

Listening to Voices from the Past: An Adventure in the Archives

By Rebecca Hopman, Intern at the Niels Bohr Library & Archives

The American Institute of Physics has many divisions, one of the most important being the Niels Bohr Library & Archives. The mission of the NBLA is to help preserve and make known the history of modern physics and allied sciences. To that end, the repository collects and makes accessible books, periodicals, photographs, oral history interviews, institutional records, and personal papers, among other materials.

During the past few months, I have been lucky enough to work in the archives as an intern. I am a graduate student in the College of Information Sciences at the University of Maryland, College Park, and as part of my degree program I need to complete 120 hours of practical experience in an archives. Most of my current work history is in college and uni-

versity archives, so I thought working in a nonprofit would prove a valuable experience. I admit my knowledge of physics and the history of physics is rather lacking (sorry Mr. Kupfer!), but I am a quick and enthusiastic learner.

For my internship, I curated an exhibit featuring the Oral History Interviews collection. This collection contains interviews with over 1,500 physicists, astronomers, and other scientists. Right now, staff at the archives are working to digitize all of the transcripts and make them searchable. They plan to have over 1,000 of the transcripts available online by June 2013, and want to highlight this valuable and unique research collection to their member societies and the public.

Like I mentioned, my knowledge of physics is rather slim, but reading these interviews is like taking a crash course. Yes,

the terms and concepts these men and women talk about are frequently beyond my comprehension, but often they focus on the human side of physics. My favorite part of researching this collection is seeing all the connections between these scientists. The physics world is like one big family tree: everyone is linked to each other by their teachers, students, colleagues, friends, spouses, and so on, until the en-



L-R: Harvey Fletcher and Vern Knudsen laughing during an oral history interview, circa 1964. Credit: AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives.

tire field is connected in one great web of scientists. Even though I still could not tell you the difference between a mass spectrometer and a cyclotron, I know and appreciate much more about these people and their work.

For the exhibit, I have chosen quotes from many different physicists' interviews, and paired them with photographs from the Emilio Segrè Visual Archives. I have included information about oral histories and why they are such valuable resources to researchers and educators. I have also been able to include some of the original equipment used to record these oral histories, as well as the materials the interviews were recorded on. I hope the final result provides viewers with a greater appreciation for this amazing collection.

As part of this project, I also wanted to reach out to those people who will not be

able to see the exhibit in person, as well as to share materials I could not fit into the exhibit space. I decided to put together two social media campaigns on Facebook and Flickr to share these materials with a worldwide audience. Each Tuesday you can read why "Physicists Love Libraries!" on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/AIPhistory). You can also check out photographs and quotes from famous physicists, and find links to audio clips in our "Voices From the Past" album on Flickr (www.flickr.com/photos/esva). Look out for these photos and quotes to be posted on our Facebook page every Thursday this year.

Working at AIP has been a great experience. The College Park office is an incredibly friendly environment, and I have enjoyed meeting many AIP employees. The Niels

Bohr Library & Archives is a beautiful space, and the librarian and archivists there are always happy to help find resources and answer research questions. In particular my supervisor, associate archivist Amanda Nelson, has been a wonderful source of support and guidance. She has been working with the Oral History Interviews collection for several years now, and is always able to point to an interview or name an interesting physicist to look into. I really appreciate all the help she and the other staff members have provided me with. I encourage you all to take advantage of the Niels Bohr Library & Archives and its staff in your future research and projects.

If you would like to learn more about the Oral History Interviews collection, or read transcripts from many of the interviews, please visit www.aip.org/history/nbl/oral-history.html. ■