



ANU HERITAGE OFFICE

ORAL HISTORY RECORDINGS

INTERVIEW WITH HERMANN WEHNER

18 FEBRUARY 2014

At Mr and Mrs Wehner's home, Chapman ACT

Interviewer: Dr Judith Winternitz

Also present: Ms Amy Guthrie, ANU Heritage Officer

SUMMARY

INTERVIEW

(figures= interview time counter points -hours and minutes; HW = Hermann Wehner)

0.00m– 0.07 m

- Family and educational background – born in Göttingen, Germany, 1924 in a middle-class family; had a good education 1930-1940 including 4 years primary school and 6 years middle school;
- Took up apprenticeship in instrument making because he liked to do things with his hands; his father advised him not to become an administrator;
- War interrupted his apprenticeship: was called up into the army, but was captured and became a prisoner of war in Scotland, where he was put to work as a farm labourer;
- At the end of the war was released and returned to Göttingen;
- Became employed at the solar observatory at Göttingen University, which needed an instrument maker; the observatory had some small telescopes and HW was allowed to experiment with some sun spot observations; built his own little telescope;
- Decided to undertake some formal engineering studies in Munich 1949-52;

0.07m- 0.16m

- Following his studies, got a job in Australia at Mt Stromlo Observatory;
- The background to getting this job was partly because, while working at Göttingen University, HW had successfully built an iris photometer with one of the astronomers; HW could therefore demonstrate experience in making astronomical instruments;
- Also, HW was acquainted with another Göttingen University astronomer, Hans Gollonow, who was going to Mt Stromlo to work, and who promised to try to find HW a job there as well;
- Eventually, in 1952, through Gollonow, Professor Woolley, the Mt Stromlo Director, offered HW a six-month temporary contract; HW took this up but stayed on to become a permanent employee;
- The formal mechanism for coming to Australia was that the Mt Stromlo Observatory sponsored his placement through the Department of National Development; he arrived on the October long weekend 1952, was met by Gollonow and his boss, Kurt Gottlieb at Canberra Railway Station;
- There were a number of German scientists at the Stromlo Observatory – it was a very cosmopolitan environment; HW considers he had a “sheltered” existence at Stromlo, without ever experiencing any anti-foreigner sentiments from Australians;
- HW notes he will turn 90 in 3 months’ time;

0.16m – 0.23 m

- Was reasonably fluent in English when he arrived at Stromlo: had learned some basic English at school but mostly learned the language while in Scotland;
- Lived in the “Bachelors’ Quarters” when he arrived at Stromlo; this building housed six people including one woman, Claire Beech, who later became his wife – they married in 1955;
- Only had one suitcase and a couple of boxes when he arrived;
- Work at the Stromlo Observatory was varied and interesting; he liked the environment and the countryside: it was the right decision to move to Stromlo;
- Claire was the only woman living in the “Bachelors’ Quarters”; the others were a mixture of astronomers and technical staff; there was no separation between staff living on Stromlo: it was a “cosmopolitan mob”; on his first working morning, there was a morning tea where he met the other staff; they all got on well together;
- There were 22 houses on the Mount Stromlo observatory site at the time, including the “Bachelors’ Quarters” : 40-50 people in all lived on the mountain, including children;
- Everyone talked to each other and helped each other out with things like babysitting; they built a children’s playground; it was a small, isolated community; it was only when Professor Bok became director that the sealed road, which up until then stopped at Yarralumla, was sealed all the way to the Observatory: Professor Bok insisted on having this done;
- HW and Claire lived on Stromlo from 1952 to 1976, when they moved into their present house in Chapman;

0.23m – 0.33m

- In the early days of HW's time on Stromlo, Canberra was still very small, Stromlo was isolated and there was limited transport available; a school bus would take the Stromlo children down to school every day, then pick up various Stromlo staff and academics from designated points in Civic and bring them back to Stromlo;
- HW and Claire moved into a house of their own on Stromlo immediately after they were married; HW would walk out of the house to go to the engineering workshop around 8.30 a.m. and would go home for lunch, the walk back to work;
- You made your own entertainment or listened to the radio for entertainment outside working hours - but HW recalls one evening when he and Claire rode down to Canberra to attend a concert at Albert Hall, travelling there and back on their small motorbike, with Claire riding pillion, in midwinter;
- The engineering workshop at this time only had three staff: Kurt Gottlieb, HW and a draftsman, Alexander Chalmers; Kurt had a car and would occasionally invite others to accompany him to the cinema at night;
- It could be very cold on the mountain: HW remembers watching the Aurora Australis several times, sitting on the front stairs of the "Bachelors' Quarters";
- HW and Claire had two children while living on Mt Stromlo: - they lived up there until their son was 12;
- The children hated leaving Stromlo to move to the house in town because there were many children of many nationalities living up on the Observatory site and they enjoyed a life of great freedom, where they could wander around anywhere (being careful to watch for snakes) and play together; because of the strength of his attachment to the site, HW's son has now bought a house from which you can see Mt Stromlo;
- HW was naturalised in the early 1960's. He also applied to become a recognised as an engineer by becoming a member of the Institution of Engineers, Australia – for this he had to undertake additional studies;

0.33m – 0.43 m

- When HW arrived at Stromlo he discovered that he had really been hired to rebuild the Great Melbourne Telescope, originally built in Dublin in 1868; this telescope had been in the Melbourne observatory, which closed in 1944; Professor Woolley had bought the telescope for the Stromlo Observatory, but when HW arrived, it was still in pieces on the ground; HW worked on it for a number of years, including installing it within its dome;
- Work on telescopes never really ended: someone always wanted new attachments or additions; Ben Gascoigne did a lot of work with this telescope;
- Another telescope HW was long and closely involved with was the 2.3 metre advanced technology telescope, built 1976-7 (at Siding Spring Observatory) at the request of Professor Don Mathewson;

- Designing and building this telescope required a team of 4 engineers, including HW; this telescope was quite revolutionary in design: it is still running at the Siding Spring Observatory site;
- A further very important telescope HW was involved with was the 3.9 metre Anglo-Australian telescope; HW was 4th and last project manager for the construction of this telescope, seconded from his usual Stromlo Observatory duties to the project for the period 1967-1975;
- The Anglo-Australian telescope followed the pattern of the telescope in Tucson, but with adjustments: the design had to be revamped to be suitable for Stromlo needs; the telescope turned out very well, and is still going now, with new electronic adjustments;

0.43m – 0.48 m

- HW remembers working under the various Stromlo Directors:
- Professor Woolley, under whom HW worked from his arrival in 1952, was “very British”, but actually came from South Africa; HW imitates how Woolley, sitting behind a desk with an unlit pipe in his mouth, would call HW in to talk to him in a very formal way;
- When Woolley’s cows ate the cauliflowers from HW’s vegetable garden, Woolley just laughed; Woolley kept cows and horses and a goat on Mount Stromlo (others had goats as well);
- Woolley was a good man, but had strong views on many things – for example he was reluctant to use new or modernised technology in his observing work; when HW wanted to put electric motors on the Great Melbourne Telescope to move the telescope view around, Woolley wanted to keep the older mechanical movement system, where the observer used mechanical handles to adjust the telescope; he refused to allow the handles to be cut off, even though the electrical motors meant they were not necessary;

0.48m – 0.56m

- HW describes how the next Stromlo director under whom he worked, Bart Bok, called him in without warning one day to announce that he had just bought a telescope and gave him orders about all the things he had to do to ship and install it on Stromlo;
- It was in Bok’s time that the decision to have another observatory site at Siding Spring was made; Bok did not support Siding Spring as a site at first – he preferred another possible location at Mt Bingar near Griffith – but eventually agreed on Siding Spring;
- Bok’s wife, Priscilla, would help him with his observations and reductions;
- Bok made the decision to purchase and install three telescopes; in the 1960’s, he sent HW to Pasadena and elsewhere to look at them;
- The next director, Eggen, would do his observations at night, sleep during the day, and only attend to his director’s duties for a few hours in the afternoon;
- HW retired on 31 December 1980, under the directorship of Professor Alex Rodgers;
- Virtually the next working day, in January 1990, he was re-employed at Stromlo as a casual engineer, called in to work on various projects; he also worked at the Visitors Centre;

0.56 m -1hr.08 m

- HW has worked with most of the astronomers who were working in the Observatory;
- His closest working relationships were first with Kurt Gottlieb (head of engineering design) and then with the astronomer Ben Gascoigne, with whom he went on several overseas trips to look at telescopes and work on electronic instrumentation;
- HW's position was originally as a technical officer at £326 per year; he then became a senior technical officer, then was reclassified as an engineer and then senior engineer;
- Worked closely with the astronomers, seeing them daily; also worked closely with the workshop staff;
- HW never had a cross word with anyone, and was never bored: there was always something new happening every day;
- HW remembers how he arrived at Stromlo shortly after the 1952 fires, when the pine trees had all been burned;
- Sums up his time at Stromlo as a satisfying job; would call himself an engineer;

1hr.08m – 1hr.19m

- Claire Wehner (wife) comments on the recording that HW has not talked about his major interest outside astronomy : orienteering;
- HW was introduced to orienteering by an astronomer, Russell Cannon, who worked on Stromlo; he started going to orienteering events with his son, Martin;
- Attends about 60 events per year, from small orienteering exercises within Canberra to larger competitive courses overseas; has won medals in many World Masters Orienteering Championship events overseas including Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Germany, England, Italy, New Zealand, Scotland US, Canada;

1hr.19m – 1hr.42m

- HW advises that the new heritage trail proposed for the Mount Stromlo Observatory should make the site and its work interesting and should explain the scientific principles behind the telescopes and what they could do;
- When HW himself used to lead tours around the site from the Visitors Centre, his tours would focus on the technology and science aspects, explaining what the telescopes represented and their capabilities;
- On the day of the 2003 fires, a Saturday, HW was working at the Visitors Centre, taking a tour to see the 74" telescope in its dome; he had recently installed a multi-focus viewer capacity in that telescope;
- One visitor on the tour asked HW how long the telescope had been there; HW replied that it had been there for 50 years and it was good for another 50; this was at 2pm and by 3pm the telescope and dome had been destroyed by the fire;



- HW refers to some models of telescopes and other exhibits which were in the Visitors Centre before the 2003 fires;
- The nature of astronomical work at Stromlo has somewhat changed over the last decades; by the time the 2003 fire occurred, astronomical work at Stromlo was more team based, with people undertaking specific aspects of projects; before that time, astronomers would be working on projects individually;
- Electronics has now become dominant in telescope technology: the old photographic methods have been bypassed.