

Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project

Descriptive Summary

Title

Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project

Date(s)

2000-2004

Creator (s)

Michael Woods, Ryan Morris, Thuong Le

Extent

Twenty (20) oral histories

Repository

Center for Oral and Public History
California State University, Fullerton

Project Abstract

This project is a compilation of oral histories of individuals interviewed about the development and incorporation of Rancho Santa Margarita. Many are included in Michael Woods' oral history project "From Cattle to Community: An Oral History of Southern California's Rancho Santa Margarita, 1841 – 2004." Rancho Santa Margarita incorporated in 2000 and became Orange County's 33rd city. Interviews cover the history of the land from when it was part of Rancho Santa Margarita Y Las Flores and primarily open cattle grazing land to the community's planned development, incorporation and early city management. Interviewees include land owners, land managers, residents of the city and nearby areas, city council members and business owners. Interviews provide varied viewpoints about land development, preservation, open space, environmental issues, community planning, incorporation issues and process, municipal control, transportation, and population growth.

Interviews were conducted as part of History 492: Community History, at California State University, Fullerton.

Researchers interested in city planning, development, and incorporation might consult the oral history collection "South Orange County Development."

Administrative Information

Acquisition

All items in this collection were donated to the Center for Oral and Public History by the interviewer and interviewees.

Access

The collection is open for research.

Preferred Citation

Citations must identify the oral history number, interviewee, interviewer, date, project, and the Center for Oral and Public History.

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Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project Abstracts

OH 2904

Narrator: Lewis, Debra

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Debra Lewis"

Date: May 22, 2004

Language: English

Location: Encinitas, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio; video

Status: edited transcript (34 pages), verbatim transcript (34 pages)

An oral history with Debra Lewis, attorney, member and president of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) Chamber of Commerce, who in 2000 became first mayor of RSM. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Lewis' involvement in the development of RSM and especially her role in its incorporation. Specifically, this interview covers Lewis' move to RSM from Irvine; involvement in the Chamber of Commerce; interest in cityhood to counter plans for a super city and as counter to plans to move John Wayne Airport to the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS). Discusses community members' feelings of geographical isolation; lack of understanding of advantages/disadvantages of incorporation. Explains absence of airport issue on 1999 election platform in order to have county supervisors' support for incorporation; airport was "shadow issue" and hot-button topic. Discussion of revenue neutrality, potential tax base, financial viability of city, county's potential revenue loss; resistance of Coto De Caza residents to incorporation with RSM; county's desire to include Dove Canyon, Robinson Ranch and Trabuco Canyon; Coto De Caza residents' concerns about law enforcement especially teenagers and traffic and desire to have RSM provide police services. Election of city council in 1999; process for selecting the mayor; decision to run for office and join "gang of five," election of woman as mayor; overcoming community divisions between RSM and Trabuco Canyon; effort to make community government approachable; project to build a bridge across Avenida de las Banderas; self control as primary issue for incorporation, especially for police, tax base and development; airport and county bankruptcy as arguments for incorporation; status of airport argument; Villa Park's changing position about the airport and potential flight patterns; Lewis' example to her daughters as a role model for professional, independent, powerful women.

OH 2905

Narrator: Richard Reese (b. 1928)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Richard Reese"

Date: December 1, 2000

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio; video

Status: edited transcript (43 pages), verbatim transcript (43 pages)

An oral history with Richard Reese, master planner of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Reese's involvement in the development of RSM and especially his role in its design and planning. Specifically, this interview covers Reese's experience in master planning other new communities; the concepts behind the plan such as "urban village," "lifestyle enhancement opportunity village," California lifestyle, and "people gathering places;" creating a good community for new families and businesses; offering moderately priced housing; creating the lake as a community amenity with access for everyone; reserving land for open space and parks and bringing the natural environment into the planning homes, streets, parks, landscaping; using nature to modify congestion and urbanity; planning and design of Santa Margarita High School; Tony Moiso's support for the school's design and completion; development and features of RSM public schools; city as a prototype to inspire others; comparisons of RSM to Irvine and Mission Viejo; importance of city council's support for the community concept; delay of plans for the town center due to recession in early 1990s; new owner's changes in plans for central plaza, park, city hall, intergenerational community building; fragmentation of town center, reduction of park land, roller hockey rink; lost opportunity to completely carryout the concept; Reese's disappointment and subsequent retirement; role of Steve Kallenberg in carrying out plans; friendship with Jack Wynn, editor of *El Campanero* monthly RSM newsletter; influence of RSM design on Ladera Ranch development; planning RSM with incorporation as intent; advantage of master plan in decreasing time officials spend on planning and zoning; RSM's credo written on 10th anniversary; discussion of design of San Francisco Solano Catholic church; brief discussion of Frank Lloyd Wright; discussion of Reese's work planning developments in Hidalgo and Quintana Roo, Mexico based on the concept of vecinal (local, neighborhood).

OH 2906

Narrator: Blais, Neil (b. 1962)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Neil Blais"

Date: November 20, 2000

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: printed pages from election campaign Web sites

Format: audio; video

Status: edited transcript (28 pages), verbatim transcript (28 pages)

An oral history with Neil Blais, councilman and mayor of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Blais' involvement in the development of RSM and especially his role in its incorporation. Specifically, this interview covers his early involvement with the community in an effort called Save the Park involving the RSM Cityhood Committee, his subsequent participation in incorporation activity and his election to the first city council in 2000. Discussion of incorporation process begins in 1997 with petition drives to collect signatures. Discussion of advantages of incorporation especially in regard to taxes and representation, cuts in county budget for unincorporated areas; effect of voter fraud allegations in Dornan-Sanchez election, neutrality law, and "Super City" plans; negotiation process with LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission); necessity of including Dove Canyon, Robinson Ranch, Trabuco Canyon, Rancho Cielo and Walden in order to garner enough property tax; determination that incorporating Coto De Caza was too costly; education of citizens about need for incorporation; arrangements to get Ford and Honda auto dealerships in RSM; beginning of Intergenerational Community Center; intention of planners to have mixed generations in community; strategy to keep airport plans out of incorporation argument; politics with county board of supervisors; increased law enforcement as important benefit of incorporation; easier access to building permits and inspections as benefit of incorporation; better responsiveness of city council members over that of board of supervisors concerning community issues; establishment of ordinances concerning massage businesses.

OH 2907

Narrator: Thompson, Gary (b. 1950)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Gary Thompson"

Date: November 8, 2000

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: printed pages from city Web site and election campaign Web site

Format: audio; video

Status: edited transcript (33 pages), verbatim transcript (33 pages)

An oral history with Gary Thompson, councilman in Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Thompson's involvement in the development of RSM and especially his role in its incorporation. Specifically, this interview covers Thompson's involvement since 1995 when he was on the board of SAMLARC (Santa Margarita Landscape and Recreation Corporation) master homeowners association. Discussion of idea for "Super City;" town hall meeting and establishment of RSM Cityhood Review Committee with Thompson as chairman; executive committee of Thompson, Mel Mercado and Carol Gamble; review of cityhood options, work with LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission); cityhood as longtime assumption, as vision of Tony Moiso and Richard Reese; influence of Mission Viejo planning decisions on planning RSM; prevalence of parks unlike other communities that traded park rights to the county; community goals for cityhood that included financial viability, a community center, and improved law enforcement; discussion of desire for greater police presence, relationship with sheriff's dept.; effect of county bankruptcy concerns and airport on incorporation plans; incorporation as benefit to county government; position of city council persons regarding airport; revenue neutrality work with Michael Ruane; financial considerations of including other communities in RSM incorporation, decision not to include Coto De Caza; fundraising for cityhood process; plans for community center and city hall; plans for Via De Las Banderas bridge over toll road; intention of have small city government staff and increase efficiency, e.g. building permit process; importance of educating community about incorporation benefits, having reliable financial data; costs related to incorporation; importance dedicated leadership.

OH 2908**Narrator:** Riley, Christy (b.**Interviewer:** Woods, Michael**Title:** “An Oral History with Christy Riley”**Date:** May 8, 2001**Language:** English**Location:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** audio and video**Status:** verbatim transcript (41 pages)

An oral history with Christy Riley, city council member for Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) and resident of Dove Canyon since 1989; filled a RSM council vacancy after Deborah Lewis left. Lewis was former Chamber of Commerce president and has a business in RSM. Specifically, this interview covers her work on fund raiser projects for incorporation; how Riley was appointed, not elected; her role in incorporation via Chamber of Commerce – forums, fund raisers; desire for local control of building issues, signs, parking, and traffic for a business-friendly community; desire to become involved in city government; shared common vision with other council members including need for bridge joining business and retail parts of city and desire for Intergenerational Community Center, plan to keep Community Center non-profit, prototype for other cities to create parks and recreational facilities; effect of airport plans on incorporation, residents’ lack of knowledge of El Toro Reuse Planning Authority (ETRPA) plans; opposition to plans for new freeway to accommodate traffic from southern Riverside County; discussion of extension of 241 toll road to San Clemente; discussion of “super city” plans ; need to incorporate to gain local control, fiscal neutrality, extending incorporation to include surrounding communities; primary revenue from sales taxes; lack of hotel rooms to host large events, gain revenue; zoning and planning issues not mitigated by master plan – issues over signage, traffic; RSM as a destination community; beginning construction on town center, failure of theater plans, need for better restaurants, more retail, difficulty recruiting large chain stores and restaurants; Riley’s personal effort to draw businesses to RSM; RSM as good place for retirement; future of unincorporated areas like Las Flores, Coto De Caza , Wagon Wheel; RSM transition to a general plan; need for new Environmental Impact Reports (EIR); short-sightedness of not putting in a public high school; county’s past plans to build a courthouse on land where Santa Margarita High School is; improvement in law enforcement.

OH 2910**Narrator:** Aguirre, Gilbert (b. 1936)**Interviewer:** Woods, Michael**Title:** "An Oral History with Gilbert Aguirre"**Date:** April 13, 2001**Language:** English**Location:** San Juan Capistrano**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** audio and video**Status:** verbatim transcript (31 pages)

An oral history with Gilbert Aguirre, ranch manager for Rancho Mission Viejo and partner with Richard O'Neill and Tony Moiso. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, CSU Fullerton. This interview covers Aguirre's earlier years in Arizona, education, involvement with the Ranch since 1967 and the transition of the land from ranching to housing and city development. Specifically, this interview discusses Aguirre's experience with the company's ranches in Nevada and California, information about cattle ranching such as moving cattle between ranches, typical size of herds, unpredictability of cattle business, cowboy lifestyle, and land ownership as key to making money. Discussion of value of California land for grazing cattle; Aguirre's role in managing the land leases to a variety of lessees for agriculture and other purposes such as sand and gravel, cement manufacturing, rocket testing, waste disposal; discussion of education and acculturation of Mexican immigrants on ranch; discussion of ranching business as unique because of employer/worker loyalty, business done on trust and handshake; support of ranchers for each other, keeping tradition; history of O'Neill land ownership, family's commitment to preserving open space; value of land as open space vs. development; acknowledges "you have to develop the land to it's highest return." Description of Ranch Mission Viejo land before development; development of Mission Viejo, Rancho Santa Margarita, Ladera described as "progress;" increase in population and public trespassing on ranch land; sadness over loss of California ranching as it once was; disease threats to cattle, cattle varieties suited to different climates; privilege of learning vaquero tradition and skills from longtime cowboys; aspects of cattle ranching that haven't changed, esp. use of horses; mention of the Moulton family selling their land in 1970s and leaving the area in contrast to O'Neill family's desire to control how their land was developed; Aguirre's reminiscences on how certain parts of the ranch used to look before houses and gas stations.

OH 2911

Narrator: Schrank, Steve (b. 1946)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Steve Schrank"

Date: April 5, 2001

Language: English

Location: San Juan Capistrano, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: verbatim transcript (22 pages)

An oral history with Steve Schrank, real estate developer for Rancho Mission Viejo Company (RMVC), key developer for the Santa Margarita Company and Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Schrank's involvement in the planning and development of RSM. Specifically, this interview covers his involvement leading the master development team charged with building the infrastructure and key community amenities. Discussion of his involvement begins in 1983 with the formation of a team of key members Donald Moe, marketing, Ron White, VP of development and Michael Babbitt, VP of construction. Discussion includes involvement in development of Ladera Ranch and study of other planned communities e.g. Mission Viejo, Irvine, Woodbridge; importance of landscape tied to natural environment; planning for balance of business and housing so people could work in the community: commuting and transportation as elements of planning. Discussion of Orange County reaching build out, running out of developable land and citizens' decision to tax themselves to fund infrastructure such as roads and highways; how transportation projects in the 1990s made RSM more accessible; how RSM 20-year master plan was affected by recession; business development delayed until threshold population could support it. Rancho Mission Viejo Company management team now focused on developing Las Flores and Ladera Ranch as RSM is nearly built out. Pattern of how RMVC creates development companies to develop areas of Rancho Mission Viejo. Explanation of the origin of the name "Ladera" for Ladera Ranch. Discussion of importance of keeping history and ranch heritage in community development so residents feel "roots" and "relate to the land," to form sense of belonging; creating environment that facilitates and encourages sense of community. Other areas in California where single ownership of large tracts of land has led to planned communities, e.g. Newhall Ranch, La Costa. Discussion of ranchers and farmers becoming developers involved in development of family land. Schrank's thoughts on the future of Rancho Mission Viejo land.

OH 2919**Narrator:** Hurst, Judy (b. 1934)**Interviewer:** Morris, Ryan**Title:** "An Interview with Judy Hurst"**Date:** November 26, 2000**Language:** English**Location:** Trabuco Canyon, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** CD**Status:** recording only

An oral history with Judy Hurst, resident of Trabuco Canyon. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about life in Trabuco Canyon before the development of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). Hurst provides family background about her great-grandfather William Gilbert and grandfather Bill Gilbert who were the first of her family to live in the Canyon. She describes her life in the canyon since she and her parents moved there when she was four and especially describes what life was like for children. Life included having few families in the area, open land, livestock, riding horses and bicycles to school, no home mail delivery. She describes changes brought about by opening of O'Neill Regional Park and Coto De Caza development. Discusses change in home prices since 1940s.

Hurst says she would be against incorporation with RSM if it meant change in lifestyle, giving up animals and livestock, and accepting codes and restrictions.

OH 2925

Narrator: DULMAGE, Steve (b. 1969)

Interviewer: Morris, Ryan

Title: "An Oral History with Steve Dulmage"

Date: November 20, 2000

Language: English

Location: Trabuco Canyon, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: CD

Status: not transcribed

An oral history with Steve Dulmage, resident of Trabuco Canyon. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Dulmage's impressions of living in Trabuco Canyon and in Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). Discusses lifestyle in the community and what drew him to living there – "didn't want to live with sidewalks" - enjoys living closer to nature, opportunity for his sons to explore, build forts; reminiscent of his earlier life in Montana. Describes Trabuco as a very tight community in which there is close connection and support among residents. Having lived in both communities Dulmage says the difference between RSM and Trabuco "is money" and the stricter housing regulations in RSM vs. more uniqueness and individualism allowed in Trabuco. Dulmage discusses his involvement with CASA the local Community Activity and Services Association, sponsor of local rodeo and other events.

OH 2926**Narrator:** BAERG, Sherry (b. 1954)**Interviewer:** Morris, Ryan**Title:** "An Oral History with Sherry Baerg"**Date:** November 5, 2000**Language:** English**Location:** Trabuco Canyon, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** CD**Status:** audio only, not transcribed

An oral history with Sherry Baerg, resident of Trabuco Canyon for most of her life. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about her life as a Trabuco Canyon resident and how different she perceives it to be from living in an incorporated area or city. Baerg discusses problems she perceives with incorporation and describes the independence and uniqueness she currently enjoys in the canyon community.

OH 2930

Narrator: Nguyen, Phata

Interviewer: Le, Thuong

Title: "An Interview with Phata Nguyen"

Date: December 16, 2000

Language: Vietnamese

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: verbatim transcript (6 pages) in English

An oral history with Phata Nguyen, member of the only Vietnamese family in Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather Nguyen's impressions and thoughts about being a Vietnamese resident of RSM. Nguyen discusses her preference for RSM over Bolsa (Vietnamese neighborhood in Westminster, Orange County, CA), that she values the privacy, independence and safety of the community, but is not involved in any community activities and does not attend community meetings. Her connections are local shopping and with her Catholic church St. Nicholas Catholic Church in El Toro and at Santa Margarita (San Francisco Solano parish).

OH 2931**Narrator:** NIEDZWIECKI, Narges (b. 1971)**Interviewer:** Le, Thuong**Title:** "An Interview with Narges Niedzwiecki"**Date:** November 9, 2000**Language:** English**Location:** Rancho Santa Margarita, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** CD**Status:** audio only; not transcribed

An oral history with Narges Niedzwiecki, teacher and resident of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather the narrator's opinions about the city as a place to live. The discussion includes biographical information, especially about her Persian cultural heritage and her family's acculturation in America since 1978. Narrator speaks of retaining some Persian traditions and cultural mores and blending of them with American ways. She speaks of her strong American nationalism and of respecting and blending her husband's Polish culture into their family traditions. Narrator speaks of choosing to move to Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) because it was new, clean, affordable and a "controlled environment." Narrator discusses her involvement in politics, her candidacy for RSM city council in 1999, and her pro-incorporation position. She briefly discusses other cities' incorporation issues, city boundaries, and the influence of SAMLARC (Rancho Santa Margarita Landscape and Recreation Corporation). Niedzwiecki discusses her impressions of RSM demographics and attitudes and what the city needs for further improvement.

OH 2932

Narrator: Moiso, Anthony (b. 1940)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael & Melissa Potter

Title: “An Interview with Anthony Moiso”

Date: December 13, 2000

Language: English

Location: San Juan Capistrano, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio and video

Status: verbatim transcript (37 pages)

An oral history with Anthony Moiso, who formed and headed the Santa Margarita Company. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Moiso’s involvement in the development of RSM. This interview covers his description of how five thousand acres of the Plano Trabuco became the community of Rancho Santa Margarita. Moiso discusses sale of Mission Viejo Company to Philip Morris in 1972 and the beginning of RSM planning with Tom Blum also that year. History includes selection of planning team including Dana Empringham, Richard Reese, Al Hollinden, and Steve Schrank. Discussion includes early planning, the South East Orange County Study (SEOCS), selection of Plano Trabuco as core of future development, analysis of future traffic challenges, and financial planning and challenges behind the entire enterprise.

Specifically, Moiso describes getting financial backing from Copley Real Estate Advisors, groundbreaking and first sales to builders in 1985, assistance from General William Lyon and his company; success of home sales, planning Santa Margarita Catholic High School, traffic issues and how the planned “urban core” and the RSM town center did not develop due to lack of demand and the recession of the early 1990s.

Moiso explains how RSM development was influenced by experience gained in developing Mission Viejo and how RSM development plan included the possibility of incorporation (esp. by providing business tax base) if residents wanted it, but says Santa Margarita Company was not otherwise involved in incorporation effort. Moiso explains the desire of his company to build the physical infrastructure only and to have the sense of community built by the residents.

Discussion includes some family history including Moiso’s relation to the O’Neill family.

OH 3224

Narrator: Holloway, Jerry (b. 1956)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Jerry Holloway"

Date: February 19, 2004

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: verbatim transcript (29 pages)

An oral history with Jerry Holloway, teacher and Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) city council member. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Holloway's experience as a resident of RSM as well as his involvement in city government. This interview covers his experience in police administration in Costa Mesa, his election to city council in 2002 and his experience in RSM city government. Discussions include Holloway's election on a public safety platform and general public safety issues, the advantages of being a "contract city" (competitive contracting for city services), development of city codes and ordinances, the city's economic viability, the intergenerational community center and the related Bell Tower Foundation, synchronization of traffic lights, traffic and parking around schools, possible expansion of the 241 toll road, and RSM's ranking as most desirable place to live in *Money Magazine*.

OH 3277

Narrator: Chandos, Ray

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Ray Chandos"

Date: March 19, 2004

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: edited transcript (19 pages), verbatim transcript (19 pages)

An oral history with Ray Chandos, resident of Trabuco Canyon involved with land use issues. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Chandos' views on the effects of RSM incorporation on the lives of canyon residents and natural environment. Specifically, this interview includes description of the area in 1950s or 1960s and in 1983, especially Plano Trabuco and Trabuco Canyon. Chandos was involved in land use issues beginning with county plans for a highway through Trabuco Canyon and then with development of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). Chandos expresses concern for natural areas, elimination of some wildlife, esp. large mammals and birds; affect on O'Neill Regional Park, water runoff and pollution, changes in natural environment and encouragement of non-native species; light pollution, increased traffic with Santa Margarita Parkway; discussion of proposed tunnel through Santa Ana Mountains; expresses opinion that Tony Moiso, Rancho Mission Viejo Company and other developers are disingenuous about amount of land left as open space and don't consider all of the long term impacts of development, especially traffic and air pollution.

OH 3278

Narrator: DeSimone, Pete (b. 1954)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: "An Interview with Pete DeSimone"

Date: March 9, 2004

Language: English

Location: Starr Ranch Sanctuary, near Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: edited transcript (22 pages), verbatim transcript (16 pages)

An oral history with Pete DeSimone, manager of the Audubon Wildlife Starr Ranch Sanctuary. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about the relationship of the Sanctuary and the development of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM). Specifically, DeSimone provides a description of what the land was like before RSM was developed. He provides a history of the property beginning with its ownership in the 1920s by Eugene Starr and the Audubon Society's eventual acquisition of 4,000 acres in 1973. Discussion includes the Society's use of the land as a wildlife preserve and research and educational resource; biographical information about DeSimone, and extensive description of the land before RSM development. Points of reference include Preusker Peak, View Rancho, Coto de Caza, Plano Trabuco, Rancho Trabuco, Dove Canyon, Rancho Cielo,, Arroyo Trabuco, Live Oak Canyon Road, Cook's Corner, Bell Canyon, Bell Creek, Tijeras Creek, Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park, San Jaun Creek, Canada Gobernadora. Description of effects (biological impact) of development, grading and grazing on wildlife, grassland, native plants, watersheds. Also discussed are efforts of Endangered Habitats League, National Resources Defense Council and Laguna Greenbelts to get conservation easements and preserve open space; early organization of environmental movement in Orange County; open space and quality of life issues; preservation of unique habitats; scarcity of water in Orange County.

OH 3279

Narrator: Thor, James (b. 1952)

Interviewer: Woods, Michael

Title: “An Interview with James Thor”

Date: March 24, 2004

Language: English

Location: Rancho Santa Margarita, CA

Project: Rancho Santa Margarita

Realia: none

Format: audio

Status: verbatim transcript (29 pages)

An oral history with James Thor, realtor, Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) city council member. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Thor’s involvement in the incorporation of RSM. This interview covers his involvement with several RSM community organizations, his advocacy activities for incorporation and his election to the first city council in 1999. Thor moved to RSM in 1986, one of earliest families in the community. His early involvement included leading opposition to a sand and gravel resource recovery mine in nearby canyon. He was involved with the Community Activities and Service Association (CASA) and the Rancho Santa Margarita Landscape and Recreation Corporation (SAMLARC) and served on the architectural review board. Thor formed Rancho Santa Margarita Civic Association in 1991 which later became the RSM Civic Council, a precursor to cityhood effort, and then the Cityhood Review Committee. Discusses Ron Greek and super city plan failure. Discussion of council campaign and incorporation issues include the intergenerational community center (term coined by Jack Wynns, member of Rancho Santa Margarita Civic Association), increased law enforcement for RSM, Orange County bankruptcy and possibility of airport at former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro. Thor describes the city council slate as opposed to airport plans “vehemently and vocal.” Thor describes a proposal to bring in other cities (Robinson Ranch, Trabuco Canyon Cielo, Walden) one at a time and explains including them as not fiscally possible until the county government gave RSM incorporation effort \$200,000 consideration for revenue neutrality. Thor describes involvement with El Toro Re-use Planning Authority (ETRPA) and explains impact of ERAF (Educational Revenue Augmentation Fund) which shifted local property tax revenues from cities, counties and some special districts to reduce the cost of education to the state general fund. Thor mentions visit in 1973 to “Escape Country” an area near Robinson Ranch for motorcycle riding and campground. Describes RSM as safest city in Orange County, second safest in CA, and *Money Magazine*’s calling it a “most desirable place to live.”

OH 3280**Narrator:** Mercado, Mel (b. 1964)**Interviewer:** Woods, Michael**Title:** "An Interview with Mel Mercado"**Date:** March 26, 2004**Language:** English**Location:** Riverside, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** audio**Status:** edited transcript (38 pages), verbatim transcript (39 pages)

An oral history with Mel Mercado, former resident of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) and employee of Phillips, Brandt & Reddick, land planner for RSM. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Mercado's involvement in planning RSM and in the incorporation effort. Mercado's role is described as a "bridge" between development and incorporation. Mercado speaks of the influence of mentor, Richard Reese, RSM master planner. Mercado describes the land before development, especially its openness and isolation. He describes RMS's Community Activities and Service Association (CASA) involvement in rodeo as reflection of the area's heritage, saying the history of the land and its owners helped build sense of community for residents. Mercado was the first resident member on the board of the Rancho Santa Margarita Landscape and Recreation Corporation (SAMLARC) and a member of the Civic Association. Mercado describes community and civic council disagreement over building an auto mall, evolution of the super city idea and failure of that plan. He describes door-to-door canvassing of RSM residents by Cityhood Review Committee; his relationship with Gary Thompson and Carol Gamble as nucleus of cityhood committee; his decision to put time with his family ahead of getting elected to the first city council.

OH 3281**Narrator:** Smith, Tom (b. 1965)**Interviewer:** Woods, Michael**Title:** "An Interview with Tom Smith"**Date:** May 17, 2004**Language:** English**Location:** Rancho Santa Margarita, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** audio**Status:** verbatim transcript (23 pages)

An oral history with Tom Smith, assistant principal at Santa Margarita High School since 1987 and resident of Rancho Santa Margarita (RSM) since 1993. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about the high school relationship with RSM before and after incorporation. Discussion includes description of the area in 1987, discussion of Moiso family connection with the high school, Tony Moiso and Art Bircher involved in raising money to build the school, Monsignor Michael Harris as founding principal, plan to name the school after Bishop Johnson; relationship with the city, resources provided by the city, master plan submitted to the city, impact of school on traffic and safety, more personal relationship with RSM than with the county government; relationships with sheriff and fire departments. Discussion of enrollment affected by Tesoro High School opening and then opening of Junipero Serra (Catholic) High School in San Juan Capistrano, statistics for enrollment of children from various areas around RSM.

OH 3920**Narrator:** Flores, Jesus**Interviewer:** Woods, Michael**Title:** "An Oral History with Jesus Flores"**Date:** May 14, 2004**Language:** English**Location:** Rancho Santa Margarita, CA**Project:** Rancho Santa Margarita**Realia:** none**Format:** CD**Status:** not transcribed

An oral history with Jesus Flores, resident of Rancho Santa Margarita, active member of the community and publisher of the *Trabuco Canyon News*. The interview was conducted for the Rancho Santa Margarita Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about Flores' involvement in the community during and after its construction. Flores describes his attraction to the community beginning when he was in the construction/stucco business in the mid 1980s and worked on homes built in RSM. Flores describes early RSM as isolated, wilderness, with very little infrastructure but a good, safe place for families. Flores describes starting the *Trabuco Canyon News* in August 1989, difficult economic times of early 1990s, and Orange County bankruptcy. Describes his vision for the newspaper and the community; saw paper as vehicle to "bring down fences" between long-time canyon residents and new RSM neighbors as well as share news of the community. Flores describes his involvement in effort to "save the oaks" in the canyon and prevent building of large road/bridge. Discusses knowing Jim Thor, Anthony Moiso, Richard O'Neill, mentions *El Campanero* newspaper published by Jack Wynn for Santa Margarita Co. Briefly discusses his support for city incorporation.