


1986

American Philosophical Society Finding Aid for JAX Oral History

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Jackson Laboratory Oral History Collection

1986

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Table of Contents

- [Background note](#)
- [Scope & content](#)
- [Collection information](#)
 - [Provenance](#)
 - [Preferred citation](#)
 - [Processing information](#)
 - [Other finding aids](#)
 - [Related material](#)
- [Indexing Terms](#)
- [Contact information](#)
- [Detailed inventory](#)
 - [Jackson Laboratory Oral History Collection](#)

Abstract

In 1929, the geneticist C. C. Little founded the Roscoe B. Jackson Memorial Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine, a major center for the study of mammalian genetics, cancer, and related areas in basic biomedical research. An independent institution, the Lab has maintained a consistent scientific reputation both as a supplier of inbred strains of mice for genetic and biomedical research and for the scientific achievements of its researchers.

Conducted by Susan Mehrtens in 1986, the Oral History Collection includes transcripts of extensive interviews with fifty scientists, administrators, and staff members of the Jackson Laboratory. At greater or lesser length depending on the subject, the interviews provide a detailed picture of the operations and administration at the laboratory, the culture of research, the sometimes contentious staff relations, and the research itself.

Background note

In 1929, the geneticist C. C. Little founded the Roscoe B. Jackson Memorial Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine (now the Jackson Laboratory), a major center for the study of mammalian genetics, cancer, and related areas in basic biomedical research.

As an undergraduate at Harvard, Little took an interest in studying the inheritance of coat coloration of mice, and in 1909 developed the first inbred strain of mice for use in genetic and biomedical experimentation. Continuing as a graduate student under William E. Castle, Little received his doctorate in 1914 for research on the inheritance of susceptibility and resistance to tumor transplants in mice, and began a distinguished career that led him to the presidencies of both the University of Maine and University of Michigan before his fortieth birthday. Despite his administrative duties, he remained active in research, and when he left Michigan in 1929 over political disputes with the Regents, he was soon able to secure funding to establish the Jackson Laboratories as an institution for "research in cancer and the effects of radiation."

The misfortune of opening a research center only months before the stock market crash of 1929 resulted in several years of financial hardship for the Laboratory. Yet ever charismatic and opportunistic, in 1933 Little lit upon the idea of generating income for the laboratory by selling excess stocks of inbred mice to other researchers, and two million mice and 2,500 varieties later, the Jackson remains a center for supplying genetically pure mice for research purposes.

Despite the hardships of the Depression, Little lured an impressive staff to the coast of Maine, including George D. Snell (who later won a Nobel prize for his discovery of the major histocompatibility complex), Elizabeth "Tibby" Russell, and George Woolley, and he enthusiastically encouraged a broad range of research on a number of mammalian taxa, including the introduction of behavior genetic research at Hamilton Station. During the Second World War, the Laboratory provided thousands of mice for use in investigating the effects of poison gases and for the production of encephalitis-B serum, but the relative prosperity it brought was curtailed when the laboratory and nearly all of the mouse stocks were destroyed by fire in 1947. Tibby Russell directed the efforts to rebuild the "inbred nucleus" of mouse stocks with the assistance of scientists who had purchased Jackson mice in the past, and the laboratory emerged from the episode as a stronger institution.

After 27 years as Director at the Laboratory, Little stepped aside in 1956 and was replaced by Earl Green. Very much a contrast to Little, Green brought a micro-managerial style to the position that chafed several of the scientists on staff, and he exerted his control in part by curtailing the breadth of research. Green showed little interest in exploiting new areas in genetic research,

rejecting a move into biochemistry or immunology, and he attempted to shut down the successful program in behavior genetics at Hamilton Station. In short, Green's tenure brought an almost exclusive focus on mouse genetics combined with a steady deterioration of relations between the administration and the scientific and support staff.

Following Green's retirement in 1975, Richmond Prehn attempted to recraft the Laboratory into a broader center for research in the mold of Rockefeller University, downplaying mouse genetics and mouse production in favor of an emphasis on cancer research. However the alienation of the staff plagued Prehn's directorship as much as it had Green's. He added a now-major research program in molecular biology at great expense, and the financial strains placed on the laboratory combined with the tensions with the research staff led to his resignation in 1980. Subsequent directors have included Prehn's successor, Barbara H. Sanford, and Kenneth Paigen (1989-present). They currently (2003) conduct research in six major areas (bioinformatics, cancer, development and aging-related, immune system and blood disorders, metabolic diseases, and Neurological and Sensory Disorders), and are one of eight institutions designated by the National Cancer Institute as a cancer center.

Scope and content

Conducted by Susan Mehtens in 1986, the Jackson Laboratory Oral History Collection includes transcripts of extensive interviews with fifty scientists, administrators, and staff members of the Jackson Laboratory. Not affiliated directly with any academic institution, the government, or private industry, the Lab has maintained a consistent scientific reputation both as a supplier of inbred strains of mice for genetic and biomedical research and for the scientific achievements of its researchers. At greater or lesser length depending on the subject, the interviews provide a detailed picture of the operations and administration at the laboratory, the culture of research, the sometimes contentious staff relations, and the research itself.

Because several of the first generation of scientists to work at Jackson were still alive in 1986, Mehtens' interviews address nearly the entire history of the institution up to that time, although the emphasis inevitably falls upon the period under the directorships of Earl Green and Richmond Prehn. One of the real virtues of the project lies in the decision to include a wide slice of the laboratory community, ranging from non-professional staff to scientists, administrators, board members, and affiliated scientists from outside the institution. The conflicting perspectives offered on the history of the institution, the intellectual and cultural life there, and the personalities and activities of the directors and scientists makes for a particularly rich resource for study of the dynamics of scientific and laboratory culture during the mid-20th century.

Mehtens compiled an extensive finding aid that includes a highly detailed

three volume index to the interviews. In notes accompanying the individual interviews as well as in her finding aid, Mehrtens comments freely upon her impressions of the interviews, and whether the subject were candid, reserved, anecdotal, or precise, and whether their observations meshed with those of others.

Collection information

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access:

The interviews with David Harrison and Robert Stanwood are closed until 2037.

Provenance

Gift of Susan Mehrtens, 1985.

Preferred citation

Cite as: Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, Me.) Oral History Collection, American Philosophical Society.

Processing information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2003.

Other finding aids

See Susan Mehrtens' "Finding aid to the Jackson Laboratory Oral History Collection," available in print form at the APS.

Related material

The history of mouse genetics in the papers of [L. C. Dunn \(B D917\)](#) and, to a degree, the [J. A. Weir Papers \(Ms. Coll. 92\)](#) on the history of the Bussey Institute.

The archives at the Jackson Laboratory contain the institution's complete administrative records from the time of its founding, along with the papers of many of its key scientists, including C. C. Little, George Snell, and Tibby Russell.

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Oral histories

Personal Name(s)

- Abbott, Mary
- Abbott, William
- Bailey, Donald
- Baltimore, David
- Barker, Jane
- Beck, John
- Bennett, Dorothea
- Bernstein, Seldon
- Brilliant, Murray
- Bunker, Helen
- Bunker, Lester
- Champlin, Arthur Kingsley, 1938-
- Clark, Frank
- Coleman, Douglas
- Compton, John
- Crow, James F. (James Franklin), 1916-
- DeLaitre, William
- Dorey, John
- Duran-Reynals, Marie-Louise
- Ebert, James
- Fahey, Eunice
- Foley, Dale
- Fox, Richard
- Fuller, John
- Gilley, Reginald
- Glass, Bentley, 1906-2005
- Green, Earl Leroy
- Green, Margaret
- Harrison, David
- Hirschorn, Ann
- Kandutsch, Andrew
- Lane, Priscilla
- Law, Lloyd
- Lawson, Fay
- Little, Ann
- Little, Clarence C., (Clarence Cook), b. 1888
- Little, Richard
- Little, Robert
- McFarland, Roy
- McKusick, Victor A., (Victor Almon), 1921-2008
- Mehrstens, Susan
- Neilson, Harry, Jr.
- Petschek, Stephan
- Prehn, Richmond

- Robbins, Watson
- Roderick, Thomas
- Russell, Elizabeth Shull, 1913-
- Salisbury, Allen
- Sanford, Barbara H.
- Scott, John Paul
- Silver, Willys
- Snell, George D., (George Davis), 1903-1996
- Sprott, Richard
- Staats, Joan
- Stanwood, Robert
- Stevens, Leroy
- Waymouth, Charity
- Winn, Henry

Subject(s)

- Cancer--Research
- Genetics
- Laboratories
- Mice--Genetics
- Women geneticists
- Women in science

Detailed Inventory

Jackson Laboratory Oral History Collection	1986	1.5 lin. feet	Request Series
Abbott, William and Mary. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 7	TMsS, 60p.	Box 1 Request File
Long term cook and mate for summer program re: C. C. Little etc.			
Baltimore, David. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 16	TMsS, 22p.	Box 1 Request File
"Outsider's view" of current status of Jax			
Barker, Jane. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 July 22	TMsS, 42p.	Box 1 Request File

Russell's lab; Green and sexist hiring policies			
Bailey, Donald. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 35p.	Box 1 Request File
Jackson Laboratory in 1950s and 1960s			
Beck, John. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 30p.	Box 1 Request File
Trustee of lab under Green, Prehn, and Sanford			
Bennett, Dorothea. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 22	TMsS, 34p.	Box 1 Request File
Chair of Board of Scientific Overseers re: Green and Prehn years			
Bernstein, Seldon. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Sept. 13	TMsS, 47p.	Box 1 Request File
30 year research scientist at Jax; mouse genetics; ICG Montreal			
Brilliant, Murray. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 June 14	TMsS, 37p.	Box 1 Request File
Recent hire at Jax			
Bunker, Helen and Lester. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 50p.	Box 1 Request File
Lab assistants on Jackson Laboratory in 1940s and 1950s			
Clark, Frank. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 May 16	TMsS, 51p.	Box 1 Request File
Long term employees at Jax; Little's retirement			
Champlin, Arthur Kingsley, 1938- Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 7	TMsS, 38p.	Box 1 Request File
Students at Jax			

Coleman, Douglas. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 7	TMsS, 45p.	Box 1 Request File
"Second generation" scientist re: Green and Prehn years			
Compton, John. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 21	TMsS, 29p.	Box 1 Request File
Assessment of Jax's reputation; molecular			
Crow, James F. (James Franklin), 1916- Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 22	TMsS, 39p.	Box 1 Request File
Reflections on Green and Prehn years			
Dorey, John. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 34p.	Box 1 Request File
Duran-Reynals, Marie-Louise. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 30	TMsS, 18p.	Box 1 Request File
Re: Francisco Duran-Reynals' research on viral theory of cancer; Snell, Little			
Ebert, James. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 July 22	TMsS, 47p.	Box 1 Request File
Re: Green, Prehn, and Sanford years; current situation at Jax			
Fahey, Eunice. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 36p.	Box 1 Request File
Green's secretary re: Green years			
Foley, Dale. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 38p.	Box 2 Request File
Administrative assistant of Little and Green re: financial and administrative activities			
Fox, Richard. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 May 31	TMsS, 37p.	Box 2 Request File

Fuller, John. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 22p.	Box 2 Request File
Hamilton Station			
Gilley, Reginald. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 June 7	TMsS, 33p.	Box 2 Request File
Re: Green, Prehn, and Sanford years, Robbins; support staff			
Glass, Bentley, 1906-2005 . Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Oct. 10	TMsS, 12p.	Box 2 Request File
Green, Earl Leroy. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 June 14	TMsS, 116p.	Box 2 Request File
Green, Margaret. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 June 21	TMsS, 29p.	Box 2 Request File
Wife of Earl Green			
Harrison, David. Interview by Susan Mehtens		TMsS,	Box 2 Request File
Restrictions on Access: Closed to research until 2037			
Hirschorn, Ann. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 7	TMsS, 34p.	Box 2 Request File
Summer work experience at Jax, 1950s			
Kandutsch, Andrew. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 May 31	TMsS, 47p.	Box 2 Request File
Little and Green years			
Lane, Priscilla. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 45p.	Box 2 Request File

Green and women at Jax; mouse genetics			
Law, Lloyd. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 26p.	Box 2 Request File
Jackson Laboratory in 1940s; fire of 1947; Little			
Lawson, Fay. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 May 31	TMsS, 53p.	Box 2 Request File
Jackson Laboratory in 1950s; Russell			
Little, Richard. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Nov. 16	TMsS, 77p.	Box 2 Request File
Jackson Laboratory in 1930s and 1940s; C. C. Little			
Little, Robert and Ann. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Aug. 22	TMsS, 51p.	Box 2 Request File
Re; father, C. C. Little			
McFarland, Roy. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 July 22	TMsS, 37p.	Box 2 Request File
Support staff at Jax			
McKusick, Victor A., (Victor Almon), 1921-2008. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 July 14	TMsS, 21p.	Box 2 Request File
Short courses at Jax			
Neilson, Harry, Jr.. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 Sept. 13	TMsS, 23p.	Box 2 Request File
Trustee re: all four Jackson Laboratory directors			
Petschek, Stephan. Interview by Susan Mehtens	1986 July 22	TMsS, 26p.	Box 2 Request File

Former Chair of Board of Trustees re: administration			
Prehn, Richmond. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 May 16	TMsS, 31p.	Box 3 Request File
Transitions and changes in Jax			
Sanford, Barbara H.. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 21p.	Box 3 Request File
Roderick, Thomas. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Sept. 13	TMsS, 35p.	Box 3 Request File
Green, Prehn, and Sanford years			
Russell, Elizabeth Shull, 1913- Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 7	TMsS, 37p.	Box 3 Request File
Jackson Laboratory over 50 year career			
Scott, John Paul. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 22	TMsS, 40p.	Box 3 Request File
Hamilton Station			
Silver, Willys. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 14p.	Box 3 Request File
Russell and other researchers			
Snell, George D., (George Davis), 1903-1996. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 May 31	TMsS, 39p.	Box 3 Request File
Early years at Jax; Little			
Sprott, Richard. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Nov. 7	TMsS, 49p.	Box 3 Request File
Green and Prehn years			

Stanwood, Robert. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 7	TMsS, 34p.	Box 3 Request File
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Restrictions on Access: Closed to research until 2037

Staats, Joan. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 14	TMsS, 39p.	Box 3 Request File
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Jackson Laboratory librarian re: Little, Snell, Jackson Laboratory in 1950s and since

Stevens, Leroy. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 14	TMsS, 29p.	Box 3 Request File
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Jackson Laboratory post-World War II; Little and Green

Waymouth, Charity. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 June 21	TMsS, 40p.	Box 3 Request File
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Scientist and interim director after Prehn

Winn, Henry. Interview by Susan Mehrtens	1986 Aug. 3	TMsS, 55p.	Box 3 Request File
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Green years

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