

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RICH NOLF

Interviewer: Harold Smith (corrections in parentheses) (FINAL 6/15/20 – Ross Marshall)  
(proofed by Mary Conrad)

HS: Rich, my name is Harold Smith and I live down in Parkville, Missouri, close to  
Kansas City. TAPED OCTOBER 21, 1996

RN: Yes, sir.

HS: I'm active in the Oregon-California Trails Association and also in our Trails Head  
chapter down here. The reason I called you is because Niel Johnson and I have  
been asked to gather some of the history on the beginning of OCTA here in this  
area and also the beginnings of the Trails Head chapter. Of course, you were one  
of the people present at the creation, so to speak. I wondered if there was some  
time when I could maybe talk to you over the phone and if you are agreeable,  
record those things that you remember about that.

RN: I don't remember much at all. What I thought when I knew we might be getting  
together (with) Conrad—I can't think of her first name...

HS: Mary Conrad.

RN: Mary told me you were after me. In fact, I think you've sent me some literature.  
I don't get things filled out.

HS: It sounds normal to me.

RN: My life, I like to think I'm in control but I know it's a bunch of bull shit.

HS: As I say, it sounds normal to me.

RN: I know that we drove a van down. We took a van load of people. In fact, I ticked  
off one person from St. Joseph because they were notoriously late for everything,  
and I made it very clear to this couple that we were leaving at a certain time, to be  
sure they were there ahead of time. And we even waited an extra five minutes for

them and they didn't come. So we went off without them. Well, it pissed them off. Well, that's their problem. It didn't bother me at all. Anyway, we had a van load. I know that Marilyn [Taylor] and Jackie [Lewin] were both in that. I don't know who else.

HS: This would have been, I suppose, when? Are you talking about the beginning of OCTA itself in '82 or '83? Or are you talking about Trails Head chapter?

RN: No, I'm talking about Trails Head chapter. I think Sharon Logan maybe also was in on that. My memory. I get by something and I forget about what happened in the past. I look it up in the future.

HS: Too many things come up.

RN: What's happened has happened. I let other people keep track of the past.

HS: Yes, my recollection of Trails Head stems from the fact that my first experience with OCTA was going out to Scotts Bluff in '85 when they had their third national convention. We came back and then we heard that Sylvia Mooney and Barbara Magerl were going to have a bunch of locals get together out at Cave Spring Center, where Sylvia then worked, to talk about forming a local chapter. Is this what you are talking about coming down for?

RN: We came down, I think...

HS: This was an evening meeting that I remember.

RN: I remember an evening meeting, but I sure don't remember it being at Cave Springs.

HS: Well, a couple of months later, right after the first of the year in '86 they had a meeting over at one of the branch libraries in Roeland Park, Kansas.

RN: That sounds more like it.

HS: This was an organizational meeting at what is known as the Cedar Roe branch of the Johnson County Public Library.

RN: I think that's kind of where...Because I remember that then the city manager of Independence...

HS: Yes, Bill Bullard was there.

RN: Yes Bill Bullard was there and he spoke. And he also spoke something in terms about the plans for the Trails Museum that they were planning in Independence at that same time. I remember very little about that particular meeting. I know that one of the names thrown out for it was, I think, Gateway. I know that Sharon Logan liked Gateway. But Trails Head was selected. And then we realized that since we had the coordination and I was chairing the meetings [OCTA convention] of '88 that we were going to have to have a chapter in St. Joe. So we formed the Gateway Chapter.

HS: You formed your chapter there.

RN: Yes, and there was some communication. We had several people from the Trails Head Chapter that participated with us and had membership with us. I would think that another couple who went down with us would have been the Pennistons. I don't know whether you have talked with them or not.

HS: No.

RN: But I would talk with the Pennistons because they were involved from the very beginning of OCTA, way back.

HS: Which would have been, I think, late '82.

RN: I think they went to that first meeting in Independence [1983], if I am not mistaken. Our first meeting was Scotts Bluff [1985].

HS: Yes.

RN: I made a bid at that time for the meetings to be in St. Joe. I made a bid for '87, I believe, at that time and they gave it to Lee Underbrink (Casper, WY in 1988), fortunately. Then we were given it for '88.

HS: Yeah, I remember that. Well, as I say, I'm like you. I was new to all this. I was interested. I went out to that meeting in November of '85 at Cave Spring. Out of that, apparently, according to the notes I have, there was an executive committee that met at the Rodeway Inn out in Overland Park, Kansas, in January of '86. That included, according to my notes, Mike Duncan, who served as chairperson at that meeting, Elaine McNabney, Ross Marshall, Peggy Smith, Barbara Bernauer and I have your name down as being at that one out in Overland Park.

RN: I sure was.

HS: At the Rodeway Inn (yes).

RN: At the Mahaffie Ranch, wasn't it? Yeah, remember going out there. I sure don't remember the context of that meeting, but I do remember going.

HS: My notes say, "Executive committee chosen to implement organization of a local chapter met at Rodeway Inn, Overland Park on January 22, 1986." Those present were the names I just read you, according to the notes I have. And your name is given there.

RN: I'm not going to argue with you. I remembered going out there when you mentioned the first person on that list.

HS: Mike Duncan

RN: Mike Duncan. He was head of the...Isn't that the Mahaffie Ranch stop?

HS: It's close to that. It may have been that you ended up going over there. I don't know.

RN: I remember a meeting there too. But I don't...Boy, you're reaching back into recesses that I have forgotten about. I'm not doing you any good for your history here. I think what you can do is you can write whatever you want for history and nobody is going to remember.

HS: Yeah, well, we're trying to avoid getting into fictional history.

RN: Aw shoot. It's more interesting.

HS: Well, anyway, as I say, we're trying to trace some of this back. And I can understand that because I am very vague in my own recollection.

RN: I think that in a sense...This is not to be recorded.

HS: Okay. (The tape recorder was turned off and then on again.) I suppose another factor was that if we were going to have a local chapter it's kind of a drive to come down to Kansas City, say every other month. And it would be a drive for locals here to drive 50 miles up the road there. So that gave some impetus to forming separate chapters.

RN: I think after Gateway formed I think there some cross migration. I know Ross continued to maintain membership and John

HS: Leamon.

RN: Leamon did. We had a fair number of people from the Kansas City area. And I think Pennistons maintain contact down there. That's my perception. I felt this

pretty much in terms of meetings. Professionally, I'm not an historian. I'm more of an administrator any more. But my background was not administering.

HS: Let me interrupt at this point. What do you do, Rich? What is your business?

RN: I'm the director of the St. Joseph Museum and the Pony Express National Museum.

HS: Okay, sure.

RN: My early background was in natural history. I was (unclear) at a children's museum on the East Coast for three years and then came to the St. Joseph Museum in 1965 as curator of natural history. Then I had figured in my own mind that I would go on in about five years because the director was a local boy and he would never leave, so advancement was really limited. Much to my surprise he left in '68. In '67 I applied for the directorship. Starting January 1 in '68 I became the director. I've been director for 28 years now.

HS: So this has been the main road in your life then.

RN: Oh, yeah. I've been here pushing 32 years.

HS: Where were you from originally?

RN: From Iowa City originally. I finished high school and banged around the country for a while, went in the Navy for four years and came out and went to school. I am one of those people that couldn't make up their mind in terms of majors. That took me about six and a half years to get a B.A. I started out in electrical engineering. Then I switched to mathematics. Then I ended up in Museum Science with a natural history background.

HS: Well, hey. You're not the first person who had that experience. You're talking to another one who floundered around for awhile before he decided which way to charge.

RN: What I think, you know, what I told all our kids. They all ended up going through school in essentially four years. But I made it clear to them that if it took more than four years that was fine. You do not have to make a commitment. What you think you want to do when you are a freshman does not mean that's what you want to do when you are a senior. Don't get trapped. All three kids are off doing things that they enjoy.

HS: That's what's important. And I'm sure your interest in the trails originated from the fact that St. Joseph is where, like you say, a lot of wagon trains originated, the Pony Express of course.

RN: It's all interesting. But I approach it from a different point of view than an historian would approach it. I have a much different appreciation of history than I did before I came here. I think most people are turned off by history by the way it is taught in schools. I think there is great potential for living history, so to speak. I think OCTA helps to do that in a sense as one small medium. You know, Jackie, Marilyn and Sarah are history oriented. And Mary running those tapes. I go to the meetings when it is convenient, but I'm not a staunch...I find it interesting in terms of coordinating the meetings of ADA were more the challenge of the coordination.

HS: Yeah, the organizational aspect.

RN: The organizational aspect. I have some skills in that arena. Then I do better when I am in a program that has a particular subset to it, rather than something which is ongoing. I like moving on. Being with something for two or three years and then moving on to another arena. I've been director all this time but constantly changing. Just to give you some idea in terms of what has happened in the last 28 years since I've been director, is that when I started we had a staff of six and a budget for both facilities of around \$40,000. Today we have a staff of 28 and a budget of between \$600,000 and \$700,000. We finished a \$2 million expansion three years ago. So we haven't been standing still.

HS: Yeah.

RN: I've been the director for so long now that I don't really involve myself much in natural history. I enjoy working with people and being a cheerleader and a facilitator.

HS: Let me ask you one other question. What if any involvement did you have with Greg Franzwa, the prime mover in the founding of OCTA? Did you cross paths with him? Did he influence you in your thinking?

RN: Oh, yes. I don't think he influenced me in my thinking. Greg's a fascinating character, just a great wit. I met Greg a number of years ago when he first did *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, his first book. I'm not sure if it is in the forward of that one...Maybe. But anyway our former curator, Don Reynolds, he worked closely with Don on a segment of that book. And that's where I first met Greg. Then later on when we started getting involved with OCTA I got to know Greg.



He of course is opinionated. He has some real thoughts in terms of preservation of the trail.

HS: I think for many of us his book, which came out 25 or 30 years ago (1972), may have been the first influence we had and the key thing in getting our attention to the trail.

RN: He popularized it. What was it, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*?

HS: Yes.

RN: Then the maps that followed. But we've maintained correspondence. He's come over. We've had him come over a couple of times. He came over and did some programs for us, really interesting. In a lot of ways he's been a champion of this museum.

HS: Good

RN: He's followed us. Several times in (unclear) he has made little comments about us that he does not have to do. It is good to know. He has always been a champion of the staff. I appreciate that. I don't always agree with him and that's okay with him and that's okay with me.

HS: Rich, Mark Twain said it's a terrible death to be talked to death, so I'll not...

RN: I've been doing all the talking.

HS: That's what I wanted. I tell you what. You were one of the people on my list to interview. What I've done I've had the tape recorder going except when you said, "I don't want this to be added." So I turned it off at that time.

RN: I heard you turn that off.

HS: I turned it back on after we resumed the rest of the discussion. And if it is agreeable with you, I will use this as an oral history of what you have been able to contribute to our knowledge about the founding of the Trails Head Chapter.

RN: I really can't help you a whole lot.

HS: I appreciate you taking the time to talk. What I'll do is I'll make a copy of the tape and send that along to you.

RN: Okay

HS: Thank you so much for taking the time.

RN: You're welcome.

HS: I look forward to meeting you face to face a little further down the line.

RN: Great. Well, thank you, Harold.

HS: Thanks so much, Rich.

RN: It's a pleasure talking with you.

HS: Talk to you later.

RN: Have a good day.

HS: You too.

RN: Goodbye.