

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
OF MELVIN D. SHIPP
BY ROBERT NEWCOMB
FEBRUARY 23, 2016

- Q. It's Tuesday, February 23, 2016. I am Dr. Robert Newcomb. I am in the conference room at University Archives on the campus of The Ohio State University. And the purpose of my being here is to interview Dean Emeritus Melvin Shipp, who is today in Goodyear, Arizona. So I want to say first of all thank you to Dean Shipp for agreeing to be part of the recording here at the University Archives. Dean Shipp led the College of Optometry at Ohio State for 10 years, from 2004 to 2014. And it's a pleasure to talk with him today and share some of his experiences while leading a college. Dean Shipp, are we coming through loud and clear?
- A. Yes, you are, Dr. Newcomb, and it's a pleasure to speak with you again.
- Q. Thank you very much. I'd like to start off by having you state your full name and birth date.
- A. Very good. My name is Melvin Douglas Shipp, and I was born August 10, 1948.
- Q. I didn't realize that we share a middle name. My middle name is also Douglas.
- A. That just goes along with everything else I know about you. I consider you a close personal friend and apparently we're even closer than I thought.
- Q. That's right. Could you tell us where you were born and where you grew up?
- A. I was born in Fort Benning, Georgia. I'm a military brat. I had the opportunity to live in Georgia; Texas; Louisiana; Bad Nauheim, Germany; Kentucky; and Vilseck,, Germany. So a lot of different places as a result of my father's career. I ended up graduating from Nuremberg American High School in Nuremberg, Germany.

Q. Oh, very interesting. And at what point in your life did you decide to become an optometrist?

A. Actually I've always had an interest in the health professions. I actually considered medicine, dentistry, psychiatry, psychology, and was undecided during my senior year of high school when I was in Germany. Back in those days we didn't have access to the internet and so I had to go through a catalog, to find out what institutions might offer those various degree options, ideally at the same institution. And as I waded through that book, which was rather thick, I got to the I's and finally found Indiana University. That was the University I decided to pick because all of those career training options were available. At Indiana University, I had a chance to do work-study. I chose to work within the School of Optometry at IU, and after interacting with Dr. Gerald Strickland, who was the Dean of Students at the time, and working with some vision researchers, I decided on optometry. And I decided to do not only my undergraduate training, but also the OD degree.

Q. Now you mentioned Dr. Strickland at IU. Did you have a hometown optometrist anywhere along your developmental years that kind of encouraged you into optometry?

A. Actually, I had interacted with several optometrists, one of whom was very influential. It was during my final year of high school, in Germany. And I was undergoing a physical for a scholarship program, and the person who examined my eyes happened to be an optometrist. He was very patient, very kind and not only explained what he was doing, but told me a bit about optometry. I feel very sorry that I can't remember his name. He was a military optometrist. I would very much like to know his name and it would be wonderful to thank him for his influence. Thanks to him, I added optometry to my list of

potential professional opportunities as a result of that eye exam during my senior year in high school.

Q. We find here at Ohio State, and you know this very well, that most of our students have an influential optometrist somewhere along the line who encouraged them, sparked their interest in the profession. And so it's not at all unusual that you would have such a person. It's a little unusual that his person was a military optometrist stationed in Germany, but I can only assume that was an Ohio State or an Indiana graduate that pushed you in the right direction.

A. It has to have been one or the other. That's true.

Q. So you said you attended Indiana University and obtained your OD degree. Did you go right into optometric education after you graduated?

A. Indeed, I received both my BS degree and OD degree at Indiana. And again, the choice of Indiana University was because I wanted to make sure that whatever academic institution I chose for my baccalaureate degree would offer the same options of continuing my education for the health professions. So Indiana was the institution that I chose.

Q. And then when you were at Indiana, is that when you became interested in optometric education, or did that come later after you had graduated?

A. Actually, it was during my optometry training. I had an opportunity to work with Dr. John Amos during my fourth year. Dr. Amos was teaching a course in clinical methods. He asked myself and two other students to assist him in developing the laboratory exercises for that course. And so I wrote the laboratory exercises and taught them during that time. That exposure was interesting, although at the time, if I'm honest, I really

hadn't thought seriously about academic optometry. But subsequently I did, because that was a very positive experience for me.

A. Not only interesting. It's undoubtedly as a result of that, because I knew him and I knew he was at UAB [the University of Alabama at Birmingham]. It's always nice to go someplace where you know someone and you've worked with them.

Q. Now I know that you are a veteran of the U.S. Navy, and I want to thank you for your service. I also want to ask you, your dad was in the Army, so how did you happen to choose the Navy as your military option?

A. Actually, again, my father was very influential. He had a stellar career, and I had many positive experiences. Again, that was the only experience I knew growing up. The military was comfortable for me, and therefore it was comfortable to go into the military. However, as a result of being an Army brat and traveling to various posts and bases, I realized that some of the assignments that one could receive in the Army, were not so wonderful. I assumed that I might do better with the Navy, given that most Naval bases are at major cities and major sea ports, and therefore less likely to be assigned to some isolated location. So that was part of it. The other part of it, of course, with the last name of Shipp, I thought it would be most appropriate for me to be affiliated with the Navy as well.

Q. It did seem like it was a good fit and you actually retired as a full Navy captain. And so it was good for you, and it was good for the Navy as well. A wonderful partnership.

A. It was. And I enjoyed my service. And while we're talking about service, I want to thank you for your service as well. It's nice that there's yet another thing that we have in common, along with our middle name.

Q. Well, thank you. I think the listeners to this interview would be interested to know how optometry was practiced in the Navy. You went in before there were diagnostic and therapeutic drugs in the profession, and I assume when you got in the Navy you had to learn a little bit of pharmacology. Could you share a little bit about that experience?

A. Actually, you're exactly right, and I had had pharmacology training in Optometry School. However, it was all didactic with no actual experience other than using anesthetics for tonometry. The commanding officer of the hospital, at my initial base assignment, was excited about the fact that I would be there and be able to provide eye services. He gave me a list of privileges and asked me to check the privileges I wished to have in the hospital. And I did. But I limited my choices to those things that I had actually done while I was in training at IU. He observed the list and he asked me, "I noticed that you chose not to do any treatment. Any particular reason why?" And I told him, "Although I've had the course work, I've not had the practical experience of actually treating eye diseases and disorders pharmacologically." He then volunteered, "If you would like to get the experience I can arrange for that. I would really like it if you could provide those services here at our hospital." It was a small hospital in Port Hueneme, California, just north Los Angeles. And so I did. I took him up on his offer and I went to Long Beach and spent about a week with an ophthalmologist on Long Beach. The ophthalmologist gave me some tips and pointers about his experiences with pharmacological treatment, and encouraged me to use the training I had and offered to consult with me if I had any questions or needed assistance. It was almost like residency training in pharmacological eye care. I was able to do things that I had been taught, but had not had the opportunity to do while I was in optometry school. I then went on to practice optometry at a different

level, thanks to my commanding officer of my hospital, and the ophthalmologist that I met at Long Beach.

Q. I had a very similar experience. I think our Big Ten universities prepared us well academically, but we didn't have the practical experience, and many people in our generation during the Vietnam era, did receive those kinds of experiences. And then came back and fought for the use of diagnostic and therapeutic drugs in the private sector.

A. Exactly.

Q. Toward the end of your tour at Port Hueneme, you obviously had to make the decision of whether to stay in the Navy or get out, what went through your mind at that point in your life?

A. Although I had had a wonderful clinical experience, practicing at the full level of training I had had in Optometry school, I did so in a very healthy patient population. As you well know, the folks who are in the military have been pre-screened to be healthy. And so you are basically dealing with healthy people and healthy eyes. Although my four years of active duty were a wonderful experience, I did not want to spend 20 years doing that kind of practice. At that time, I remembered that I found the academic environment very stimulating. Not only could you do the clinical practice but also teach. And something else that I had not done but found interesting was doing research. And so I decided to end my active duty service. However, I remained in the Naval Reserves and moved to an academic environment, with the express purpose of getting a graduate degree. I felt that I wanted to do try academics, and I wasn't sure whether I'd like to practice full-time. I was killing two birds with one stone. One, to pursue graduate level training, but also having a bit more time to decide where I might spend the rest of my professional career. I

considered Indiana University. I also considered the College of Optometry in California. But I chose UAB, primarily because I knew someone there. When I went to visit UAB, I learned of its interest in enhancing minority representation in optometry and providing optometry service within a minority community. And both of those were very compelling and persuasive. That's why I chose UAB.

Q. And I might add that that's where I first met you, Mel.

A. That's correct.

Q. And we both had a wonderful time down there in Birmingham. You were actually at Birmingham for 25 years. I was only there for about six years. What were some of your early courses that you taught at UAB in addition to some of your administrative responsibilities?

A. Well, initially most of my work was administrative. I was Director of the Optometric Technician Program. These are individuals who are trained to assist optometrists in providing eye care services, with two years of college training. That was where I spent most of my time. However, I did also teach in the clinic. Also I gave guest lectures in some of the professional-level courses. That was my initial emphasis at UAB. Later, I was asked by Dr. Henry Peters, the Dean of the School, to consider a different kind of administrative appointment. I became Assistant Dean for Clinical Services and Director of Clinics for the School of Optometry. While in that position, I also taught other clinical courses. Subsequently, I then went to pursue a graduate degree in public health, and returned to teach epidemiology, health policy and other public-health-related courses.

Q. You were down at UAB for 25 years, had a distinguished career, not only in clinical care and education, but also in research. Can you tell me some of your early research interests?

A. There were a couple of areas, one of which related to public health: specifically, investigating relationships of aging vision and traffic fatalities. In fact, while at UAB I went to the University of Michigan and received a doctorate in Health Policy for research in that area. I published and lectured, not only in the U.S. but also abroad, specifically Ireland, South Africa and Italy. The other area was working with Dr. [Karla] Zadnik and others on the CLEERE [Collaborative Longitudinal Evaluation of Ethnicity and Refractive Error] study. This study investigated the incidence, prevalence and changes in the refractive status of children of differing racial/ethnic backgrounds. They were very different research areas. One was, again, policy-related; the other more clinic-related. So those were the two major areas.

Q. And, of course, the Dr. Zadnik that you cited was at Ohio State at that time, when you collaborated with her, and she is our current Dean, having succeeded you in June 2014.

A. Yes.

Q. Optometry is truly a tight-knit family.

A. Indeed, indeed. We all either know each other or know of each other.

Q. Exactly. Well, we were delighted when you accepted the appointment here at Ohio State in June 2004. What went through your mind at that time? You were doing pretty well there at UAB, being a full professor and having research grants. It sounds like you were on top of your game there academically but you decided to come to Columbus. Can you tell us what went into that decision?

A. I've always liked to stretch myself whenever I feel comfortable. Having done a bit of administration while at UAB and also having leadership opportunities in the military and outside of the military, when I was asked, I agreed to be a candidate for the Deanship at OSU. I'm glad I did. It was an extraordinary opportunity to be considered, and even more extraordinary to have been offered an opportunity to serve as the Dean of the College of Optometry.

Q. And although you were not new to higher education on optometry, you were new to Ohio State. So were there certain mentors or people in possibly University administration or other colleges that mentored you during those early years here at OSU?

A. I had many mentors at OSU. I guess I'd have to start with the people who offered me the position: President Karen Holbrook and Provost Barbara Snyder. They were two exceptional people. I felt very comfortable with both of them and thankful they saw fit me to offer me the opportunity. Subsequent presidents, E. Gordon Gee and [interim President] Joe Allutto, extraordinary leaders, were also very inspirational and extremely supportive. With respect to Provosts, I had a chance to work not only with Barbara Snyder and also Joe Allutto but Carol Anderson and Joe Steinmetz. So again, these are extraordinary people who were very supportive. Fortunately, all of the Deans of OSU at the College of Optometry were living in Columbus during of my tenure as Dean. They were extremely supportive: Dr. Fred Hebbard, Dr. Richard Hill and Dr. John Schoessler. I met and had lunch with them, and sought their counsel. But beyond the academic folks within the University, I also was extremely appreciative of the support I received from the Ohio Optometric Association. The College had a very special relationship with that organization, especially the Executive Director at the time, Rick Cornett. They were

supportive of our efforts, and also helped in recruiting outstanding students, to our College. We also are indebted our alumni, and specifically The Ohio State Optometry Alumni Society, for support in our recruitment efforts. They also provided scholarship support and the mentorship and counseling that I needed. The problem with listing is you are fearful of leaving somebody out. Others include the faculty, emeritus faculty, staff, professional colleagues within the University, and friends, not only in industry but within the community. So I've had many mentors

Q. I think we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who went before and helped us along the way. And on the other side, you probably have mentored some people in optometry, both at UAB and Ohio State whom you are especially proud of. Can you recall any of their names?

A. Formally, I've mentored graduate students and professional students. Again, I am fearful of forgetting someone, so I'd rather leave it at that. So I guess again, both formally and informally, I've had a many opportunities to mentor. And it was something that I enjoyed tremendously. Obviously as clinicians you have a chance to work with patients and provide services and support to them, but in an academic environment, as you well know, we get a chance to do that almost on a daily basis with not only students but also professional colleagues.

Q. I understand but I do want you to know that my name is on that long list of the people you've mentored, and I am a better optometrist and optometric educator because of it.

A. Well, thank you. You're very kind. And I should say that it goes both ways.

Q. Thank you, Mel. So could you just reflect back on the 10 years you were at Ohio State? Gosh, it was an exciting time in the profession. We were changing state laws. We were

acquiring new technology, and Ohio State was expanding from excellence to imminence. I wonder if you could look back on those 10 years and reflect on how it impacted your career.

- A. Wow, how much time do we have? Again, there were so many things that happened, all of which were exciting to me. I was delighted that I had an opportunity to be there at that time and to contribute to some of those developments. Within our College, I was very pleased to build upon the successes of those who preceded me in administration. Again, the Emeritus Deans that I mentioned to you before. More specifically, though, I had the pleasure of following up on an initiative that John Schoessler had started: building a facility for our research activities. Dr. Schoessler had initiated funding and planning efforts in advance of my arrival, to build what became the Wildermuth Research Tower. This allowed the recruitment of some outstanding research faculty to enhance the college's research program, and expand our graduate program. I had hoped, frankly, that we'd be able to build a new facility but that was not possible during the time that I was there. So we took the resources that we had and we used them to update our existing facilities. The other development that I was proud of was expanding our externship program. We also revised our curriculum to optimize critical thinking skills throughout the professional program. We created an electronic health records system in our clinics that was not only important for us operationally, but also necessary for us to keep pace with clinical developments. I was perhaps most proud of our efforts to increase awareness of diversity issues, cultural sensitivity between and among individuals, especially of different races and cultures. As clinicians we examine and treat eyes but we also help people, and being able to communicate effectively with people is extremely important.

The University's global outreach efforts were just beginning before I retired. I hope those efforts will be successful and continue to grow. We were also able to support our faculty and the University's efforts to promote technology, development and transfer.

Q. Yes, especially the externship programs in the fourth year have been a point of pride. When I was a student every student went through the identical clinics here on 10th Avenue and I assume that's the way it was at IU for your education as well. And we just assumed all of the interesting patients would stumble into our on-campus clinics, which in fact, didn't happen. And so getting the students off campus has been good for all of optometric education.

A. I agree, and I would hope that we will not only continue to do that but increase those opportunities, because the on-campus interdisciplinary training activities enhance training operations and address individual preferences.

Q. Now at this point I want to change gears a little bit and ask you about the service that you provided to the profession. You are the only optometrist to serve as President of the American Public Health Association, a fact that we all take tremendous pride in. And I wonder how you got interested in the early days of the APHA and how you ascended through the various chairs to become the first OD to lead that prestigious organization?

A. It's interesting and it probably goes back to when I left the Navy. I left the Navy with the idea of going to graduate school to pursue degree in either pathology or pharmacology. This was consistent with where our profession was heading at that time. However, I realized that I tended to be more of a generalist, as opposed to a specialist. Public health was more attractive to me. I chose to do the Master's of Public Health, and subsequently went on to do a doctorate in Public Health, in policy, because I felt that our profession,

more than other health professions, is significantly impacted by policy. I found a home in the American Public Health Association. First of all, it's an umbrella organization that includes any and all disciplines that relate to health. Some immediately come to mind, like health providers of medicine, dentistry, optometry, nursing, etc. But also other disciplines that were perhaps less obvious. Biostatistics for example. I found the American Public Health Association to be receptive to professions and individuals who had an interest in trying to promote health in a very general way. Initially, I had opportunities to be a member and serve in leadership roles in the APHA Vision Care Section, including serving on the governing counsel of the American Public Health Association. And as a result of that, I was befriended by the Executive Director of the APHA at the time, Dr. Mohammed Ahkter. He was instrumental in increasing my involvement at the organizational level. I was asked to be the founding chair of the Education Committee for the Association and subsequently ran for office. I was elected Treasurer of the American Public Health Association, and ultimately as the President. Frankly, none of these experiences were planned. I was fortunate to have that opportunity. During my time as President, I had a chance to travel, not only to roughly a third of the states, but also Ethiopia, Canada, and Taiwan. Although I represented public health broadly, I took every opportunity to talk specifically about optometry and what it had to offer for the publics of those respective countries and states.

Q. And optometry is practiced quite differently in different countries, and even in different states within the United States.

A. Indeed. But as we both know, this is not as it should be. All optometrists have the same training and therefore are able to provide services independent of geography. There should be a more uniform health delivery of eye and vision services by optometrists.

Q. Well, Mel, I know when we graduated in the early 1970s, we could not have anticipated the change and scope of practice and the technology and electronic health records and all of the things that have come down the pike. Where do you see optometry 25 years from now?

A. That's a great question. I wish I had a great answer. I think it's extremely important for optometry to increase or enhance its communication between and among other health disciplines and policy makers. The training that optometrists receive is extraordinary. The care and services they provide are also extraordinary. And the quality of care, as reflected in extremely low malpractice rates, is high. Optometry should be quite different than what it is today. When we graduated, optometrists were basically limited to refractions, whereas now our practice has broadened to include minor surgery in certain states. The fact that one state has this scope of practice means that it should happen in all states.

Q. Well, you've had a remarkable career, both at UAB and here at Ohio State. I wonder if you do have any regrets or mistakes or moments you would like to do over, as you look back on a really stellar career in public service and optometric education and research and military optometry. Do you see your life unfolding any differently if you had made different choices along the way?

A. I'm sure there are some mistakes that I made that probably I would prefer not to have made, but I don't have a problem with making mistakes. In fact, there is a comment that, "If you show me someone who's never made a mistake, I'll show you someone who is

either lying or has never tried.” So making mistakes is part of the human condition. The key is not to make the same mistake one more than once. You should learn from it, and to grow from it. So yes, I’ve made some mistakes

Q. We’re just about out of time but I can’t let you go without asking about your life outside of optometry. Do you have any particular hobbies or interests that you are exploring now in your retirement years?

A. I was very pleased to have made the transition from working full-time as a professional and moving into this new chapter of my life where I am able to spend more time with my wife and my family. I’m happy about our move to Arizona. I’m enjoying my family, especially now that I’m a brand-new grandfather with a three-month old grandson.

Q. Congratulations.

A. Thank you. We’re getting involved in our new community. We’re supporting efforts to help those who are underprivileged or challenged. We’re also spending a little time with ourselves. I’m enjoying golfing, reading, art, learning French, and we’re traveling as time permits. So it is a wonderful time to spend a bit of time doing things I couldn’t do while working full-time. And I’m sure you can understand that.

Q. We miss you here in Columbus, but we’re delighted that you’re enjoying a healthy and happy retirement there in Arizona. As a final question, what do you think would be your greatest legacy to the profession of optometry?

A. I really don’t know. And I guess I haven’t given much thought to that. I would like to think that the things that we were able to accomplish as a College at Ohio State will be instrumental in helping to move the profession forward. I hope people will remember me as someone who was a team player, someone who tried to assist and help others. I also

always tried to leave things a little better than I found them. And I hope that was the case at OSU. During my transition from being Dean to retirement, I was focused on safely passing on the baton to Dr. Zadnik. That is a pretty good analogy as a relay race except when running a relay race, normally the track is always the same. But that's not the case when you're passing on a baton from an administrative post. When I reflect on the careers of Dr. Hebbard, Dr. Hill, Dr. Schoessler and myself versus what will happen with Dr. Zadnik, each of us carried the baton at different times with different challenges and different opportunities. I hope that I made the best of the opportunities that existed during my tenure and moved us through that period in the way that was effective for the college. And I would like to say this, before this interview is over, and that is to thank you Bob, for your support when I was at OSU. But more importantly, for doing something I desperately wanted when I arrived at OSU: a history on the College. Thank you for authoring that book for our College. I've read the book now at least twice and each time I learn a bit more. You captured not only the facts and the names and the dates, etc., but also the sense of family that exists in our profession. And again, given the long history of the College of Optometry, you've also contributed to our profession. So I want to say thank you for that contribution to OSU and to our profession.

Q. Thank you for your very kind words. Mel, when I think about our years together here at Ohio State, I always remember you saying, "I wasn't a Buckeye by birth but I'm a Buckeye by choice."

A. And that's true. I have come to love Ohio State and I am especially appreciative since I didn't graduate from Ohio State. I had the audacity to graduate from that school up north, but everyone made me feel welcome and at home.

Q. Well, you did reference the book that I wrote in 2014, which was the 100th anniversary of the College of Optometry. And I do have a copy in front of me and in the chapter of Deanship I do have your philosophy as Dean. And this was in an address to the college you gave in April 2009. You said, “The Dean’s role is to give undivided attention to enabling others to do what they do best, and to coordinate all of the talent within the college effectively.” And Mel, I don’t think there’s any question that you did succeed in leading our college through just a wonderful 10 years, and we couldn’t be happier that you chose to come to Ohio State, and you still have such fond memories in your retirement years.

A. I thank you for that, Bob. I appreciate your comment. I’d like to think that that was the case, but, again, I am so thankful for the opportunity to serve as Dean and for all the support that I received during the time that I was there. I can’t begin to thank, again, Dr. Holbrook and Dr. Snyder and others, for allowing me to have that opportunity and for their continued support during the time that I was there. And most importantly, our faculty and our alumni for their undivided support during the time that I served.

Q. Well, thank you for your time today, Mel. It’s been a pleasure talking with you. Anytime you get to Columbus I hope you’ll call me so we can link up at the Varsity Club or some other appropriate place, maybe the golf course, to renew our long-time friendship. And in a way of closing, I’d just like to say, even though I’m in Columbus and Mel is in Arizona, I think if I had said these two letters he might respond appropriately. So let’s try it: O-H

A. I-O.

Q. Thank you, Mel. Have a good day and our love to your family.

A. Thank you, Bob, and go Bucks!

Q. Goodbye.