense to ask the fellow that taught zooplankton at Scripps if I could have his reading list, and he gave me not only a reading list but a course outline. His name was Mike Mullen. So I had that to start with, but, you know, I was having to read each of those papers and synthesize, and that was hard. And then, I think the third course was biological oceanography, which I taught as a combination of the other two. That was a little easier because I was synthesizing stuff I had already read, and had already written and lectured on, to make that course for our graduate students that weren't biologists (this was for the physicists and chemists and geologists who also were part of the oceanography

department).

Sellers: Oceanography is strictly a graduate level program, is that correct?

Thistle: Here at FSU. And at the time I came, very much that was a truism throughout the nation. There were very few exceptions; Miami taught something called marine biology. It's less true now, but that's the history of FSU. We are graduate-only, although we are making a larger and larger contribution to the general undergraduate education in the college by teaching distribution classes and classes that the humanities majors take to fulfill their science requirement.

Sellers: How many students on average would you have in each of these classes?

Thistle: My graduate classes? Over the years, I think the average has been six or seven.

Sellers: So it was a relatively small, manageable group, more like a seminar or something like that?

Thistle: Very, yes, intimate.

Sellers: And you did almost a hands-on type thing with them?

Thistle: I lectured; my teaching style was lecturing, but eliciting comments and trying to make them make connections. So there was a lot of discussion, back and forth. But you know, for most of the time, it was a lecture format.

Sellers: Did you have master's students that you would work with and Ph.D. students, just like the History Department?

Thistle: Right. I could count them up, but I've had more – well, you can see the bound theses over there.

Sellers: Lots.

Thistle: Six Ph.D. students so far through their programs, and sixteen – I don't remember off the top of my head – but more than ten, less than thirty, master's students who trained with me.

Sellers: And you're please with all that group? Relatively speaking.

Thistle: [Chuckles] Well, I take a certain pride that anyone who started the degree program with me got through and got their degree. And that's not trivial, because of several marriages, I've been through at least one woman who finished up between two children. Several

of my students got jobs, what I considered a little prematurely, and went off to start their careers without finishing their degrees and by a certain amount of moral persuasion were able to use their nights and weekends to finish up what they'd started and got their degrees, all of whom were happy in the end, but grumbled a bit at the time.

Sellers: Talk to me a little bit about your colleagues in the department. Who did you find very helpful? Who would you rather not mention?

Thistle: The FSU Department of Oceanography, at least the time I've been here, has been an extraordinary department in that it has gotten along with itself very well. We've never been in a position of being divided badly into groups or cliques, which is remarkable because naturally we form three varied groups of people, with very different training, background, and interests. Biology, where biological oceanography has come from, for biology majors. And physical oceanography is for physics majors, and the chemists were chemistry majors. And yet, we are friends together, and we see each other socially across groups. We work together; we write proposals together. And we do our business in a remarkably collegial fashion. And we out vote people, too, and then people get over it. I mean, it's not like – we don't operate on unanimity in order to get things done. Some controversial issues, the votes can be pretty close, but people accept the votes and move on. So that has been very nice. I value that very, very much about FSU. It's one of the reasons I've stayed. Very different from my impression of the way things operated at Scripps, for example, where it was sort of each person in his or her own fiefdom and they fought a lot, had a very difficult time agreeing on the basics of their lives together, how students should be trained. You know, there's lots of decisions that have to be made in any social organization, in a department. Any department has to deal with this. If you can't make decisions amicably, you waste a whole lot of energy on being angry or fighting or being devious or whatever.

Sellers: Or fuming.

Thistle: And academics are famous for neither forgiving nor forgetting. And somehow we managed to avoid most of that here, which is not to say that there haven't been some personality clashes. But they tend to be maybe acute at the time but they tend to be sort of gotten over with, or at least the people involved find ways to accommodate each other and get past it, so that even people I know who have interacted pretty negatively still are able to get business done. They can be in the same room together, and that's good. That's unusual.

Sellers: What about the different chairs? How has each one of the chairs affected your particular area, positively or negatively?

Thistle: Well, even though he was no longer chair when I came – Jack Winchester stepped down in '76 – but he had been chair from '70 to '76. And if you look into the period, that period, Jack had a tremendous task to do because the department was riven at that time with some serious personality problems, and people had to be let go. I don't even know all the

details, but I know that Jack's personality allowed him to get through that and bring the rest of them through it. I think he did the real heavy lifting of changing the department from one that didn't get along with itself and didn't necessarily have the quality that we were aspiring to at FSU. Made some hard decisions, made some hard changes, took a lot of flack. And then Tony Sturges came in and took over. Tony has a personality that certainly let healing go on that needed to. He had a very – some people call it gentlemanly style of running the place. Had an eye for quality and was definitely trying to build that whenever he could. We were in a time when the department either had shrunk or was just stopping shrinking from its initial size as an institute, when it became a department with about twenty people in it. We bottomed out at fourteen, and then have since built up to now back to twenty. So Tony was great, very much in setting a tone in the department of collegiality (although people wouldn't call it that, they would call it politeness and courtesy). But it worked to foster collegiality. And also, he of course had a lot to say about who got hired. Even though each of the groups would come up with their own candidates, there was somehow a sense that we wanted people that would be very good scientists, but also would buy into this culture that we were striving toward. And we were lucky and able to find people – and I think Tony gets a lot of credit for that – who could come in, be good, help raise our reputation nationally and internationally, but not be – not make their success costly to their colleagues, if that makes any sense?

Sellers: Wouldn't steal the limelight?

Thistle: Oh, they're welcome to the limelight. What they wouldn't steal was the walls and the furniture. All too often, very academically accomplished people have terrible personalities. That they are totally egocentric, have no inkling even – it goes beyond rudeness – they have no, I think, don't view their colleagues as having any particular right to exist.

Sellers: I'm familiar with that, yes.

Thistle: And we don't do that here. Everybody's program has a — . We knew some people have larger reputations than others, but everybody gets a chance at resources and gets to work in peace. It's great. Which doesn't mean that we don't take promotion and tenure seriously. Not everyone who's hired into the department has stayed. Some people didn't work out for one reason or another, but we have been able to hire good people with good manners and that's wonderful. It's been wonderful.

Sellers: Who came as chair after Tony?

Thistle: Well, Tony Sturges and Phil Hseuh – well, they sort of did a tag team for – let's see – Tony did six years, and then Phil did three, and then Tony did – oh, I forget how it went, actually. Yeah, then Tony did two and then Phil did a few.

Sellers: Is that because no one else in your department wanted to be chair?

Thistle: Well, no one in the department wants to be chair, that's a prerequisite, okay? Anyone who wants to be chair is viewed with such extreme suspicion that it's very unlikely that they will be chosen, because we don't want someone who wants to be chair. We want someone who wants to be a good scientist in the department. So why? Partly it was sort of the age structure of the department. We had a couple of people who were sort of too old to take on that tough job, and a lot of new people who were sort of too young to take on that tough job. So for a while, the set of people who were capable and could be dragooned into doing it was pretty small. And so Phil and Tony just did it alternately. And Phil had the same – you know, a very different person – had the same sort of attitude toward who would be a good researcher.

Sellers: How about you? Have you been chair?

Thistle: Right, we'll get to me in a minute. After Phil, we had – the first real change was Bill Burnett, a chemist hired at the same time I was – well, within a month or two. I don't think he was actually hired first, but he came to FSU first, physically. And he did three years. It was a time when the Florida economy was in deep trouble, and the university had few resources, and so he basically didn't have a lot to work with. So he kept the store open and was able to do some things. We started to computerize the staff then, and I think he certainly gets credit for that. We had some counter-offers that he had to deal with. Because people weren't getting raises, our faculty started looking elsewhere for jobs. As this goes, the better people were the ones that – well, people that we very much wanted to keep, let me phrase it that way, were the ones that other people also wanted very much to have. So Bill had an important task to make sure that happened as little as possible. And I think of four incidents, all but one stayed. People were quite glad to have that work out as well as it did. One who left has been very successful, too, but —

Sellers: But not here.

Thistle: We don't win them all. And then I came in. I started in 1994. I had come back from sabbatical; I had sort of been elected in absentia.

Sellers: You weren't there say no.

Thistle: Well, I sent messages back to them. I had been approached before and had claimed I was too young and that excuse was running out of plausibility.

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Thistle: So I became chair under the usual circumstances: not wanting to, particularly since I just went on sabbatical. I had sort of come back renewed and wanted to revitalize my teaching and research, or revitalize my teaching and continue with my research. But anyway, I said yes, and did it. Larry Abele was the dean at the time, and then Larry was dean for another year, and during that time he signed me up. I didn't see much of him, actually. I was a new

chair and didn't really know how often I was supposed to go over and see the dean, so I didn't go over at all [chuckles]. But I went to all the meetings, and the learning curve was very, very steep that first year; because although I'd been a little bit involved in the department's Executive Committee and I'd been on Promotion and Tenure Committee for the science area, the view from the department chair is very different. Fascinating, stimulating, seductive in a way, because you get short-term feedback on things. So you could have a request, think about it, fulfill it, make someone happy or at least give them a decision, in a day. I mean, that's very different from our normal tasks which, you know, the time between when you start thinking about a problem, get the funding, do the work, write the paper, wait for a year for the paper to come out. You know, your feedback has a four-five-six-year time line. And so, that's a seductive aspect of being chair, being able to get things done. And if you're a "get things done" person (as I am), then that's very alluring. But there are plenty of other things that first year that kept me up at night – a lot.

Sellers: Such as?

Thistle: Well, partly just sensory overload. You know, I was trying to keep my research program going at its ordinary level, spending afternoons everyday of the week – well, Monday through Friday – in the chair's office doing the work until it was done. I still had students, two or three students at any moment, so they always had their complications.

Sellers: Were you teaching still, or had that stopped?

Thistle: Very little. I continued to teach my sort of seminar/lab meeting type course. I tried teaching a regular course one semester and it nearly killed me, and so the deal I worked with both the dean and the department was that if they wanted me to keep up my research so that I came out the other side of the chair still a productive faculty member, they'd have to take over my teaching, or do more of it. And since we, particularly at that time, had a relatively low teaching load in the department, it was an easy thing for people to accept.

Sellers: And you stayed with it from '94 to 2003, on a rotation of a three-year term. That's three terms?

Thistle: Yeah, three, three-year terms.

Sellers: It was seductive, wasn't it?

Thistle: Well, it's funny. Of course, Larry Abele was dean for – my dean for one year and then Fred Leysieffer was interim dean for a year, and then Don Foss came and stayed with us for seven years. So all the rest of my time, he was my dean. I liked Don very much, both as a person and as a dean. From my point of view, we got on very well. He didn't say yes all the time, but he'd say yes enough that I felt I was doing good things for the department. And I did. We got to hire against our retirements, and we got to grow — when there was a time when the

university was growing by 100 lines, we got our share of those. Got a lot of work done on the building with his help. This building had aged badly and some major things were getting the roof replaced so it would stop leaking, and also this floor wasn't actually freezing or boiling —

Sellers: Yes, it's very comfortable now.

Thistle: Because there was no insulation in the building. And we got the patio; Miles Hollander and I and Don got the patio closed in around the building. I don't know whether you remember, but the first floor of this building used to just be a central pillar and then the floors went up from there. Well, we filled that in, and that has made a tremendous difference. The Statistics Department got 2000 square feet and we got 1800 square feet (some on the first floor and some in the basement), which was quite important for a department that was growing and had people whose program's were growing. So those are two things that Don and I did together. We also got a warehouse built for our field gear, which was another big problem solved.

Sellers: Where is the warehouse?

Thistle: It's about in Innovation Park area. It's adjacent to the Property Records warehouses. It looks just like one of their's, except it's much shorter.

Sellers: Shorter?

Thistle: Well, we ran out of money.

Sellers: What do you think are some of the highlights of your time in the department?

Thistle: Well, hiring me was definitely one of them [laughs]. I didn't enjoy the process of — the uncertainty of going through tenure, though I was certainly pleased to get it. At the time, we went up what would be considered one year early now. After four years, spring of the fourth year. So it was quite a pressure cooker in those — in that era. Especially for someone — I came without a post-doc, and so I was only 28 when I started, no classroom experience to speak of, changed my research field. It was pretty exciting. So, many highlights have been grants being funded. I remember very clearly when NSF called me up once to tell me the grant they had turned down once previously had been funded. Those were always happy days.

Sellers: When you were going up for tenure, did you have faculty members who were mentoring you, or guiding you in some way, or were you left to your own devices?

Thistle: Well, I think that all depends on your point of view. I thought I was left pretty much to my own devices at the time. Now, I suspect that Tony Sturges was looking after my interests in his own way. I know from time to time I got a little advice from him. And Rich Iverson, I'm sure, thinks he told me what to do. And I think he did! I mean, he came into my office in the first few months I was here and said, "You want to get promoted? Publish!" But

nothing like what we do now. There was no one assigned as a mentor. No one came to my classes to inspect my teaching. It just wasn't done. It wasn't just women who didn't get any support – no one got any support! We were expected to be smart and to look around and see what was done and do it.

Sellers: Figure out how it was done.

Thistle: Yeah, that was part of the game. If you couldn't figure out the game, then you shouldn't be playing. But it was a little disconcerting because, you know, you never knew quite whether you'd done enough or what you were doing was exactly the right sorts of things. And now, with a bit of perspective on the matter, I can see that someone coming from a different milieu, a different personality, might be seduced to or might make ill-advised choices, and where a mentor could really help, point out that even though you really enjoy working with these undergraduates from another department, they're doing their research for their honor's projects, that's not going to get you tenure because you're not going to publish it and those students are in another department. So don't go overboard with this. Be reasonable; be realistic. This is about you, not just about helping these good students.

Sellers: So there is kind of a mentorship program now?

Thistle: Oh yes! The college, actually the whole university, anyway, the college mandates that every assistant, (maybe every professor) anyone without tenure, has a senior colleague assigned to them to be a mentor, and they're expected to meet with them as much as necessary but at least once a semester. They're expected to attend their classes as much as necessary, at least once a semester. Make suggestions, report to the chair once a semester.

Sellers: Have you fulfilled that role for new colleagues?

Thistle: I'm doing it now. When I was chair, of course, that was farmed out. I didn't do that myself. I went to their lectures, too, as chair, but not as mentor. But, yeah, I'm doing Dr. Nowacek, now. His mentor.

Sellers: Do you find it fulfilling or is it frustrating?

Thistle: Neither. Doug's so good, and so accomplished, and so mature that it's almost *pro-forma*. He's a shoe-in. He's publishing in a lot of good journals. He's well funded. He's teaching. I have helped him a little bit in his teaching. I think having another set of eyes in the classroom is useful. I think he's doing very well. I mean, we still have our lunch once a semester, but it might have been — so I guess that's fulfilling. But it's easy.

Sellers: So it's not a nail-biting situation or anything?

Thistle: No. I can think back – a couple of the people that we had to let go might have

done okay, at least had a better chance, if this sort of thing had been in place. But it wasn't the culture. We were supposed to know enough to ask.

Sellers: What about some of the low points?

Thistle: Well, as chair, going through having to let people go was certainly no fun. This is a small group and it's collegial. You knew them; they were your friends to some extent, yet, it wasn't working out. It wasn't in the best interest of the department that they stay. At least some people didn't think so. There were two situations – one where the department just came together and decided this wasn't going to work out and so it didn't even go through the tenure process. The person was advised to go elsewhere, not get a negative tenure report on their record. The other person the department was split on, and that was very – it was horrible for the person – but it was very difficult for those of us involved, trying to make sure they got a fair shake but that the department's interests be also considered. So, for example, the letter – the chairman's letter – that I wrote for this person – that person went up twice, and I totaled up, in the course of writing the chairman's letter, I spent at least twelve hours on that letter, getting it factually correct, talking to colleagues, having colleagues read the letter, reading it myself over and over again. Trying to make it accurate and fair. That just indicates the kind of stress that those situations develop. So I'm not sure that was a low point, but it certainly was a hard point.

Sellers: What about minority hires? So far, everyone that we've interviewed from oceanography has, as an overall umbrella, has been male.

Thistle: Well, when I came, Ruby Krishnamurti was on the faculty, for all of the time I've been here – not unusual. I wasn't chair, but I participated in the hire in which Nancy Marcus was hired into our group. So I've always had – since she'd been here, I've always had a female colleague. She has the office next door. Subsequently, we've hired two women; one didn't get tenure and one left to join her husband. The latter case was frustrating because she was well liked and very good, and I suspect would have been tenured.

Sellers: Are you pressured by the dean or the university in that area?

Thistle: Well, I'll have to phrase this very carefully. It is our understanding that among the candidates to be interviewed, there must be a member of a minority. So that's the rules.

Sellers: Do you feel that limits you in any way?

Thistle: It hasn't limited us, because our field has been changing in its composition. And so when these rules came into play, or even before they came into play, we had hired Ruby and Nancy.

Sellers: So there are women in the field now?

Thistle: And now there are more and more women in the field. For example, when I started here in the – well, the whole department – there was one woman student, and she was in the biological oceanography group. And now, all of our students, except one, are female in the biological oceanography group. So times have changed.

Sellers: Do you think with the increasing number of women and minorities coming into the field that the demands to specifically have at least one in your hiring group will abate?

Thistle: I don't know how that's going to play out. That's a political question. It's very difficult to find a minority candidate to interview. So the minority thing isn't changing very much, although it may in time.

Sellers: But you've got a much wider field of women now because —

Thistle: The women we have, at least in biological oceanography. Well, the person we tried to hire — Nancy became dean and we went to hire against her line, and our first – far and away our first choice was a woman and we moved heaven and earth trying to get her to come; not because she was a woman, but she was a tremendous intellectual.

Sellers: Where haven't I gone?

Thistle: We haven't talked much about students.

Sellers: Tell me about some of your students. Any shining stars?

Thistle: Oh sure, there's a shining star. My student Kevin Carman, who did both a master's and a Ph.D. with me, is a wonderful success story. He was a history major in college and realized partway along that he couldn't make a living as a historian, and so he changed to biology and had to try to catch up. So he came to the applicant pool looking a little peculiar, but I had a partial assistantship available because of a fluke of funding. So I offered it to him. He wrote me a letter saying he accepted it and was really looking forward to coming to the University of South Florida [laughter]. But things got better. And so he did a nice master's degree, he published, and then took a year off to pay off student debts and came back and did a Ph.D. with me. He was very successful and a good person to have in the lab. Excellent in the field; nice guy to have around.

Sellers: And he is now?

Thistle: Well, he got a post-doc at LSU and then went assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, associate dean, was to become chairman of the big biology department over there (70 faculty members) when the dean of his college was called on to be associate provost and they needed an interim dean, so he became interim dean and applied to become the regular dean.

Sellers: So he's an administrator now?

Thistle: So now he's dean of what's called the College of Basic Sciences at LSU, so that's math, chemistry, biology, physics, and computer science. And so, yes. And before that happened, we'd had some research projects together, and we been to sea together a lot. So we'd certainly gone – made the transition from student and mentor to colleagues and friends.

Sellers: Do you find that's possible with enough of your students to make it not a rarity? Or is it very unusual?

Thistle: It is very unusual for a couple of reasons. Many of our students, in fact most of them, don't go on in academia, and so once they've left Tallahassee, the chance of seeing them is small.

Sellers: You mean, they'll get a master's or a Ph.D. in the field and then go into public service?

Thistle: Public service or consulting. One of my students is very high up in a big New Jersey consulting firm working on the next tunnel under the Hudson River, for example. I think we might have been friends, but he lives in New Jersey and he doesn't come to scientific meetings, so I never see him. Whereas Kevin was in the academic business, and so I saw him at least once a year at meetings and we got in the habit of exchanging visits back and forth. So it's special. There's also the complication that the mentor role is a authority figure, a father figure, and sometimes people (the same way they just as soon not go home for a weekend because they don't like becoming children again) don't like seeing a major professor. So it depends on how things strike you. I think that's less of an issue than simply lack of proximity. I have one master's student, Susan Boa, very nice person, knew she was going to be in science communication and did a research master's and then went into science communication. Had a wonderful career working in and around Washington, and she's still doing it. But she called me up every three or four months, wanting advice or to chat or whatever. "Hey! It's Susan!" And I looked forward to that. We talked and I was still able to give her advice. And then that stopped when she got married, which is very nice. She had somebody else to give her advice, but we still exchange Christmas cards. And if she comes down to a football game, she usually makes a call to me to say hi. So I've had some successes like that, but some students I haven't seen since they walked out the door. I regret it; I'd like to at least know what they're doing. But that's the way of the world.

Sellers: Any of the students that you really didn't think were going to make it and they surprised you? You said that all of your students have been successful.

Thistle: Well, there were a couple of close calls. None of the students was I ever despairing of because of lack of ability, and I never happened to have one that just decided they didn't want to do this. But the close calls were where some student who was progressing on a

project and he'd come to me and say, "I hate this part of the project; I simply can't sit at the microscope for four hours a day. And you and I both know that I need to do that for six months and I hate it." And then, once we got over the shock and "All right, let's think about this." And I've been able to either re-direct the project or let them work on some other data and sort of piece together a master's program, where they did sampling or all the field work for one project but they worked up some data from another one. Now, that's only happened once, I think.

Sellers: It sounds like the key is for you to be very flexible.

Thistle: Yeah. Susan, when she came in – oh, Susan was the case in point. She was one of the ones that sat down at the microscope and said, "I can't do this."

Sellers: I can sympathize with her.

Thistle: I had to piece together a master's and cleared it with her committee that this was okay. And then she'd applied for a fellowship up in Washington, D.C. at the Smithsonian and got it. And walked in to my office before the degree was written and said "Oh, by the way, I've got to go up to Washington here in a month." Well, goodness, how are we going to do this? And so we worked out a deal where she had to call me at 8:30 on Friday morning, every week, and if she didn't, I would call her at 9:00. And so for a year, she called me at 8:30 to explain her progress or lack of it on her master's degree.

Sellers: So she's technically doing an independent study, but not really independent.

Thistle: Well, very independent. And she said that having to make that call racked up the guilt level enough that she finished. She got it done and was very happy to have gotten it done, and thanks me for it. But said she didn't much enjoy it at the time. I had to do that with — two Ph.D.'s students that had to finish up that way. So at least three times I've had to deal with people who needed prematurely to take jobs. So it's required a certain amount of dedication. But Susan was wonderful. She came in and laid that on me, so first surprise, then anger, and sort of got through it. You know, went all through the seven stages of divorce sort of in thirty seconds and said to myself, "Okay, what are we going to do?" And so we talked about it. And as she went out the door, she said, "You know, you'd be a very good parent of teenagers," which I've always remembered.

Sellers: Well, trust me, that takes a lot out of you.

Thistle: Well, it's an interesting situation because you can't let the students become too close. They can't be your friends. You shouldn't go out drinking with them. You can occasionally go to one of their parties, but —

Sellers: But you don't want to become their best bud.

Thistle: No. And so you don't really know a lot, sometimes, what's going on in their lives. And yet they come in and you listen.

Sellers: So you have to be a psychologist, too. I think psychological training should come with any educator's.

Thistle: Well, sure, so should training in teaching and so should training in a whole lot of things, but we don't.

Sellers: But sometimes it gets handled well, and sometimes it doesn't.

Thistle: Well, if you're only source – sometimes you're lucky and I've been lucky with the people I've had and the problems I've been faced with.

Sellers: You've been here thirty years this Labor Day, upcoming Labor Day. Retirement anytime soon?

Thistle: Oh, the DROP is certainly something I'm going to have to be thinking about this semester. Financially, it's so attractive. But it must be thought about carefully. I'm torn, of course, about retirement. My career is still in high gear.

Sellers: Will it depend somewhat on what your wife wants to do?

Thistle: Well, she's made it clear; she's going to DROP. She's doesn't insist at all we do it simultaneously, retire simultaneously. She says she has more projects to do to keep busy. But I suspect that DROP's an important consideration.

Sellers: What do you feel you need to accomplish before you retire? Or have you not given it much thought?

Thistle: Well, I don't phrase it in terms of that way. There's lot of questions I'm still curious about that I would like to have a chance to explore. Clearly there's many more than I could do in two more careers. And so figuring out which ones I can do is going to be hard. Depends on what gets funded. I've got one project funded that will last five years, I hope, working with Chris Koenig, Felicia Coleman, and Jeff Chanton on grouper juveniles in the sea grass meadows, their ecology.

Sellers: Young grouper?

Thistle: Yes, young grouper. As part of a FSU/NOAA cooperative institute. But I just sent in three proposals to the National Science Foundation. One to work with Tricia Spears on biogeography in the deep-sea, and one to work with Jeff Chanton and Mike Sullivan on food transfer from near the coast out to the shelf. And one to work with a colleague in Maine on the

ecology of a very important, unusual planktonic organism that I'll help with, that eats some benthic animals, and that's my expertise and I can help him do that part. And if any of those get funded, that'd be great. Those are all projects I'm interested in. And there's one more proposal I think I might want to write. I can sort of see it winding down. I don't see myself at age 70 still wanting to go down to the sea in ships.

Sellers: Or come in here everyday?

Thistle: Well, I like a lot of this job. I like working with the students very much. I like the teaching very much. Now that we are having a change and we're going to be doing some more repetitious teaching because the college is asking us to teach more undergraduates, I'm not sure how that's going to work out. Well, I'm sure it will be successful, I'm just not sure how much I'm going to like it. But, yeah, there are other things I think it might be getting to be time to do before it's too late, while I still have mobility and health to do.

Sellers: So retirement is not on the immediate horizon?

Thistle: Well, when you've got an expectation of the five years and then become emeritus, and then at least a year or so to wind down – or not. You know, if you still have a grant going and the department is willing —

Sellers: There's a decompression period there.

Thistle: Academics – most academics – don't have real lives. A few do, that play music and have — . Particularly for those of us with no children, work has been most of what we do. So retirement is the big step, because you're putting us out of the big chunk of what we are. But if you do not retire, you have to stay competitive at the level you need to be so that the department continues to flourish. It's one of those things that requires a certain amount of energy and that's not given to everyone to have in their 60s and 70s, so it's not an easy one to think about. People getting where I am should at least be thinking about whether it's time, do they have the energy to commit to this endeavor.

Sellers: Any last thoughts?

Thistle: Oh, I'm sure there are lots of last thoughts. We can talk again if it comes to that.

[End]