

Interview with Dr. John DeMartini
Interviewers: Chandra Miller and Adam Pinkerton
March 31, 2004

Interviewer: Dr. DeMartini, we know you attended Humboldt State College as an undergraduate student for your bachelors as well as a graduate student for your masters. What made you choose Humboldt State then?

DeMartini: Well, I was a student at Sonoma High School back in 1951, a senior, and a troupe from Humboldt State came down to Sonoma High school. They were visiting schools, I guess, in the Bay Area. And there was a Dr. Ivan Milhous¹ who was in charge of the troupe, and he mentioned that Humboldt had majors in wildlife and in fisheries and I said, "Gee, I think I could be interested in that," and I went up and saw Dr. Milhous after the program, which involved entertainment, and asked him about the program and he gave me a brochure. And I said, "Gee, I think this is what I'd like," and so I applied to Humboldt and came here in 1951 as a freshman.

Interviewer: What was your undergraduate experience like at HSC?

DeMartini: Well, I thought it was very, very good. I had good instructors. For example Mr. Fred Telonicher was the zoologist and he was a very, very effective teacher. Very eclectic in zoology, very broad background. Then I had Dr. William Lanphere who was my botany professor and also my advisor. And I started as a wildlife major my first semester, but then changed to fisheries the second semester and then I decided to go into biology and teaching. And so when I came back as a sophomore I went into the Biology department and Dr. Lanphere became my advisor and I just thought that I got, that I had a very good education, primarily from these two people in biological sciences and also there was a Dr. Brant who came in here in 1952 and I had ... Dr. Brant was also one of my instructors and particularly I remember physiology as an undergraduate from him. The one other interesting aspect of being a biology student at Humboldt State in the early fifties was that you could become a laboratory assistant as an undergraduate. I became a botany lab assistant as a junior. In fact, during my second semester of assisting—at that time botany was a two semester course—I came to the laboratory to assist Dr. Lanphere and there was no Dr. Lanphere. Then all of a sudden a Dr. MacGinitie, who was the chairman of the division of natural sciences, caught me and said, "Johnny I have to talk to you." So I went into his office and he said, "Bill Lanphere fell off his roof and fractured his skull." He said, "Bill Kinch is willing to do as the assistant in Plant Taxonomy, plant classification, would teach the Plant Taxonomy course while Dr. Lanphere was in the hospital and Dick Honee would teach photography (?), could you teach

¹ A former Dean of HSU's School of Education.

General Botany?” And here I was a junior and I shuddered and I said, “Yes.” And that was a very enriching experience for me to teach a course as a junior [chuckles]. I couldn’t teach it quite as effectively probably as Dr. Lanphere. I could cover what he took 50 minutes to cover in 20 minutes. And in any event being able to assist was very enriching. We’ll stop there for a moment.

Interviewer: What was your graduate school experience like at HSC compared to your undergraduate experience?

DeMartini: Well, I was the first person to graduate with a masters degree in biological sciences at Humboldt State. So in a way I guess I was a guinea pig, but due to the fact that I had worked on a teaching credential to teach life science, general science, I had to have a fifth year of school, so I took a lot of science courses in my fifth year and when I came back to work on my masters degree I had quite a bit of course work accomplished so I was able to finish the degree in a year and the degree—I took a non-thesis approach to the degree—and I thought I had a very good experience for being a guinea pig, in a sense, with a first run through a program. And I would say that I felt very well prepared academically to go on for a doctorate based on my experiences at both the undergraduate and graduate level at Humboldt.

Interviewer: Why did you pick Oregon State University for your PhD training? How did Oregon State compare with Humboldt State?

DeMartini: First of all the choice had a certain degree of pragmatism involved. I had, uh, the year I was finishing my masters degree which was in the spring of 1960, there were these National Science Foundation programs all throughout the nation for high school teachers and also for college teachers and there was a program at Oregon State for college teachers. To be acceptable you had to have a masters degree. Well I was in process and I applied and I told them I would have the masters degree in June, and this program was at Oregon State. Well in any event, I got accepted on the premise that I would finish the degree and I did. So went up there and being that at the time I was married and had a family I had to be pragmatic about finishing up the degree with all my responsibilities. And, uh, in any event, the dean of the graduate school gave a talk to us about graduate studies and mentioned the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Health and I went and saw him about graduate work at Oregon State and he said, “Well, to get a National Institute of Health grant you couldn’t have a masters degree, only a bachelors.” And I said, “Gee, that doesn’t make too much sense to me. I think that if you earned a masters that would be indicative more so that you could work on a doctorate.” So I wrote to the National Institute of Health and found out no, that’s not true, you can have a masters degree and so I said, “Well I’m here at Oregon

State and there's a professor Dr. Pratt whom I had heard good things about," so I went and saw Dr. Pratt and he accepted me as a graduate student after an hour's discussion and I got a National Institute of Health grant to work on my doctorate. And I thought that Oregon State was very, very good in that they put no brakes on you in terms of finishing a program, for example at schools like University of California and University of Washington I mean you essentially had to develop a beard before you graduate, a gray beard, and I was able to finish a doctoral program in two years at Oregon State. And, in any event, I don't think I was short-shrifted in terms of earning a doctorate, but my professor just let me go at my own speed. I was happy at Oregon State.

Interviewer: What brought you back to teach at Humboldt State College?

DeMartini: I'm a country hick and I wanted to live, I wasn't interested in living in a city, a big city. I was raised part of my life on a farm and I just liked open space and we had a fair amount of open space around here in the 1960s and I said, "Gee, I think I would be very, very happy teaching in a small college," and, since I knew Humboldt State, and we have the ocean here and we have the inland, we have all these natural attributes that beckon and that was my basis for coming here.

Interviewer: What were the actual years that you taught at Humboldt State? Did you teach in 1963 or just from 1969 to the present?

DeMartini: I taught General Botany in the spring of 1954. That was my first experience, then I taught, uh, when I started my masters degree, Dr. Lanphere went on sabbatical and they hired me as an instructor. So from the fall of 1959, I taught General Botany and General Zoology labs as a full-time job and took courses, and then in the spring of 1960 they kept me on as a lab assistant because Dr. Lanphere came back and I taught General Zoology and General Botany labs. Then they hired me from '60 to '61 full time as an instructor, and so for the '60-'61 year I taught Plant Taxonomy, which was a year-long course, and then also I taught General Zoology labs. And then off to Oregon State in '61, came back in '63 and taught full-time until I retired in, I think it was 1997.

Interviewer: You were here in 1963-64 in Humboldt State College's Golden Anniversary. What was that like?

DeMartini: I don't remember anything in particular, truthfully. I just knew that it was that year but I don't recall any events in particular.

Interviewer: Can you describe what the campus was like during the Vietnam years?

DeMartini: Little bit hectic. I can remember for a couple of years there, there were students whom I considered to be a little bit on the anarchic side and I was trying to tell them don't throw the baby out with the bath water in terms of changing things, but I can remember—not that I spent much time in class dealing with these kinds of matters but they were upfront with a lot of students—and I felt that after a couple of years of it, of this tension, that if I were just getting out of graduate school and, uh, this is what I was going to have to put for my teaching career that I probably would have looked at a research career. Actually if we back up a little bit, when I came here in 1963 there was the free speech movement going on down in Berkeley and there was a man named Mario Savio who was one of the leaders of the group down there and things were rather hot down in Berkeley with student unrest and I can recall student “unresters” coming up here and soap-boxing at Humboldt and students would look at them and just walk by, but after a couple of years things changed; they became equivalent to what was going on in Berkeley.

Interviewer: I noticed in the back of class catalogues it states your specialty is invertebrates and marine ecology. What sparked your interest in invertebrates and marine ecology?

DeMartini: Well, I always liked water, liked swimming, liked being physical, liked using my head and then I had good instruction from Professor Telonicher, invertebrate zoology was his specialty, and, uh, having a good educator, good mentors, along with a propensity that way makes a big difference. I could see myself, I could have gone other ways, in terms of like botany and just even today I could say I could have considered geology very strongly as a field if I were a twenty-year old.

Interviewer: How would you assess your colleagues at Humboldt State?

DeMartini: My colleagues? I consider my colleagues to be pretty darn solid, you know? One thing I've found through the years at Humboldt is that you can get soap operas going in colleges just as you can in, as you may find out when you go out and teach high school [referring to interviewer Adam Pinkerton], that you get these little things going on that are, I don't think disruptive is necessarily the right word, but I don't know, people with different ways of looking at things at least. But I found that within the biology department that we as a group have worked professionally very, very well and I would say much better, well if I back off, if I go to when I first came here at Humboldt, I would say there was a fair amount of infighting. We had, uh, biologists—the Department of Biological Sciences—but then we had the botanists and the zoologists. And I don't know, sometimes the zoologists were worried about the botanists and the botanists about the zoologists and we had department meetings once a week and we had zoology meetings once a week and botany meetings

once a week, you know, and we outgrew that, we matured and I think that was due to the fact that the younger profs became older profs. And maybe hopefully, a little more wisdom set in.

Interviewer: Was there a feeling of community in your department and/or campus when you began to teach? Did that wane?

DeMartini: Oh, I think there was a community, but I just mentioned that there was sort of this the botanists and the zoologists, then also I can go beyond that in terms of the, oh, the division of natural sciences. Oh, this, you know, there's perception and there's reality. I perceive that there probably was more, uh, separation of folks in the old days, but when we became a college of science, my perception is that as a group—physicists, chemists, biologists and so on—we worked well together when we dealt with committee work at higher levels and I would say, uh, [short pause] a pretty healthy situation.

Interviewer: What were or are your research specialties?

DeMartini: [Sigh] I don't know. [Interviewers laugh]. One thing when I came to Humboldt, I came to be an educator primarily and educating and researching can be full-time jobs, and then you have the balance between just at the professional level with these matters and then you have the other components of your life, like a family, and families take time. In any event it is a juggling act, it's a dynamic and, uh, I did get involved with research with the National Science, well not the NSF so much, but the National Sea Grant Program when that started within the state back in the late 60's. I was involved with that but I found that research is something for me that I can't just do fifteen minutes a day or start on a manuscript and have to put it down because I have classes to teach or have students to serve and then pick it up and be warm and I find that very, very difficult. Some people probably can balance those things better than I, but I'd say it can be hard to be a renaissance man and be everything.

Interviewer: Tanner, a historian of Humboldt, states in his book, *A View from the Hill*, "By 1967 the most popular majors were forestry, wildlife management, biology, psychology and history." Would you say that there were conflicts or competition between the biology department and other departments on campus?

DeMartini: I never sensed that, uh, particularly with psychology, forestry. I'd say that the one thing that the biology department when I first came here was primarily a service department where we had classes in biology for the wildlife and fisheries people, and the forestry, for foresters for example, I think forest entomology and forest pathology. As time progressed though, the amount of servicing that we did, uh, did diminish and so, for example,

when I first came here I knew virtually every fisheries and wildlife major. Naturally the programs grew and, but I just knew a lot of students outside the biology department. As time went on, that diminished quite a bit, but also concomitantly the biology department started to stand on its own feet more so, we had more of our own students and so in any event we grew that way.

Interviewer: I read in Tanner's book that when the faculty increased from 75 full-time members in 1961-1962 to 355 full time members ten years later the "close knit familiarity, informality, and friendliness diminished" at Humboldt. Did you experience any of this?

DeMartini: No, [short pause], not myself but I think, that probably reflects on my own personality. I found that I was exceedingly busy doing my job and I didn't spend much time with other faculty members socially. For example when I first came here, up in Founders Hall—I don't recall, it used to be the old library way back in the 50's, I don't know what it is used for now it's a meeting room, a big room on the I guess it would be the south end of the building²—faculty members used to lounge in there and so you'd see a variety of people discussing world events or whatever. I remember going up there a couple times, but pretty much I just was very, very busy in my office and with my students, and not that I was anti-social, but I just wasn't a great mixer.

Interviewer: In 1972 Humboldt State College changed to California State University, Humboldt and later in 1974 to Humboldt State University. Did this change cause any commotion on campus, was it accepted with open arms, or was it a non-interesting change?

DeMartini: Being that I wasn't exceedingly involved in campus politics, I can't give a very good approximation on that. For myself, I can recall Dr. Siemens ... when this was under the changing from semesters to quarters; I remember that was a major matter that came up. Semesters to quarters and I remember that Dr. Siemens mentioned that there were carrots associated with going to the quarter system. Well I don't know what the carrots were, maybe I've forgotten, but the one thing at that time I considered that the quarter system seemed feasible to me in terms of year-round operation—so we'd have a summer quarter—that never really materialized. Students don't just go to school four quarters a year [chuckles]. Well you better repeat that question. [Question repeated] Naw I don't recall it as a commotion I thought it was sort of awkward though, CSUH, you know, Humboldt State University just seemed so tripeth off the tongue much more nicely so I thought when we became HSU from HSC, Humboldt State College, not to CSUH and to HSU. HSU is just a little more euphonious.

² A reference to what is now called the Green and Gold room, a general-purpose room in Founders Hall.

Interviewer: How has the work culture, or professionalism, changed over the years, if at all?

DeMartini: Well, I think as of late, there's more and more stress on professors conducting research and bringing in grant money. I think it's a sort of academic capitalism going on and I do have concern about maybe too much being expected out of a professor and I would say that young professors coming out of graduate schools now are more research prone, more interested in that, and I'm not saying that's bad, but if your teaching load is still heavy, there could be a deterrent from your teaching and I get concerned about people having to juggle too many things and I mentioned your personal life and, uh, I could see people maybe living quiet, frantic lives trying to be the good professional and the good parent and the good wife or husband and so on.

Interviewer: How would you say the work atmosphere has changed over the years at Humboldt State?

DeMartini: Well, I think that with more technology there's been more work, more can be done, you know. For example, if you came in to an office like this twenty years ago you probably didn't see a computer on a table and you didn't find professors there at their desks with their monitors like you do today and I would say that technology, to some degree, is a two-edged sword. It can help you do more, but it doesn't necessarily replace work, it's just a way of enhancing it to some degree.

Interviewer: How has the campus changed since your undergraduate days?

DeMartini: Well, when I was an undergraduate here I don't recall as many women. And I can remember, you take majors like wildfire and fisheries, when I first came here there was no woman in either of the fields and I can still remember the first lady wildlife major back in the 50's, but there are more women in the natural resources area and biological sciences and so on, so I'd say the female component of the population has certainly grown. As far as I know, nationally I think there are more women in college than men. In any event, there are more students and, uh, oh, [short pause] you see more diversity in terms of what students look like. For example, back when I was here as an undergraduate, students were more conservative. Nowadays, I would say that you're dressed conservatively [addressing interviewer Chandra Miller wearing long sleeve button-up shirt, sweater vest, jeans, and converse shoes] and I'm not faulting you at all, but I would say that attire has become attire that doesn't, to me, necessarily foster academics.

Interviewer: What was your opinion about the administration at Humboldt State over the years you've worked here?

DeMartini: Well, for me, I've been the kind of person who likes to have faith in people and, uh, let me just start like this. I can recall when I first came here I was put on a committee, it had to do with journalism matters, *The Lumberjack* and, uh, don't recall all the details, but I remember we had to deal with the canons of journalism and we had to deal with issues of some of the writings in *The Lumberjack* and, uh, I can recall, now I'll become a little generic. If you're on a committee you may have a lot of information about a given matter. On the other hand, if you are a faculty member you may have a piece of information and your piece may not correspond to that of another person and you may generalize from your piece of information and the generalizations that are forthcoming are not necessarily congruent. And people can look at you as a committee member as being way off base, but they don't necessarily understand, have all the dimensions. That doesn't mean that because you have them all that you still make the best decision and my feelings was that an administrator, one well-informed administrator, could make a better decision than a hundred profs with a little bit of information. And so my attitude was one of having faith, and I could see too with the collegiality that an administrator can throw something out to the committee, and then say, "Well the committee said, I went by the committee and I was collegial," and it gets them off the hook. You know the buck has to stop somewhere. But in any event, I have found through my years that I don't think that I have been hurt professionally by not fritting my time away worrying about a lot of administrative decisions, especially about things where I'd only have partial information.

Interviewer: This is a two-point question: What has been your favorite class to teach and what has been your least favorite class to teach, and why?

DeMartini: Well, my favorite class to teach has been invertebrate zoology and the reason for that is it's a rather generic subject. I could dabble in quite a few dimensions of biology dealing with invertebrates. For example, there might be something of a chemical nature that might be germane, something of an anatomical nature which is germane, and that anatomical feature may have some relationship to engineering and I'm not an engineer, I wish I did have a good background in mechanical engineering, but it really pushed me to delve in the various components of biology when dealing with the invertebrates, and so, by far I would say that was my favorite course. A least favorite, I really can't say that I had a least favorite. There was nothing that I had to teach that I did not like, and so I believe that the [unintelligible] the least.

Interviewer: Were you involved in any on campus activities?

DeMartini: [Inhales deeply, long pause] Hmm, not really. I was pretty busy just, uh, between trying to do my job here at Humboldt and then trying to do my job at home with my kids and my wife, that I had a full platter.

Interviewer: This is the last question: Did you enjoy your teaching career at Humboldt State?

DeMartini: Oh yes. I have no qualms about having come to Humboldt State to teach. I came here purposely and I think I made the right decision. I think that I have had a wonderful career; I think I've had a positive effect in a quiet way on society, and so I'm content.

Interviewer: Dr. DeMartini, thank you very much for your time and information.

DeMartini: You're welcome.

Bibliography

“New Faculty Members for the Year,” *The Lumberjack*, September 20, 1963, 36-38.

Sempervirens, Arcata, 1966, 186.

Tanner, William R. *A View from the Hill: A History of Humboldt State University*.
Arcata: University Graphic Services, 1993.