

## **ASEH Founders – Oral Histories**

Interview with John Opie by Lisa Mighetto

Boise, Idaho

March 13, 2008

**Lisa Mighetto** -- This is the interview with John Opie, by Lisa Mighetto, Boise, Idaho, March 13<sup>th</sup> 2008. John, as we explained earlier, the first part of the interview we'll focus on your background and your career, and the second part we'll focus on the founding of the ASEH and development of the ASEH. So, good morning, and thank you for doing this. Let's start out with your background. What attracted you to environmental history? What interested you in it?

**John Opie** -- Well, I didn't start out as an environmental historian. I started out as a cultural and religious historian. Got my doctorate from the University of Chicago, but always had an interest in what's now understood to be environmental, because of an interest in the outdoors. And actually, growing up in a village called Riverside, Illinois, which later I learned was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, as a park like setting, and I'm certain emotionally / psychologically, that influenced how I might respond to the outdoors, as well as various camping trips, outdoor activities. And then, a curiosity, especially in visiting the national parks, something else is going on here that I don't understand. And at that point, I spent a semester - almost took a semester off - simply reading resources, identifying authors that would inform me about where I might be heading and where I might be going, since I had no notion of where this was going, or what was going to come out.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- So, you took a semester off ... when you were teaching?

**John Opie** -- When I was teaching, yeah.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And where were you teaching, again?

**John Opie** -- At that point I was teaching at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Okay.

**John Opie** -- In the history department.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And which authors and scholars were you reading? **[JO chuckles]** What were your intellectual inspirations?

**John Opie** -- Well, I came up with a list of about 100 titles, which I'm not going to read off to you. But a good number of them, looking back on it, were environmental, in one way or another, even though the word 'environmental,' or 'environment,' wasn't used widely back in the late '60s and early '70s. And others were not at all ... and I had to actually write out a list myself, to remind myself, so I'm going to look at some of these, at this point .... Well, some of them are familiar: René Dubos for example, was an early

figure in the field. However he might be identified today, I think he was seen as an environmentalist at that time. Another, probably, that most other people have not mentioned, is David T. Bazelon – B A Z E L O N -- who had a phrase which really stuck with me -- that “modern American society, in its technological and consumer base, maybe an interesting society, but it is not a livable society.” And that raised the question, “well, what do we mean by a “livable society?”” And environment certainly came in very quickly that way. Others were Fernand Braudel the French Annales historian, and his broad sweep between social cultural and physical history. So, those were some. And I also read Rachel Carson, in the original New Yorker version of *Silent Spring*.

Lisa Mighetto – Really?

John Opie -- Yeah. Going back, into the early ‘60s, I think, at that point. And that, of course, intrigued me ... along with ... earlier than that, reading John Hershey’s *Hiroshima* – again, in the New Yorker magazine. So I can’t pinpoint a sequence of events that did it, but rather a complex, or ganglia of bits and pieces of information, which somehow I had to process and identify a certain [indecipherable] this is coming out, and I would really describe my experience as more an internal history than the response to external events. It was kind of an intellectual and emotional pilgrimage for myself. And so, these were some of the figures ... along with someone who hasn’t been recognized for his environmental impact -- Perry Miller, the cultural historian at Harvard ... written different books, such as *Natures Nation*, that title from which I stole for my textbook, as well acknowledging it, at the same time. I read Ian McHarg, and talked with Ian about some of his work. And, I guess others would be more familiar: Paul Shepard, Paul Sears. There was writing going [on] out there. I didn’t find Rod Nash’s book for quite a while, and there were pluses and minuses about that.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, that would have been published in the late ‘60s, right?

John Opie -- In the late ‘60s. That’s right. The first edition.

Lisa Mighetto -- Pluses and minuses - you were about to say ...

John Opie -- Well, pluses and minuses, in the sense that Rod’s writing was very powerful in shaping Americas view of wilderness and the environment. And I’m glad I picked it up later; but was able to form my own point of view, and go on my own pilgrimage, without Rod ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

John Opie -- ... more or less, intervening, or having an impact on me. Also, a couple of other interesting people -- the historian of religion, Mercia Eliade, was a powerful figure in my reading. E L I A D E. And Rudolph Otto, in a 1923 book, called *The Idea of the Holy*. And both of these, again, maybe suggest that I can be described as a romantic, or a transcendentalist, or something like that, in some ways. But looking back at what were the forces behind nature -- that also attracted me. Was there something else going on?

And again, there's a degree of mystery, or puzzlement, or even some degree of confusion, that led me on a pilgrimage towards ... I began to see as, first of all -- environmental issues, and philosophy, and the environmental history.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- When did you first start teaching "Environmental History"?

**John Opie** -- Pretty early on. I think it was 1968, was the first course, much to the puzzlement and surprise of my department. I think I had the good fortune that they didn't have the foggiest idea what I was doing.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- So, they didn't necessarily oppose it then? Or is that true?

**John Opie** -- They didn't oppose it because I tended to be fairly creative in the courses I offered. But they did ... also didn't know quite how to respond to it, either positive or negative. They just let me have my way and see what would happen.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And what did happen? Did students sign up for it?

**John Opie** -- Students ... I had 30 people in class -- the class limit. And a terrific response. This was of course, the late '60s; this was the era of counterculture, and so on. And so, there was a sense of idealism, of reforming society, on the part of students. I think that's part of what attracted them to it. Plus, the word -- simply the word -- "environmental" at that point carried some weight. The Wilderness Act had been passed already, in 1964, and other environmental Acts were in the process of being passed, or developed, by the late '60s. Looking back, it was probably as much a historical geography course as an environmental history course, but ....

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Do you remember the books you used?

**John Opie** -- Frankly not. I don't remember. They were probably pretty traditional -- Emerson, Thoreau. I'm quite certain I used Crèvecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer*, which I've used repeatedly ... in classes. And I'm not certain where I ended up. We probably did use Rachel Carson, but I ... unfortunately, I don't think I even have a syllabus from the course anymore.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Well, just a second ago you mentioned that this was 1968, or the late '60s.

**John Opie** -- Right.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And you mentioned the counterculture, and then earlier, when you were talking about your intellectual inspirations, you were saying that it wasn't necessarily external events that prompted you to begin teaching environmental history ...

**John Opie** -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- ... and prompted your interest. Can you say a little bit more about how influential the times were in this development? This 'development' being you're now teaching environmental history.

John Opie -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- And are you calling it "environmental history"?

John Opie -- Russell was calling it "US Environmental History" at that point. And I'm certain external events played a significant role on ... I was not a youngster at that point, being involved in counterculture or anything of that sort, but really an observer. But also, having a sense myself, I guess, of [indecipherable], of idealism, a sense of reform and change. And even environmental change was possible. And perhaps ... we thought of it naively possible, compared to even, five or six years later.

Lisa Mighetto -- And did this class become an annual offering?

John Opie -- I taught it every other year. And had a good response, except for one student who said he came out of the class so depressed [laughter] about all that was going wrong with the world, with the environment, with humanity, you know, at the same time. And I realized I had to modify my course a little bit to ... we had to have some modicum of hope at the end of the course, because of that kind of a response. But most of the students were liberal arts students, at that point -- history, English, literature, philosophy, and so on.

Lisa Mighetto -- And did you continue to teach this course every other year, throughout your career?

John Opie -- No, not throughout my career, but something similar to that. I'd have some other titles.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

John Opie -- When I taught at the University of Chicago, most recently, I taught environmental history. And then also, a US environmental great books course. And joint, doing both [indecipherable]

Lisa Mighetto -- Oh, that's a good one.

John Opie -- So, in one way or another, both at a graduate level or an undergraduate level, I have ... I taught something related to environmental history, or environmental intellectual history, every year or every other year. And I'm still trying to learn how to do it.

Lisa Mighetto -- Was advocacy versus objectivity an issue for you?

[John Opie](#) -- That's a good one, and it was an issue but not a negative issue. And part of my response to your question really came out of working with environmental scientists, and environmental philosophers, people involved with environmental ethics, as well as historians. And out of that came a sense that 'objectivity' may be not the right word, because historians are very wary about the word 'objectivity.' But a sense of 'reliability' in the kind of work that one does, either in the classroom, or in publication, or however it might be. And building up a level of reliability, in effect, made me an advocate. The very choice of doing environmental history, in some way, reflects advocacy, because one's made that choice. Just as if one were doing labor history, or gender history, or something of that sort. So I can't ... the lines are blurred for me, between quote objectivity and advocacy. But I think the word 'reliability' as is standing there for me first, and then basing what I did on the reliability of the work I was doing, then I thought I could be an advocate at the same time. So I don't draw a line there, maybe I should be faulted for that. And some people have faulted me for that, but generally not.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Well, John, I don't know if you remember this, but I first met you in, I think it was 1984, at the Banff conference. Do you remember that, with the environmental education association? And advocacy was a big issue at that conference. That was my first ASEH meeting.

[John Opie](#) -- That's right. You would have ... [\[indecipherable\]](#), the National Association for the Advancement of Environmental Education ...

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Yes.

[John Opie](#) -- ... at Banff -- a great environmental spot.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Yes. And I remember that meeting making a distinction between political activism and advocacy, and as you were saying, making the intellectual choices that all historians make.

[John Opie](#) -- And I think the issue is still there. And maybe environmental historians are more vulnerable, particularly because of the political climate of the last two decades. That anything ... using even the word "environment" becomes suspect.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Do you think the political climate influences the choice to go into environmental history?

[John Opie](#) -- If my experience at the University of Chicago is **any** indicator, I think it does. During the Bush years, and even during some of the Clinton years, and certainly during the Reagan years, students would find themselves interested and involved in environmental issues. I think, depending on how much they felt they could be really effective ... if there were so many roadblocks – political, economic, social – roadblocks, they were less interested. If there seemed to be some space for them to be active, and have a sense of some kind of success, then there seemed to be more interest in doing that.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, we've talked about teaching environmental history in the late '60s and continuing to teach it through the '70s. Can you describe how the founding of ASEH related to your intellectual development?

John Opie -- Okay. That's a very large question. Maybe I'll ... I won't answer that question entirely, other than, it seemed that a core group existed among people who were not environmental historians originally, but now were doing some environmental writing or teaching. And enough of a group existed that we could develop some kind of an opportunity to communicate -- by newsletter, by journal, by a society. And by a core group, I mean probably 30 people.

Lisa Mighetto -- And how did you know they were out there?

John Opie -- Back in 1972, I did a presentation at the AHA, and had the good fortune that my commentator was Lewis Mumford. So everybody came to hear Mumford, and I had 200 people in the room.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

John Opie -- And as the session concluded -- and Mumford didn't talk about my paper at all, he talked about what he wanted to talk about -- but a number of people came up, such as Wil Jacobs, at that point, and said, "you know, there is a degree of interest in what your talking about" about environmental subjects. And that seemed to be the first wedge of, at least, getting people together, finding some level of interest among ... at least among historians. And then, we very quickly had sessions on a regular basis at the AHA, OAH, the American Studies Association, the AAG -- American Association of Geographers, as well. And even became affiliated with the AHA. There was a good deal of responsiveness. I have a feeling from what people have said, more [then] than there is now, back in the late '60s into the mid '70s, a good deal of interest in environmental history at these different conferences.

Lisa Mighetto -- More than there is now. Do you think that's because now ASEH exists and ....

John Opie -- I have no idea.

Lisa Mighetto -- So, you met first, or you met informally, in 1972, and then **you** started a newsletter. Is that in the early '70s?

John Opie -- I think that what happened was simultaneous. There were ... we would have small sessions on environmental historians meeting at the AHA or OAH. Sam Hays was there; Don Worster; Don Hughes; were some of them. And along with that, I said, one -- we need to keep on communicating, more than just once a year or every other year, at some of these - kind of rump sessions. So I was willing to start a newsletter at that point, and my university at least was willing to pay for the printing and postage, of a four page newsletter, at that point. And from the newsletter, there seemed to be enough

interest to start a journal fairly quickly. But unlike the very successful journal *Environmental Ethics*, which has no organization tied to it, it seemed also that we were ready for some kind of a structure, an organization, by the mid '70s.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And what was your role in getting that organization formed?

**John Opie** -- Well, I guess I was the point person for that as ...

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Okay.

**John Opie** -- ... it almost fell on me, that way, to ... at least get it started. And I worked with people then who helped get the organization incorporated. My memory is that we actually started in '76, but were incorporated in '77. And the journal came out, almost simultaneously, with the Society.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And we're incorporated in Pennsylvania?

**John Opie** -- In Pennsylvania, right, 'cause I was still at Duquesne University, at that point.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- So, you're running all of this out of your office -- a newsletter, a journal, and the organization?

**John Opie** -- Yeah, pretty much.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- You mentioned other individuals helping you. Do you ....

**John Opie** -- One of them, who most people have forgotten, is Rod French, who was in Washington, I think taught at George Washington, or actually was a vice president there. And he held us together, especially financially, in early years. **Ken Shifford** was an early book review editor for us. Rod Nash was on the board as well. And I'd have to look at the actual structure of the board, at the editorial staff, to see who was there. The editorial staff of the board was probably as large as our total subscription list, you know, at that time. The newsletter probably ended up with perhaps ... between 60 and 100 people received it.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Did that surprise you? The number?

**John Opie** -- Yes it did. For two reasons. I didn't think we were that visible. and also, that there were that many people actually active, doing this ... this was not only folks who were curious, but who were doing environmental history, and delighted that there were other people out there doing the same thing. Because we all felt like lost souls, at that point. Isolated. And no one else around, you know, interested, or doing anything similar.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Can you describe the newsletter a little bit? That is, did people submit articles; did you use this the way we would now, sort of ... now we have electronic discussion boards, but did people write back and forth? Or was it you listing announcements?

**John Opie** -- Well it was very nicely mimeographed at that point. And it was mostly announcements of meetings that people would put forth. Don Worster wrote an early article, but we didn't have many articles. It was mostly notices, and listing of people, so that people could get in touch with each other. And if we had a session at the AHA or OAH, we would put that in. We would [have] an occasional book review, as well. So, I don't know how that compares. But it was a very primitive, type [of] operation.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- But it sounds like there was response to it.

**John Opie** -- Yeah. And a very significant response, I felt.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And you mentioned that you had the newsletter; you had the journal; both of which came out of your office. And then you thought there was the need for an organization as well. What activities, besides the newsletter and the journal? I mean, you've mentioned other organizations . . .

**John Opie** -- As we developed the journal, the newsletter was much less important, or disappeared for a time. Ken Shifford [unclear] did it for a time. And we also had a bibliographical issue on an annual basis, which would be kind of interesting to still have, but it's really incorporated in the existing journal, as well. And so, it was primarily the journal, and then the organization. And, it wasn't that hard to manage, because we didn't have that many people, or that much money to play with. Our biggest issues were money, visibility, and then some kind of credibility in the profession. Those seemed to be the three biggest issues that we faced.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Can you describe the credibility issue? Was that just a matter of people not knowing what environmental history is? Or was it something else as well?

**John Opie** -- Oh, I think it was more than that. I think some people thought of it as a kind of joke, or a phenomena of the '60s, as well ... and not a legitimate field. And one of our agendas was certainly to establish credibility. Or, I've used the word "reliability" as well. And it came fairly quickly. The AHA recognized us as a secondary organization very quickly.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And allowed you to meet there.

**John Opie** -- And allowed us to meet there ... OAH, ASA, as well. We had some talks with the Forest History Society, at an early point. There were discussions of perhaps, not having a separate journal, but a column in the journal of Forest History and ....

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And did you?

John Opie -- No, we decided to stay independent, at that point, for various reasons.

Lisa Mighetto -- Such as?

John Opie -- I think there was some concern, not everybody was concerned about this, but some folks were concerned that there was too cozy a relationship between the Forest History Society and the forest industry. And we wanted to maintain a degree of autonomy. And there were several people, particularly Stan Hayes, who felt extremely ... and I did too, felt very strongly that we wanted to maintain our independence. And so we did, until it was appropriate, at a later point, for the two organizations to work together.

Lisa Mighetto -- And this ... we're still talking about the late '70s now.

John Opie -- Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- When ...

John Opie -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- You mentioned one goal was to establish credibility. Were there other stated goals for ASEH, which founded in 1977, you said ...

John Opie -- Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- Or 1976, but '77 for the incorporation.

John Opie -- Right, where it became an official organization. I think other goals were not only to interest an academic audience, but to see if there was a means to identify a general public that might be responsive. Just as the western history association has its laymen ... its groups of lay ... we thought we might also have something like that.

Lisa Mighetto -- And did you, early on?

John Opie -- No, we never ... that never transpired. Another aspect of the journal, and originally it was called *Environmental Review*, was that it seemed appropriate perhaps, because of the small number of historians we could identify, that it should be an interdisciplinary journal, even including poets, geographers, scientists, economists, and so on.

Lisa Mighetto -- Were there poets, early on?

John Opie -- There were people ... I remember a couple of Korean scholars who had a good article on environmental poetry, they weren't poets themselves. But, we covered a lot of turf. And we also needed a lot of copy for the journal.

Lisa Mighetto -- Including a literary bent, it sounds like?

John Opie -- That's right.

Lisa Mighetto -- How did the first meetings ... okay, so you were meeting at AHA and other ... and OAH and other organizations. Well, the first meeting was in 1982, correct? In Irvine? How did that come about? How did it ... how did you make the decision that it's time to meet?

John Opie -- I'm trying to remember the chronology, because we had also met in Oxford, Ohio, at Miami University....But Irvine, I think, was a real turning point for us, because it was clearly identified as an environmental history meeting, and **only** an environmental history meeting, at that point. And the organization, and the structure of it, was extremely well done, at Irvine. And we had a very large number of people who came to that meeting.

Lisa Mighetto -- Do you remember approximately how many?

John Opie -- No, other people would know better than I would, but ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Why did you decide to have it at Irvine?

John Opie -- Because, and I'm embarrassed, I don't remember the man who held it ....

Lisa Mighetto -- Ken Bailes ....

John Opie -- Yeah, Ken Bailes was at Irvine, and he's the one who really put it together and, you know, bless his heart, he held the whole thing together and kept it moving. We must have had at least 200 people; far more, you know, far more than we had ever had before.

Lisa Mighetto -- Wow. Did that surprise you guys?

John Opie -- Yes, I think it did. It surprised us in the sense that we didn't realize that there were that many environmental historians out there. But I think we were also seeing something else happen. And that is, where environmental historians had been largely ... had largely come out of other fields, now there were historians who started their careers as environmental historians, in one way or another.

Lisa Mighetto -- Interesting.

John Opie -- Coming out of Yale, for example, Brandeis, out of Berkley. And I can't pinpoint them all. I think there were a couple out of Iowa as well. But, so we had a second generation beginning to emerge at that point. And I think that was extremely important; that it wasn't a flash in the pan; it wasn't one set of people -- one generation of

historians. And that, as we faded out of the picture, that the field itself would disappear, but rather that another generation was coming forth -- actually trained in environmental history. And that led to our third, or even our fourth, generation, at this point. So, that's very attractive, very pleasing.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Do you remember if there were students at the Irvine meeting?

**John Opie** -- I think there were probably a number of students, but I really don't remember who they were, or where they were from, at that point. Others may remember better than I do.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- The next meeting ... it might have been Miami. I can try to figure that out. And then we meet in Banff, and that's where I met you. When was the decision made that you **could** meet ... you had enough people to sustain meeting on a regular basis?

**John Opie** -- Well, I don't remember the dates exactly, because ... but there was a considerable discussion whether we ought to continue to meet with other organizations -- that that still might be the best way to proceed, or to meet every other year. And finally, the decision was made fairly quickly, to meet every year. It may have been at the Irvine meeting or shortly after that.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And you were president at the Irvine meeting. Is that correct?

**John Opie** -- Yes, I was.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- So, there's a board, right, and a president. Is the board meeting on a regular basis, at this time?

[Laughter]

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Or communicating, somehow, on a regular basis?

**John Opie** -- Oh, I think a lot of people might be amused as much as I just sounded amused, because it was still fairly irregular, at that point. We were still trying to find our way. But as far as the decision making process was going, it was expanding from one or two people into, you know, a dozen or so folks.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Are there individuals that should be mentioned that were involved in this process in the early '80s?

**John Opie** -- Well, I think I mentioned some of them already. I'm going to have to look at my crib sheet here, but certainly I would add to Don Worster, Don Hughes, Sam Hays, Susan Flader would be one, Carolyn Merchant certainly would be another one. And one person who's kind of disappeared off the map -- Clayton Koppes from Oberlin, and he was an early president of the organization. And he carried it through and really gave it

some structure and development, at that point. I'm trying to think who else I can mention. Another one was John Perkins, who was trained as a biologist but is a historian of science, and he was very active also, at an early point in the organization. Joel Tarr certainly was there. There was a chap from ... that I mentioned before, from Carnegie Mellon, and he was pretty active, even though he was a bit of a curmudgeon, as well. So, I'm trying to think of other names to add to this list. But maybe, those are the ones. Rod Nash was certainly involved. And also, one name that does come to mind is Harold Pinkett, who was head of natural resources at the National Archives, at that point. And he was a rock for us. He held things together, and provided some financial resources at different times. And when we would go off in 10 different directions, he'd pull us all back together again. So he was certainly a key figure there. Others that were interested were Thad Tate -- historian at William and Mary, who was involved with us for a while, and was quite supportive, particularly in our relationship with AHA and OAH. Ray Billington, also . . . even though he was much more of a traditional historian, was an early advocate and supporter. Although, his point of view was somewhat different from what most of us had experienced. I'm trying to think of other names. And of course, maybe I said this earlier, but Rod Nash soon became involved. So that was the core group of people that, at least I remember.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- You just mentioned something interesting. Now you're having regular meetings, or semi-regular meetings, of just ASEH. and you mentioned that you still had a relationship with AHA and OAH. In what sense? I mean, what did they provide for ASEH?

[John Opie](#) -- It wasn't so much for ASEH as exposure to the field of environmental history by giving us sessions.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Okay. So, ....

[John Opie](#) -- Not giving us sessions, but allowing us to compete for sessions at the organizations. And if you're going to ...

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- They continued to do that then?

[John Opie](#) -- Yeah.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- Okay.

[John Opie](#) -- And I should mention also, the Western History Association, and the Pacific Historical Society also, were very supportive in these early days.

[Lisa Mighetto](#) -- So there was an organized effort to get sessions at their meetings in addition to having ASEH meetings ...

[John Opie](#) -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay. You mentioned earlier, you were talking a little bit about early challenges, and you mentioned money. Some things never change.

[Laughter]

Lisa Mighetto -- You got money from subscriptions to the journal, is that correct?

John Opie -- We got money for subscriptions to the journal, but that was a small part of the costs. And I received some reduced teaching time at Duquesne, and also some sub-venture for the journal, from the university, too. Although Duquesne is a middle level, catholic related, university, and they'd never experienced anything like this before, but the Holy Ghost Fathers were supportive, at that point. And then, at a later point, when the journal was struggling in the late '80s, NJIT really threw in a good deal of support for the journal.

Lisa Mighetto -- When you say it was 'struggling in the late '80s,' you mean financially?

John Opie -- Financially, and our membership had gone, almost into a freefall, from what had been about 400 people down to about 160.

Lisa Mighetto -- Four hundred, you'd gotten up to?

John Opie -- Yeah. We'd gotten up to 400, and then it was built up ... I took over the editorship, again, of the journal ...

Lisa Mighetto -- In the late '80s?

John Opie -- In the late '80s. And then the membership -- or subscriptions -- it's the same thing, went up to about 800. And then when ... I'm sorry, I'm blanking our on the next editors name.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, Don Hughes was editor for a while ...and then Hal Rothman.

John Opie -- I think it was Hal Rothman. And with Hal Rothman, the membership and subscriptions skyrocketed. He went well over a thousand, up to about 1200, with the high level of energy that he had, and dedication to the journal.

Lisa Mighetto -- Going back to the late '80s, and you said 'freefall' in subscriptions -- before Hal took it on, right? Why do you think there was a diminishment of ...

John Opie -- You know, I never understood that, except that perhaps our visibility had declined, at that point. It was also the late Reagan years, in the late '80s, and that may have had an impact, too.

Lisa Mighetto -- You were still teaching environmental history, yes?

John Opie -- I was teaching environmental history. I moved, in '87, to New Jersey Institute of Technology -- the states tech school.

Lisa Mighetto -- Right.

John Opie -- And had a lot of support for the journal and the Society.

Lisa Mighetto -- And was there continuing interest in your environmental history courses at that time?

John Opie -- There was, but I think other people, such as Carolyn or others, where there were strong environmental programs, might be able to speak better to that than I could. But I initiated an environmental police graduate program at NJIT, and taught environmental history there. But it was really a combination of environmental history and the history of technology. So, to include environmental history was, at least from my perspective, a little more difficult, maybe it was the condition of ... the situation on my university. But other people could speak to it better, as to whether there was continuous growth or not.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay. But you mentioned once Hal took the editorship the subscriptions increased again.

John Opie -- Yeah. Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- Up to 1200 -- that's ...

John Opie -- That's what I remember Hal reporting to me.

Lisa Mighetto -- Current levels.

John Opie -- And I'm not certain whether it is now, because Hal was also involved in the [indecipherable] of working together with the Forest History Society and having the relationship that we have now.

Lisa Mighetto -- So, that would have been probably the early to mid '90s that that occurred.

John Opie -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, what ... you again mentioned money. You've just talked about this. Is there anything else you want to say about the early challenges that ASEH faced?

[Laughter]

John Opie -- Well, I think one of them you've already raised is the tension between objectivity and advocacy. And I think this ... for outsiders this was a major issue; that

we were yet another advocacy activity, working under the guise of history. And we had some responsibility to shift the point of view to give us more a sense of reliability and credibility.

Lisa Mighetto -- You mentioned outsiders. You mean in the academic community?

John Opie -- Yeah, in the academic community. And I also sometimes would have encounters with people from the John Birch Society or ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Really?

John Opie -- Or some of the western -- more conservative, western organizations, who were trying to pick us apart, ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Interesting!

John Opie -- ... to find little niches where we were vulnerable. And it was quite a challenge.

Lisa Mighetto -- Can you think of examples? What ... how did they even ... you mean, they read the journal or they ...

John Opie -- They may have read the journal. I'll give them credit to say they may have read the journal.

Lisa Mighetto -- How did they even know about you?

John Opie -- But more ... I think looking over different organizations simply with the word 'environmental' in them, and looking at these organizations and trying to pick them apart in a way that would make us real vulnerable. And ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Did they contact you?

John Opie -- Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

John Opie -- They contacted me.

Lisa Mighetto -- So you're on their radar.

John Opie -- Oh, yeah. Definitely. The Society and the journal were on their radar. And we were seen as something similar to the Sierra Club, or NRDC. We were lumped together with other environmental organizations.

Lisa Mighetto -- And yet, you mentioned an early ... well, correct me if I'm wrong, you mentioned that one of the early objectives was to get a wide community of people, when in fact it seemed like it was mostly academics. Am I correct?

John Opie -- Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- And so ...

John Opie -- We were hoping for a wider audience, especially, you know, an interested public. But that wasn't ... that just wasn't going to work. Nor were we as interdisciplinary as I thought ... as many of us thought we would want to be. Because environmental history, by definition, is based in many ways on environmental science. And it's, by definition, interdisciplinary. Far more than maybe most other fields in history.

Lisa Mighetto -- But these groups that were contacting you, like the John Birch Society, they didn't understand it was a scholarly organization, and they thought you were environmental activists. Is that correct?

John Opie -- That's correct. Yeah.

Lisa Mighetto -- And so, what, you just explained that you were, as we are now, 501 3c. You were a nonprofit, scholarly, learned society.

John Opie -- That didn't create much credibility, you know, from their point of view. It was rather to see what we were made of; and how much our activities, looking at the journal, the activities of the society, and the individuals, that we were really a cover operation for a much more radical, pro-environment organization. And many of us ... I shouldn't say many of us, but some of us said, "Sounds good to us." But it was quite a challenge.

Lisa Mighetto -- Were you surprised that they contacted you?

John Opie -- Yes, I was. I didn't think we were being shadowed, but ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, it means you were visible though, in a way that surprises me.

John Opie -- Yeah, it was a compliment, you know, in many ways. They thought we had more clout than we [thought we] did, at that point.

Lisa Mighetto -- And what form did your encounter take? Were these ... was this correspondence back and forth, or phone calls?

John Opie -- It was phone calls and interviews.

Lisa Mighetto -- Oh, they interviewed you?

John Opie -- Oh, yeah. They would be directing counters over coffee, or something like that, where I had to be very careful as to what I said because anything I would say might be twisted and turned ...

Lisa Mighetto -- Would it end up in the newspaper? I mean, did you get coverage out of this?

John Opie -- There was a little bit of coverage. This took place, I think ... not at the Irvine conference, but at a later point. But ... somewhere in the West, I just can't remember exactly where right now.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well I'd like to track that down.

[Laughter]

Lisa Mighetto -- The copies of it.

John Opie -- If I can track down some information, out of my files, I'll do that.

Lisa Mighetto -- Oh, I'd appreciate that. Well, looking back now, what do you think were the most significant achievements in the founding and development of the ASEH?

John Opie -- Well, I think ... two things come to mind when you ask that question. One is that within the field of history, I think environmental history is now recognized as a viable significant field, in and of itself. Another question though is -- is environmental history a field within the discipline of history, or are we actually a field that is attempting to really reinterpret all of American history, or if you will European history, or global history. Are we a subfield? Or is this a major reinterpretation? Which would make it much more radical than if we were simply, you know, a sub-discipline within the field of history. And I think that that is still an open ended question, I think for a lot of us. This conference, here in Boise, I think most of the sessions are quite specialized. And I think the description, at least from what I've seen, indicates environmental history as a **field within** the discipline of history.

Lisa Mighetto -- Okay.

John Opie -- And there are still some of us who would like to see it as a transforming force, as well. I don't know if our day is past, is still here, or will come.

Lisa Mighetto -- Oh, that was going to be my next question.

[Laughter]

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Do you have ... well, looking back, is there anything you would have done differently, in terms of how ASEH was formed, and organized, and how it was administered?

**John Opie** -- You know, you wrote that question down, and that's one thing I don't know. I don't think we would have done anything very much differently, that I can think of. Our growth, and identity, and success, were - really quite rapid. Part of it may have been the era itself, and the timing was just ... just seemed to be right, at that point. I think, probably the journal might have avoided looking interdisciplinary, or seeking a larger public, and stayed as an academic journal. But we fell into that process within two or three years, anyhow. So we were more ambitious than we probably could have provided for, at an early point. But otherwise, I can't think of much that we would have done differently, because we had university support, and we still get that in many different ways. And the fact that we have these conferences with, you know, up to 800 people coming, depending on circumstances and location.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Does that make you proud now, to see what this has become?

**John Opie** -- Oh, I'm cheered by it [chuckles] that, you know, something like this could have transpired out of virtually nothing, at that point. And that there has been a cadre of people, and some of us are still around and active, that were around back at that point. And that the level of energy and dedication ... and also that we have not become divisive. We did not split into factions, as many organizations do.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- How do you account for that? Why didn't we?

**John Opie** -- Maybe the issues weren't there, but I think there was a sense of collaboration on the part of the people. I think it was the personalities involved, as much as anything, that helped accomplish that, avoided divisiveness. There were several points where something might happen, but it didn't. It really didn't. So, I think that helped account for our rapid success, too. And, I think most people would agree, we were successful at a very rapid pace. In fact, that now we have ... we're into perhaps our fourth generation of environmental historians, and still growing, and the jobs are out there. Yes, of course they're scarce. But, they are available out there -- specifically as environmental history courses, or at least something related to where a person can teach environmental history. That ... we seem to have done the right thing.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Do you think -- you touched on this indirectly -- do you think that ASEH has influenced the intellectual development of the field? That is, if ASEH hadn't existed, but you still had a journal, and still had people teaching environmental history ...

**John Opie** -- I think the fact of a society and regular meetings is critical. When I belonged to several of the historical organizations, it seemed like you needed a journal, for a regular academic and intellectual forum, for exchange; you needed an umbrella society, to pull people together, and have some organizational structure; and then you

needed a regular meetings, to hold all this together. and I think ... so we needed all three of those.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Looking ahead, what do you think will be the most significant challenges that ASEH will face, say in the next five to ten years?

**John Opie** -- Well, if I really knew that I'd be a rich person. I could buy into ASEH ...

**Lisa Mighetto** -- And then we could hit you up for a donation.

[Laughter]

**John Opie** -- ... I was trying to figure out what to say about that. I guess, from my point of view -- because I tend to be more of a generalist, than working in a special specific areas, and each book I do seems to be totally different from the one before -- that I hope the organization avoids compartmentalization. I think it could easily slip into a number of sub-specialties. And I'd still like to see, you know, a good number of people in the field working under the philosophy of environmental history, the nature of environmental history, working on global and international issues. It'd be interesting to have some sessions, for example, on Iraq and the Middle East.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Good point.

**John Opie** -- In other words those sessions that might deal with contemporary issues, as well as ... the historical background as well as something that happened 50 or 100 years ago. Or, in our rapid based society, even, you know, ten or 15 years ago. One of the interesting issues which, I think, hasn't been sorted out, and will be ... is an immediate challenge, and that's the relationship with the internet. And, how people will identify what they're doing as a society, in sessions or meetings like this, with the journal. And then, how the internet is going to change that. And I don't think that has really been sorted out -- and deserves a good deal of attention. We ought to have a session on that, or some kind of a workshop.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Okay, I was just going to ask you for advice. That's good.

**John Opie** -- Because I think the internet is a transforming force, far more than anybody has realized. We're still trying to understand the significance of it, today.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- Is there anything that you'd like to add, that we haven't covered?

**John Opie** -- Well, I guess, all I can say is that it's become a great organization. There's been terrific readership, and support. And I think, like I said, I had thought about this before, we had not broken up into divisive forces. It's really stayed, fairly homogenous group, in the sense of a willingness to build the organization, and the journal.

**Lisa Mighetto** -- A sense of a common goal.

John Opie -- Yeah. And I think a sense of a common goal. And a sense of success in reaching that common goal, despite some ups and downs that we've had.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, thank you, very much.

John Opie -- Ok. Thank you. This has been fun.

Mark Madison -- John, can I ask you a question?

John Opie -- Sure.

John Opie -- How did you guys pick the name ASEH when you were founding.

John Opie -- Well, it was an interesting question: should it be 'American Society of Environmental History' or 'American Society **for** Environmental History'? Of course, it's the second one -- 'American Society **for** Environmental History'. And, I guess, that was at an early point, in a sense that, we were advocates for another look, particularly at American history, at that point. Although, fortunately, it's gone much farther than that. And then environmental history deserves this kind of attention. So, it was '**for**' instead of '**of**'. But, that's about the closest I can say about, you know, any name we had, at that point.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, here's something that might interest you, in the ASEH exhibit right now, there's a new panel. And it has the original newsletter, from 1974. One suggested title was 'the Society for Study of the American Land,' and then the reasons that maybe that wasn't broad enough to encompass what you had envisioned. And I thought that was interesting, too.

John Opie -- Yeah, I'd forgotten about that. There was an organization, dealing with the American land, based in Washington. I can't remember the name of it exactly. And I think, in some ways, we were trying to see if we could be a spin-off off of that organization. But most people agreed it wasn't broad enough.

Lisa Mighetto -- That newsletter is up there, if you want to see it.

John Opie -- Yeah. Yeah. And also, the name of the journal changed. We were *Environmental ...*

Lisa Mighetto -- *Review*

John Opie -- *Environmental Review*, and we even got some articles from scientists who thought we were a technical review organization, and journal. And then became *Environmental History Review* to maintain continuity with the old title, but focus on history. And now, appropriately, it's called *Environmental History*. And I think that's the way it should be.

Lisa Mighetto -- And that happened in the mid 90s when we merged with Forest History Society ...

John Opie -- Right.

Lisa Mighetto -- ... in terms of producing the journal.

John Opie -- Right. And I am maybe one of the last people who has a full set of the journals issues, which I'll have to pass on to somebody. Including that rare one about China. I think it's No. 6, that hardly anybody has.

Lisa Mighetto -- And what year is this?

John Opie -- It was probably about '77, '78.

Lisa Mighetto -- I might be contacting you about that.

John Opie -- There are [indecipherable] copies around, but I've got an original.

Lisa Mighetto -- Well, thank you again, so much.

John Opie -- Well, thank you. This has been fun.