

Western Oregon University Digital Commons@WOU

Oral Histories of Western Oregon University

Department of History

10-31-2016

John Rector Interview 2016

Andrew Dobrowolski

Western Oregon University, adobrowolski16@mail.wou.edu

Haley Scoggins

Western Oregon University, hscoggins16@mail.wou.edu

Zane Abrams

Western Oregon University, zabrams15@mail.wou.edu

Spencer Patterson

Western Oregon University, spatterson16@mail.wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/oralhistoriesofwou>

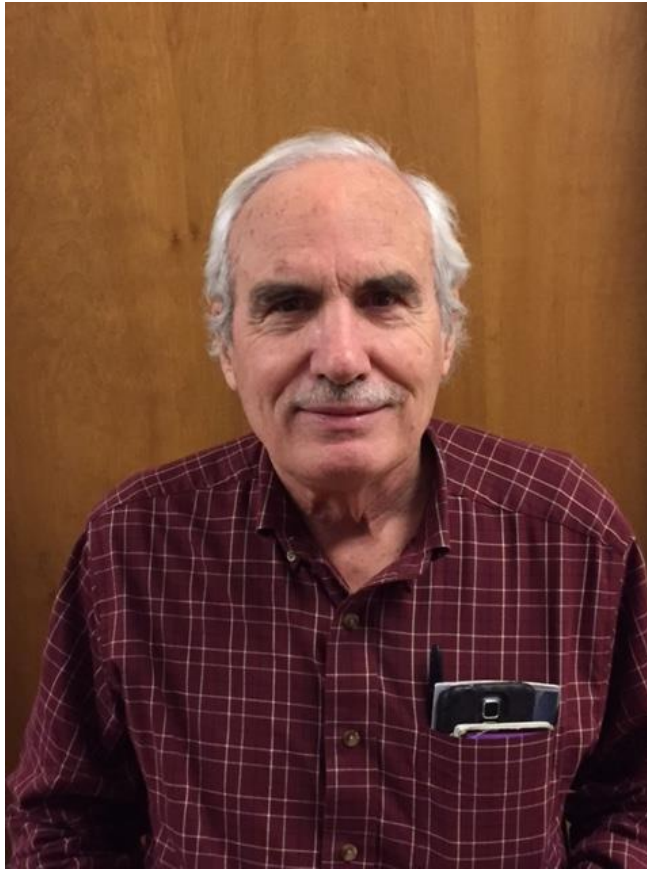
Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dobrowolski, Andrew; Scoggins, Haley; Abrams, Zane; and Patterson, Spencer, "John Rector Interview 2016" (2016). *Oral Histories of Western Oregon University*. 11.

<https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/oralhistoriesofwou/11>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories of Western Oregon University by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu, kundas@mail.wou.edu, bakersc@mail.wou.edu.



Zane Abrams: Alright, Okay so please provide the name of the interviewee, date, place of interview, at this time.

Professor John Rector: My name is John Rector, I'm a professor here at Western Oregon University and I have been asked to talk to these students in an oral interview which I am very happy to do.

ZA: and it is Oct. 31 Halloween.

JR: Yes, alright.

ZA: So when did you start working at Western.

JR: I came to Western, fall term of the year 1987, I had previously been teaching at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, and previous to that, I had had a very short replacement position at the Lewis and Clark College in Portland.

ZA: And then, follow-up was, what was the circumstances that led you to come to Western?

JR: There were a variety of reasons I was attracted to the position. One, it was the kind of institution that I really wanted to work in, a middle sized university that had a strong education program, that had a dynamic history faculty, that had people who specialized in historical areas. They were looking for someone to teach the Latin American area. They had decided they wanted to branch out in that area, so there were three candidates who were invited in. I never met the other

candidates that was not a part of the process, but I'm very pleased they selected me. I joined the faculty the fall of 1987. With the exception of a sabbatical and teaching on the study abroad program that Western has in Argentina, I have taught here continuously since 1987.

ZA: sure, and have you had different positions here?

JR: In addition to teaching a variety of courses, some dealing with Latin America, others with US History and World Problems, I also was Department Chair. Most of us serve as Department Chair because we have a rotating process. It isn't as if someone can be Department Chair for 10 years. I also was chosen to be Division Chair. That position is a three- year term, which can be renewable. I was reelected and served a total of six years. I also was President of the Faculty Senate for two-year period, after having belonged to the Faculty Senate for a number of years. The other position that gave me a lot of satisfaction was serving on the International Education and Studies Committee. We rotated as chair so occasionally I lead that committee. When I joined the committee, Western had very few opportunities to study abroad. Only six to eight students went abroad yearly. Eventually we were up to about 120 or so a year, with opportunities to study abroad almost anyplace in the world. Study abroad developed enormously and became a vital part of many students' lives. They have used the opportunity to learn languages, history, art and have many other experiences.

ZA: thank you very much, that should conclude question number one, and we will switch interviewers for question number two.

JR: Okay.

Haley Scoggins: Okay, so, the first part of question number two is: What is the basis for your job at Western?

JR: Well, I have the same kind of expectations, job expectations, as all my colleagues. We are asked to teach, to engage in research, and to also to participate in the governance of the college through our participation in committees and other kinds of things. I've indicated to you already, some of the governance opportunities I have had. And I can go into more detail at them if you wish.

With teaching there are certain courses that our department has to offer to students because they part of their program to graduate. One of those courses is U.S History, so members of the history department they either teach U.S History classes every term as part of their responsibility or they teach World History. When I taught at the Catholic University in Puerto Rico I always taught World History. In addition, I taught U.S history as well. When I came here, there were other folks that were teaching World History, so I began teaching U.S History. As it turned out there were always enough professors teaching World History here so I taught it at Western.world history since I've been here. Also I always might mention that, with the exception of one class, all the classes I taught at the Catholic University were in Spanish--because it's a Spanish speaking country [laughs].

Another aspect of my faculty job includes research. My area of specialization not only is Latin America, but is also within Latin America, I research on Chile. I was a Peace Corps volunteer there, I did my dissertation research there, and while at the Catholic University, I was a Fulbright exchange professor for a year at two Chilean universities. So, I have been in Chile during times of optimism and development. I've also been in Chile during revolutionary times. I was there when

the Allende government was overthrown by the military, which was a very frightening experience. So, I have had a lot of experience teaching in very different circumstances other than those at Western. We have not yet had a military coup here [group laughs] at Western, and I don't anticipate one in the near future. But

I've published a couple of articles about Chilean history and I also have a survey book, *The History of Chile* that basically covers the original Native American migration there up to event occurring the year the book was published in 2002. It is a book widely used for survey classes in Chilean and Latin American history.

HS: Nice, the last part of the question is, what is a typical work day like for you?

JR: A typical work day is teaching a couple classes, having office hours, and meeting with my colleagues. One of the things that is very great at Western is that we faculty get along generally quite well and so we enjoy spending time together. For example, this room is where a lot of us have lunch. And so, I'll be sitting here and Professor Maureen Dolan was sitting there [points with pen to opposite chair] and she'll be talking about her experience last summer in Argentina. And then Professor Isidore Lobnibe will be over there [points again to chair across from him] and he'll be talking about his trip to Germany and his trip to Ghana. And then Professor Callero over here will be talking about his experiences in Italy. So, the ability to share socially and to talk about what is happening in various places is just a very unique opportunity that we have here.

The other kinds of things that I do at Western... I very much appreciate the incredible library we have here. History, by definition, is using libraries. The library that we had when I first got here today is used for Student Services, which needs a much smaller space, not as big as the library we have today. Now we have a very, very adequate library. The staff will buy almost any book I want for our collection. They have increasingly developed online services. A researcher used to so, it used to search many printed journals. Now you just sit at your desk and do a computer search. For example, my *History of Chile* that is not only in our collection in hardback, but it's also online. A student can read the online edition from their house if they want. I make a lot of use of our online journals. If professors are really conscientious, they can do almost eighty to ninety percent of research here on campus. That was not the way it was when I first got here. Because you have such incredible access to online sources, you can be very active in online research without paying thousands of dollars to go research in some exotic place. So these kind of changes have really benefitted faculty members and students.

Are you going to ask something about students later on? Or, should I throw that in now?

HS: Throw it in now if you want! (laughs)

JR: Okay, about fifteen years ago we had a provost named Bill Coward who said that "the trend nationally was for all programs to have a way to evaluate whether their students had learned the material that they feel is essential to their discipline." In response, some disciplines at Western like the natural sciences decided to give their seniors a national exam. We in History, however, opted not to teach our students to an exam. Rather we faculty feel that skills that we appreciate the most in our discipline are the students' ability to do research and write. So we opted to establish a senior seminar paper. We were not unique in this decision. I think almost all the social sciences requires a senior thesis and perhaps some Humanities disciplines do as well. So, with time we

began to post these papers on our history website and then the library bought a system called “The Digital Commons.” It now posts the papers on the libraries website, which can be accessed globally. And, just this summer, Sue Kunda, who is the head of the Western Archives sent us this statistical breakdown of how many people have downloaded our student’s senior papers. And it’s incredible! And it shows a map of all the places in the world where people have been looking at our students’ papers. So, one of the things we are really proud of is our seniors are not only getting the research experience of a professional historian, but their work is being recognized and downloaded in all kinds of places.

Haley: Nice, okay that’s it for question number two. Andrew will come in for the next one.

Rector: Okay.

Andrew Dobrowolski: Okay, so for question three I have— what is the most interesting experiences you have had while you were working at Western?

JR: Positive or Negative? That answer is a bit facetious. I ask that question because I also want to discuss that Western, like all universities, makes decisions based on limited resources. We’re a school that lives primarily by what the Oregon Legislature allocates it every two years in the biennial budget plus what students pay in tuition. So, if either of those two sources decreases it puts programs under stress. So in the last few years, with the economic downturn, the legislature decreased Western’s funding, so we have been under stress. An example of this, is our Master’s of History program. Administrators decided to suspend our MA program because they didn’t think the enrollment was sufficient. We in the department argued about that, but we don’t get to make those final decisions.

In another decision, perhaps based on financial criteria also, administrators decided they were going to have to fuse the study abroad and international studies offices, which consequently shrunk the study abroad program. So if you look at the statistics for students going abroad during the last two years, they have declined substantially. There has been considerable turnover in the study abroad staff.

I was involved in both the History MA and the Study Abroad program.. I helped create the Masters of History program and worked closely with the International Studies Committee to create the study abroad program. Those were interesting experiences but in the end, not in the positive results. I’m not necessarily blaming Western. Lots of schools like Western are very vulnerable to economic cycles which affect both contraction and expansion of programs. Once the History Program seven full time tenure track professors. We’re now down to six, and we hope that that number doesn’t shrink. With retirements in our Social Science programs, rarely is the Administration allowing us to hire a new tenure track professor to replace retiring one. So we’re having to deal with those kinds of shrinkages of resources. On the positive side, I have been here while the university was expanding. When I arrived we had 3,300 students, now we are over 5,000 students. So the institution has not quite doubled in its enrollment, and but it seems to have tripled in its physical plant. The number of new buildings they have built at Western is very impressive.

I’ve had the joy of seeing this campus become more important, not just more in terms of enrollment and buildings, but also in terms of the quality of the education. The history had an excellent faculty when I first arrived. They were very dedicated and inspiring teachers. However, they were not

very oriented towards pushing students to do research. It was the demand by the Provost that we show that our students achievement that pushed us to create the senior seminar program. This pushed our program more towards research, which I think is really extremely positive. There are many jobs for our students in which they will be seen as leaders because they know how to do research. They know how to find sources, they know how to bring the materials together, and they know how to write it up their results. So for me, being part of that transition of our department and at one time having that masters program, that was exhilarating to have students here who wanted a research degree. A number of them hope to go on and eventually enter a PhD program. So,

It's also been extremely interesting to help get students studying abroad. Having been a Peace Corps volunteer I also encourage students who have that kind of vocation to become Peace Corps volunteers. I've had probably a dozen or more of my students go to Latin America. One of my students, Johanna Thomas, is just coming back from Paraguay and hopes to go to Law school. For a variety of reasons, Peace Corps has shrunk its Latin American programs and is now emphasizing Asia, but in any case, those who went to Latin America have been very satisfying to me. I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to work at Western, teach here, help guide students in making decisions about what they're going to do when they graduate and helping them develop skills which they will use all their lives.

AD: What are your plans and goals for Western now and in the future?

JR: I just finished a project with the Western Oregon Archive and it's called the "Caburgua Visual Archive. I combined a narrative with a series of illustrations about the economic development experience what where I served a Peace Corp Volunteer. It is about a twenty-page document that is online. Anyone can look at it and see how this area has changed since I first visited it as a Volunteer. I do not take credit for anything in particular, but I saw the transformation an area in which horseback riding was the main system of transportation to an area which is now a tourist center served by public transportation. The Western Archive uses a fairly new computer program called Omeka that combines a narrative and illustrations accessible all over the world on the internet. So, I feel very pleased to have completed this project in collaboration with the Archive staff. It took me two years to get this project done because I was doing it during summers and part-time, but last week it went live on the web..

My wife also assisted me with translation and advice. We met in Peace Corp training at the University of Washington. She wasn't a volunteer but she was teaching people to speak Spanish. For the Visual Archive, she did the Spanish translation, allowing viewers to choose the English or the Spanish edition. And I sent the link to a number of people that she and I trained. Already we've gotten feedback from a number of them. It brings back their memories when they were Volunteers.

What other kinds of things do I look forward to? I have a number of publishing agendas about Chile. Sometimes I am encouraged by friends and even family members to write what the experience of being in Chile during the Coup that overthrew the Allende Government in 1973. It was such an anguishing experience that I haven't been able to go back to it. I am wonder will I ever be able to deal with it? It was just—I can't give you an explanation as to how horrifying it

is to have military in the streets, guns going off all the time, and not knowing whether you might be arrested or worse. My wife gave birth during the state of siege. She was afraid to go to the hospital because the streets were occupied by/with soldiers. So, it's hard for me to sit down and write about that, but maybe someday I will be able to get a handle it.

I also look forward to working with my colleagues in trying to get beyond this hiring issue of losing faculty in Social Sciences. It's such a strong division that it was sad to see when Anthropology that had a retirement three years ago— that they still haven't been authorized to hire a tenure track replacement. We had a retirement in History two years ago and we haven't been able to hire a replacement. . Fortunately, this year the Political Science Department was able to persuade the Administration to replace a professor with will retire retire this year. One of the challenges, institutional challenges, is to keep your academic programs strong.

AD: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences working here?

JR: I wish that we had done what you're doing now with the history faculty who taught here, when I arrived at Western. They soon retired. One of the outstanding professors of that generation was Erhard Dortmund. He was spell-binding lecturer. He could teach the history of Vietnam, the history of WWII, and the history of the Holocaust. Students just loved his classes. He was honored as professor of the year. I wish we had done an oral interview with Erhard and a number of other colleagues so we would have that history. But, you're doing it now and preserving our department's history. Are you interviewing professors of other departments?

AD: Anthropology—

JR: Good, you're doing anthropology.

AD: And the Social Science Division.

JR: Okay, cool. That's good. And you'll have these available. You're recording it so it'll even be available on tape! So, that's great.

AD: Alright, well that's all the questions we have.

JR: Okay, well thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to do this. You don't realize how valuable this will be thirty years from now. You know, people are going to want to know what the history department was like and your interviews will tell them..