

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

SAMUEL L. PFAFF

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Robin Mejia

at

Salk Institute for Biological Studies
La Jolla, California

on

3, 4, and 5 October 2005

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles



Samuel L. Pfaff

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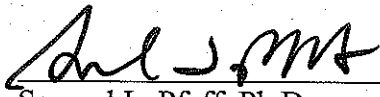
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Education

1983 B.A., Biology, Carleton College

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Professional Experience

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Selected Publications

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ABSTRACT

Samuel L. Pfaff was born and raised in Rochester, Minnesota, a city of, at the time, fifty- to sixty thousand people composed, primarily, of physicians and other Mayo Clinic staff and engineers at International Business Machines (IBM). Dairy farming was a major industry in the area surrounding the city; Pfaff's parents were both raised on farms. His father received a baccalaureate degree in chemistry and went to work for the Mayo Clinic, first as a research technician, but then later on as an administrator of laboratories; his mother was a housewife and then an accountant. Pfaff and his younger brother spent most summers on their grandparents' farm (his brother chose to pursue dairy farming as his vocation) working hard and finding the work very rewarding. He received a public education and felt fortunate to have a fifth grade teacher who recommended him for accelerated academic work and to have a high school biology teacher who suggested he volunteer in a Mayo Clinic laboratory, subsequently contacting Dr. Peter Dyck at Mayo on Pfaff's behalf. In Dyck's neurology lab, Pfaff contributed to Dr. Jeff Yao's research on Wallerian degeneration (the degeneration of nerves after injury); he presented his work at local, state, and, finally, National Science Fairs and because of it also won awards from the U.S. Navy and the state of West Virginia to attend a navy-themed camp in Hawaii and a science camp in West Virginia.

He decided to attend a local college for his undergraduate degree, matriculating at Carleton College—a liberal arts school about forty minutes from his home. Dr. Ross Shoger's class in developmental biology proved quite influential and Pfaff chose to pursue a doctoral degree in the sciences over a medical degree. He entered the University of California system for graduate school, studying at Berkeley with Peter Duesberg whose lab focused on how oncogenes function—working with retroviruses, RNA viruses, that could be grown on cells (mostly on chick embryos) which then led to a transformation of the cells and overproliferation—though this was slightly before Duesberg's public claims that the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was not the cause of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). From Berkeley Pfaff went on to undertake a postdoctoral fellowship in developmental molecular biology with William Taylor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and then another with Thomas M. Jessell at Columbia University in New York, New York, working on molecular neurobiology and gene regulation of motor neuron development. At the end of his postdoc he moved on to a position at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, researching gene combinations for regulation of motor neurons in spinal cord development.

At the end of the interview Pfaff discusses setting up his laboratory; the impact of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences award on his work; the role of the scientist in educating the public about science; and his lab management style. He concludes the interview with his thoughts on balancing family life and his career; funding scientific research; educating the public about science; the relationship of politics and science; tenure at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies; and his professional and personal goals.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Robin Mejia, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., Biology, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1997

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Pfaff's office at the Salk Institute.

Dates: October 3, 2005; October 4, 2005; October 5, 2005

Total number of recorded hours: 6.5 hours

Persons present during interview: Mejia and Pfaff.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts' Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Mejia corresponded with Pfaff by email and talked by phone to obtain background material, including Pfaff's CV, and schedule the interview. Mejia also obtained and read copies of several of Pfaff's published articles and reviewed his descriptions of his work on website.

ORIGINAL EDITING

Carol Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Pfaff did review the transcript. He verified proper names and made a number of corrections and additions.

Carol Squires prepared the table of contents and compiled the guide to proper names.

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