

Laguna Woods History Center
Community Oral History Project
Recording Log

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ABSTRACT: Rob Merritt began as the Channel 6 Intern while studying Communications at Cal State University, Fullerton in 1969. This opportunity led to his lifetime career where he captured the local Leisure World stories and news that also pertained to the surrounding communities. The studio in Clubhouse 1 originally filmed in black and white with a single camera. The station was managed by Paul Ortiz. Rob helped institute modern technology with the use of multiple cameras, live coverage, and color broadcasting. He spent forty-three years with this community where he conducted over forty-thousand interviews. He received the Doctor Tracy Strevey Award. Rob retired in 2012, but continues to host the Laguna Woods annual car show.

00:00:00 JK: We're here at the Laguna Woods History Center with Rob Merritt on October 29th, 2016. My first question for you was, "The first time you heard about Laguna Woods, or Village at the time, what did you hear?"

RM: I was at Cal State Fullerton majoring in Communications and one of the requirements to get a degree there, at least at that time, was an internship program. So, one of the internships that was available was down here in Laguna Woods. And so that was actually the first from my advisor at Cal State Fullerton. And they said, "You know, you need to do an internship, a little TV station down there in Leisure World. You want to check that out. That might work for you..."

Keywords: amenities; Cal State Fullerton; Clubhouse 1; Clubhouse 2; clubhouses; co-op; community; internship; internship program; Laguna Woods; Laguna Woods History Center; Laguna Woods Village; Mr. Cortese; Third Mutual; TV station

Arriving at Leisure World

00:02:57 RM: Sure. There was a gentleman who was at that point the acting station manager. I found out later he was the assistant station manager. The station manager was away on a medical leave. And there was like two younger fellas, maybe a little bit older than me, in production. That was pretty much it and at that point everything was live. So, there were resident-run shows, primarily. And it was literally live TV like it was back in the early days of, you know, the so-called Golden Age of Television. A resident would come in, they'd set them down, put a mic on them, there would be a slide on the air - coming up next is so and so, go to that person live and hopefully their mic worked and hopefully the camera was in focus and they did their thing...

Keywords: 1969; 1970; 2007; Administrative Chat; administrator; Amateur Radio Club; assistant station manager; board members; cable system; Cal State Fullerton; Cal State Los Angeles; Carolyn Wood; Channel 5; Channel 6; Clubhouse 1; clubs; co-worker; community; Eleanor Marquis; Fourth Mutual; general managers; George Phelps; Harry Babbitt; Harry von Zell; Home Savings; intern; Irvine; Irvine School District; Ivan Foley; Kay Kyser; Long Beach State; Los Angeles; master antennae system; Mayor La Guardia; Mr. Cortese; news program; newsroom; Oaklawn Homes; OC Register; parades; PR team; production; production company; radio TV film; Razor Radio; resident-run shows; Rob Cromwell; Robert Price; Ross Cortese; Rossmoor Corporation; Rossmoor Electric Company; San Diego; satellite dishes; station manager; studio; technology; The Leisure World New; volunteer program

Rossmoor Electric Company

00:14:34 RM: Sure. Rossmoor Electric, the community started, as I said, they found that the cable system needed to get built. They needed to build a real cable system here. So, Rossmoor Electric was the company that actually finished the construction on that. And then because of the warranty situation with the Rossmoor Corporation, they ran the warranty for the first year of new homes in the community. In '69, at the end of '69, when the previous production company got into negotiations with the community, they weren't renewed. And the community said, "But we want to keep the station." So, they went to the gentleman that ran the Rossmoor Electric, Ivan Foley, and said, "We'd like you to take over Channel 6."¹ And he said, "Well, I'm not really interested in that. I

¹ "By 1970 Leisure World had one of the largest cable television systems in the world, with every manor being provided 12 channels from a community antenna. The cable system, not including the head end facility and antenna, was owned by the GRF Trust. During January 1970 GRF signed a five-year contract with Rossmoor Electric Company, owned by Ivan Foley, to maintain Leisure World's 12 channel cable television system. Rossmoor Electric also agreed to operate Channel 6 during 1970 and provide three hours per day of broadcasting plus a 24-hour a day weather watching service in a format similar to today's message board without messages. On February 5, Channel 6 broadcast programs in color from 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. to test new color equipment designed for closed-circuit television systems." *The Historian*, The Laguna Woods Historical Society, 2001 November-December; Vol. 5 No. 6.

don't know much about television. I don't really have any people that could run that. And they said, "Well, hire some of those kids that are over there now, which was myself and George and the gentleman who at that point was then...had been promoted from assistant station manager to station manager. So, the three of us ran Channel 6 in 1970. Christmas vacation of '69 was not spent with our families. It was spent down here. And we rewired the whole studio. Two of the technicians from Rossmoor Electric were there and kind of guided us through that process. So, we rewired everything, still in black and white, but brought in...make it as good as we could for black and white for that first few years...

Keywords: 1969; 1970; 1971; 1972; 2007; 2008; 20th annual parade; 25th annual parade; assistant station manager; board members; cable system; Cal State Fullerton; Carolyn Wood; Channel 6; clubs; co-worker; community; construction; control room; Eleanor Marquis; George; homes; Ivan Foley; Laguna Beach; organizations; phones; PR team; printing press; production; public relations; residents; Rob Cromwell; Rossmoor Electric; shows; station; station manager; technicians; television; volunteer; volunteer program; warranty

00:19:15

Switch to Color

RM: Right. There was a...we felt that that would make the station even better to have color cameras, but to justify because the company that did the production, Rossmoor Electric, owned all the equipment at that point. So, to justify the expenditure to get new equipment, they wanted a long-term contract. So, Mr. Foley sat down with the community people and negotiated a longer-term contract which then justified the expenditure to get the cameras. So, went color...we had a gentleman that was a...worked at actually NBC Channel 4, but was very knowledgeable about RCA equipment so we got some small RCA cameras. At that particular time, the FCC was encouraging all cable systems to do what they call local origination programming done by the cable operator. Not such a big deal now, but it was a big deal back then. So, they built...RCA built a small camera for what they called cable casting use. And we got a couple of those. We're on our way with color...

Keywords: Bob Price; cable casting; cable systems; cameras; Clubhouse 1; color cameras; community; company; contract; equipment; FCC; film; L.A. Rams; local origination programming; Long Beach; Mr. Foley; NBC Channel 4; NFL; production; Rossmoor Electric; station

00:21:45

Administrative Chat

RM: Sure. As I said, the program was called *Administrative Chat* and I think he had started at Clubhouse 1 with Mr. Babbitt, but then over in the studio. So, he was his own...he was his own host and it was very much, you know, sits down, puts his mic on and says, "Well, welcome to *Administrative Chat*," and if there were no questions at that point, carry over questions or new questions, he would just start thumbing through the *Leisure World News* and say, "Oh, here on page three, there's an article about the new pool or the new club or something that's going on, a church is being built in the community. He would just kind of talk

about that, relay sort of 'til he got... 'til he got questions. And then he would deal with the questions and let on like that for half an hour. And eventually we actually started recording that and showing it back during the week as well, so...

Keywords: 1983; 2000; Administrative Building; Administrative Chat; board meetings; board room; cameras; Chat Part II; Clubhouse 1; disaster group; Leisure World News; live news show; meetings; Mr. Babbitt; PCM; program; residents; robotics; studio; Third Mutual

00:25:40

Politics and Local Leaders

RM: Sure. We started out, of course, when we first started here we weren't a city. There wasn't...no city of Laguna Woods. So, we were part of the county, so the county supervisors were very important and we would have the supervisor honor representatives from the different aspects, Orange County Sheriff's Department, those kind of people on. When cityhood came around, we obviously gave a lot of coverage to the march to cityhood, which was motivated to a large extent by the closing of the El Toro Marine base. And some people wanted to make it into a commercial airport, which the residents were definitely against. They tolerated the marines because it was national defense and they said, you know, quote unquote, "They're our guys." But when the commercial airport concept came around it was very unpopular in this community. Most of the residents were opposed to that. So, that's what got the move to cityhood although it took three elections to finally get cityhood here. It was going to be a part of Laguna Hills, originally and then eventually it was just its...just this community of Laguna Woods and a little bit of surrounding area. So, we had the people that were running the campaign as well as the new members of the...the first members of the city council. And subsequently, we had all of them on over the years - the ones [who] would give a report after each meeting, sort of like the board meetings. We would have the board member president on the day after those Tuesday board meetings and talk about what went on for those who might have missed the meeting. It also allowed us to promote the replay, you know, if you missed the meeting, you could see the replay on this time and this day. We found that that was a really good way to maximize our work was to record things and play it back. So, you got a different audience and you got, you know, the same amount of work, but it was multiplied by two or three times by showing it again, give people a chance to see it and they might have been out doing something else or missed it. So, we had those folks on. We also started working with our congress people. We would have them on, school board people to some extent would want to come on even though people here weren't in school, still they were paying taxes on the schools. And, of course, the college was very popular, Saddleback College, started the Emeritus Institute, which provided classes right here in the village, classes for seniors. So, we had those folks on as well from the college and then the start of the new college at the Irvine as well. So, we covered a lot of those things, but the city council was the big one once the city came around...here in the community...

Keywords: Administration Building; Administrative Building; ballots; board meetings; Bob Ring; campaign; Channel 31; Channel 6; city; city council; city

hall; cityhood; commercial airport; community; congress; county; county supervisors; El Toro Marine base; Emeritus Institute; Laguna Hills; Laguna Woods; Orange County Sheriff's Department; residents; Saddleback College; school board; vote

00:30:03

The Mr. X Dinner

RM: Right.

JK: At Clubhouse 1.

RM: Right.

JK: So, would you share what that event was designed for...what it was about and then going live for it for our listeners?

RM: Alright. When this place started it was pre-Medicare when this community started. So, Mr. Cortese provided a medical clinic over on the area which is now Saddleback Hospital. And it was open to the residents and it was sort of a program for the residents with doctors and nurses on staff that were there. In fact, they had 24 hour on-call, there were no paramedics at that time either down here. My understanding, so the story goes, the day after Medicare passed in Washington, Mr. Cortese's chauffeur drove him over to the site of the what it now the hospital, which was the medical clinic at that time. There was a large sign that said, "The future home of your resident hospital provided by Ross Cortese and the Rossmoor Corporation." And that sign got picked up and put in the truck of a limo and they drove off because, you know, there's no way I'm going to build a hospital now that the government's getting involved with Medicare. So, the residents decided, though, that there really was a need for a big hospital. The nearest big hospital was South County in south Laguna Beach or Hoag up in Newport. There weren't really anything close, so the land that the hospital was built on was the medical clinic that still was at that point, but the land behind it they needed was also owned by the Rossmoor Corporation. And some of the gentlemen in the community actually played softball there. So, they lost their softball field and that was one of our first remotes was going over there and videotaping that event as they, you know, cut the ribbon on the land, so to speak. So, the hospital was a big deal and obviously financing the hospital was a big deal. So, they were looking for donors of all shapes and sizes and they had a gentleman who was going to make a large donation. They wanted to sort of promote it as a hook, so we say, to get more people to contribute. So, they said, "Well, Mr. X is gonna give this large donation and we're not going to reveal it 'til, you know, the big event. So, they had a dinner at Clubhouse 1. Well, they said, "We want you guys to cover us." So, what we had to do was get our technicians to run cables from the studio which fortunately was near Clubhouse 1. We had to build a ramp so cars could drive over the cables to cross the street and run them all the way to the Clubhouse 1 dining room. We actually did our evening news show live from that and then went live to the Mr. X dinner. So, it was a big deal and a lot of promotion went into all of that. So, that was our first real live remote that I was involved in. Everything else had been pre-taped, parades and all that kind of stuff...

Keywords: 1967; 1969; airplane crash; American Cancer Society; annual car show; board meetings; board members; Bubbles the Hippo; cameras; Channel 6; China; Clubhouse 1; community; congressmen; coworker; David Frost; El Toro; fire; George; Gerald Ford; governor; Hoag; hospital; Irvine; Laguna Beach; Laguna Canyon Foundation; Lion Country; medical clinic; Medicare; Mr. Cortese; Mr. X; Newport; Nixon; Orange County; pre-taped; president; program; remotes; residents; Ronald Reagan; Rossmoor Corporation; Saddleback Hospital; San Clemente; show; Speaker of the House; station; studio; The Republican Club; Western White House

00:40:32

Incorporation and Cityhood

JK: So, a little bit more about capturing the change. So, did you capture more residents' voices as well? So, you captured Bob Ring.

RM: Right. Running down the hall. Yeah. Yeah.

JK: Victoriously shouting. But did you do...residents and just capture their immediate feedback? What was the program...?

RM: We primarily started working with the council members as you can imagine because it was a brand new city. They also had to have an election of city council people on the same ballot. So, people had to vote for that, so we started having those folks on right away. And then started covering, at their request, their meetings which were at first held there in the Administration Building before they got their own facility, down the road. So, yeah, mostly worked with the council members and the city staff and did that quite extensively over the years. A lot of...the reality is normally with a new city - the first members of the city council come from your home owner's association leadership. And that's still the case to most of the people on the council now have been on our boards here in the community...

Keywords: 2001; Administration Building; boards; Bob Ring; building; Channel 6; city; city council; city staff; community; council members; Ed Foley; election; equipment; home owner's association; meetings; Paul Ortiz; residents; Rossmoor Electric; station; station manager; studio; vote

00:43:33

Doctor Tracy Strevey Award

RM: Yeah, Doctor Strevey, who was the first president of the GRF, and the folks here had gotten involved it was called The (Leisure World) Historical Society. And they wanted to obviously preserve the memories of this community because some of the new residents were no longer here. They thought, "Well, we need to start doing something to preserve this community." So, they started The Historical Society and they said, "We need to start giving some recognition to people who have contributed to this community." So, they had a dinner and they honored the *Leisure World News* and Channel 6. So, George Phelps and myself shared a nice plaque and the newspaper got one as well. It was kind of nice to be recognized for

the work we'd done. Going, you know, back to the early '70s when there were people who wanted to get rid of us now there were people saying thank you very much and we appreciate the work you guys have done. So, it was kind of nice to be honored/recognized. And that was called the Doctor Tracy Strevey Award...and it's, I guess, we were among the first recipients of that. They don't give it out every year so I know it's kind of a special thing...

Keywords: 1969; 1970s; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2012; Associa; Badham; board; cable system; cable TV; Channel 6; Chris Cox; co-workers; community; congressman; Dan Gurney; Doctor Strevey; Doctor Tracy Strevey Award; Formula One racing; George Phelps; Grand Prix; GRF; interviews; Irvine; John Campbell; Laguna Woods Village; Leisure World Historical Society; Leisure World News; management company; OC Register; Orange County sheriff; Paul Ortiz; PCM; president; production company; re-election; residents; retired; Robert Edward Badham; Ross Cortese; Rossmoor Corporation; Rossmoor Electric; station; station manager; studio; The Historical Society; The History Center

00:53:44

The History Center

RM: As I mentioned prior, it was really important, I think, the people that had the vision to say, "You know, this place is [a] unique community. Unfortunately, people move on or pass away so there's a lot of history that gets forgotten about. I think it's important that they started this organization. Obviously I'm glad that it's continuing on. It's obviously been very successful, part of it was getting their own site. One of the things we did cover was the late Huell Howser from PBS was down here for the groundbreaking. And then a year to the day later was here for the ribbon cutting to open the door. So, seeing this get built was kind of an exciting thing as well. And I think it speaks well for the residents that wanna preserve the history and want to see the history continue. I mean just little things like the diorama out there, that's amazing that people can actually...new people can say, "Okay, what's your manor number? Oh, here's where your house is. Right there." You know, people can see that and orient them that way. They've also done a good job with tours and helping people get to know this...about this community for future residents and also people from the outside. I understand a lot of groups from their gerontology oriented come here for tours and The Historical Society has helped out with all a lot of that as well. So, I think it's important...I'm glad they're keeping it going and obviously they, you know, they're archiving all kinds of good stuff as well...

Keywords: 1969; 1970s; 2012; 50th anniversary book; car show; Channel 6; Clubhouse 5; community; diorama; gerontology; groundbreaking; Huell Howser; organization; PBS; residents; ribbon cutting; The Historical Society