

Gretchen Schafft – Willis Sibley Interview

This is a transcript of an interview of Gretchen Schafft done by Willis Sibley, for the Society of Applied Anthropology Oral History Project, August 26, 2006. Gretchen Schafft was an organizing member and the second president of the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists (WAPA). WAPA is a local practitioner organization. Sibley was also a later: president of WAPA.

[Tape 1, Side 1]

SIBLEY: That was from [inaudible]. Okay, this thing is on [inaudible]

SCHAFFT: Okay.

SIBLEY: It's August twenty-six, two thousand and six. My name is Will Sibley. I'm interviewing on behalf of the SFAA Oral History project and I'm interviewing today Gretchen Schafft, anthropologist, who is one of the pioneers in the organization of WAPA, the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists, and I'm going to start with asking Gretchen to say a word or two about her own academic background, after which we will talk about the organization of WAPA and some of the reasons why it was organized and where it has come since in evolution and so on. So Gretchen, welcome and . . .

SCHAFFT: Thank you, Will.

SIBLEY: Why don't you say a little word about your academic background and also would like to know, for the record, of what your status is now, I understand you now have an appointment with American University in other activities, so, please talk about that a little bit.

SCHAFFT: My undergraduate work was done at Antioch, in Ohio. And I had lots of experiences under their work-study program that coincided with anthropology, although I was a sociology major. In my last year at Antioch I studied under Abe Rossman who later became Professor at Columbia, and he supervised my senior project, which was educational : education as a cultural bridge in Decoy, Kentucky, which started with my work in an American Friends Service Committee work camp. We were building a low water bridge in the community and replacing the roof on the school house and doing other jobs for this really very dispersed rural community, and I went back and did my senior paper there under Abe's tutelage and I really enjoyed it very much. I decided that I would apply for graduate school in

anthropology, or in rural sociology, and I was accepted in rural sociology at the University of Kentucky and in anthropology at American University. My decision to go to American University was based on my . . . having become acquainted with Harry Schafft who became my husband at the first break in semesters the following year [chuckle], so that, that really was the deciding factor for the decision to become an anthropologist. I did my masters at American University and completed that in 1964, and after some years started a PhD program at Catholic. By that time I had two little children and . . . decided with the second child that I would really like to go back to school and finish my education. I went to Catholic University and studied primarily under Conrad Reining and enjoyed it very, very much, and did my doctoral dissertation in the United States in my own community, looking at white children as a minority in a public school – which was our neighborhood public school. We were living in an intentional community, where whites were integrating into a majority black community, and I looked at the experience of white children as a minority. That led to other studies over the years of the minority experience itself and the influence with minority status on people's development.

SIBLEY: I understand that you went to John Hopkins as well. Why don't you say a word about that and how that has fit into your long career.

SCHAFFT: That actually is parallel to the development of the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists. As I was finishing my work at Catholic, Conrad Reining was getting ready to retire and he was very interested in pursuing post retirement possibilities in the consulting area, and so he and I were looking together at what other people around the country were doing in terms of becoming practicing anthropologists. At an SfAA meeting there was, [well?] perhaps it was in a triple A meeting, I don't remember, in 1975 or early seventy-six, there was a . . . a, a small meeting of practitioners who had gotten together in Arizona and they had formed a practitioner organization.

SIBLEY: I think Barry Bainton was involved . . .

SCHAFFT: That's right.

SIBLEY: . . . in [inaudible]

SCHAFFT: It was Barry Bainton and there was a woman, whose name I can't remember, unfortunately, who was very articulate, and they had a meeting and Conrad and I said well we could do that, we could do that

in Washington, we should do that. [Editor: Margaret Knight] So in the spring, it must have been the triple A meetings because it was in the fall, and in the spring, we started WAPA, and that was the spring of 1976, and Conrad was elected the first president, and Joan Volpe and I and another graduate student, Joan was a graduate student, and another graduate student named Suzanne something, whose last name I cannot remember, we were the three graduate students who helped him put that together and we got as many names as we could find of people working in the Washington area who were anthropologists.

SIBLEY: Were there other Catholic people involved with this project?

SCHAFFT: Huh, I think we were the I don't think there were other Catholic people – I don't think . . . Jay Ingersol took part and . . . Bill [Amade?] also took part.

SIBLEY: Bill [Amade?] was working through NIH probably at that point, was he not?

SCHAFFT: I think so but he had a part time appointment at Ameri . . . uh, at Catholic University.

SIBLEY: Yes . . .

SCHAFFT: Yeah.

SIBLEY: . . . I remember him well.

SCHAFFT: So . . . we started meeting once a month, and we literally passed a hat and took donations, brought some refreshments, and met in, at Catholic University in their lounges and from there it grew by leaps and bounds, almost immediately, and at the same time there was a very poor market for employment. So, as I graduated from Catholic, I didn't feel I was in a very good position to get a job right away. I was concerned about it and applied for some things but I also [inaudible] two little children at home and I wasn't quite convinced that I was ready to become a full time employee somewhere and really started looking at consulting possibilities, and all of the sudden I was . . . I, I had a lot of publicity around the topic of my dissertation and an article appeared in TIME magazine.

SIBLEY: Mm!

SCHAFFT: 'The . . . Unexpected Minority' and it also appeared on the front page of the Washington Post and many of those stories were . . . saying that white children had an impossible task to integrate into black schools and the integration wasn't working very well – which was not I wanted to say. My dissertation said that the minority status is a difficult one which needs strategies and coping mechanisms for anyone in the minority. At any rate, suddenly I was overwhelmed with many requests

to do small jobs and consulting for no money at all, and I think my role as a mother and community member in this particular school where I had done the dissertation led people to think that I was just being an endless volunteer. So I established my own consulting firm, set up rates . . . and decided that I would be a professional. That fit together with the idea of a professional anthropologist, and we had deliberately named our organization the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists, based on the idea that we were going to be professionally employed in the community, and that seemed to be very salient for the times. We also developed WAPA around a set of ground rules which remained in force for most of its history. One was that we would alternate between a male and a female president. So after Conrad, I was the next president.

SIBLEY: We seem to be maintaining that pretty well . . .

SCHAFFT: [Laughter]

SIBLEY: . . . through the years

SCHAFFT: And the brief . . .

SIBLEY: Our new president is going to be a woman.

SCHAFFT: Yeah, and the reason for that was that there were no women who were prominent . . .

SIBLEY: Right.

SCHAFFT: . . . in AAA and SFAA at that time.

SIBLEY: Quite right.

SCHAFFT: And although we had so many famous female anthropologists in the seventies, certainly, and the eighties, they were not making their way to the top of the list for nominations in our organizations. So WAPA's had a different version, and Conrad felt very strongly that we should never distinguish between people who were in academia and people who were not, and so we also tried to alternate between academics and non-academics in the presidency.

SIBLEY: This is an interesting point I think of WAPA that from the beginning it appears that WAPA attempted to reduce the tension between academic people and non academic practitioners although the terminology is still troubling a little bit, I think, of . . .

SCHAFFT: I think the terminology is troubling, and I think the . . . actual cultures are very different and they get in the way, as [inaudible] often does.

SIBLEY: Well, I think that's . . .

SCHAFFT: . . . in getting along together.

SIBLEY: I think that's exactly right. One of the things that I reflect on my own academic career is that the academic calendar is a very stultifying and rigid one, which makes it very difficult for non-academics to participate because the non-academic person on a time clock can't simply have the same leisure to organize time which the academic person frequently can. And on the other hand, one of the things that irritated me about my academic colleagues was that if a person didn't have the ultimate PhD degree, they couldn't be considered legitimate teachers, or practitioners, or, or . . . or people who contribute something significant to the academic enterprise and I think that tension still, still results.

SCHAFFT: I think that, that's a large deterrent, but beyond that, the tensions I found, as a practicing anthropologist, have involved the lack of ownership of one's own work, working as a practitioner,. Someone else owns the research. It can be the consulting firm, it can be a government agency, but the ability to publish off of anything that one has spent years working on is extremely limited, and so one doesn't have the same resume, the same CV as others and . . . therefore really is never on a, on a level playing [field] with, with anyone else, and many of us would like to go back and forth between academia and practicing anthropology and it makes it difficult for us.

SIBLEY: Have you had any success in negotiating this business of publication rights with people who are financing your applied research?

SCHAFFT: Absolutely not.

SIBLEY: Because that's . . .

SCHAFFT: And I have tried.

SIBLEY: . . . consistent issue.

SCHAFFT: Yeah. And it, it . . . the decision makers are not the people one works with. The decision makers are much more removed from the research than the ones one is working with in . . . a, a cooperative venture, and the ability to get their permission to publish is, is so politically blatant that it's virtually impossible, so I've never have any, any luck with that at all and it's been a real, a real struggle to have the kinds of publications I wanted to have despite strategies to get around it and do other things, but not what I would have preferred.

SIBLEY: Well, in your recent work with Holocaust victims and the treatment of Polish and other populations by Nazi doctors is much more independent I take it, and something that you have obviously been able to publish about.

SCHAFFT: I, I did my recent work . . . issues regarding World War II after I stopped working as a consultant, and it has been a way for me to re-enter academia and now, the last – well since the eighties I have had a position at American University as the Applied Anthropologist in Residence, which is a courtesy appointment, but it has certainly well [worked] well] in getting me into academic circles that I wanted to enter in Europe. But in the past few years, I've re-entered teaching at American University in conjunction with that. I've enjoyed it very much and have really turned to a more academic career since 1990, which is now about fifteen years, sixteen years.

SIBLEY: Do you teach regularly?

SCHAFFT: I've been teaching regularly the last two years.

SIBLEY: Oh, I didn't realize you had teaching experience.

SCHAFFT: But not full time just a course . . .

SIBLEY: Yeah.

SCHAFFT: . . . a semester. And I've been able to develop my own courses so I've been teaching about genocide and violence and the holocaust for now.

SIBLEY: Let me turn now for a moment, if we may, a little bit about the evolution of WAPA. My involvement with WAPA started almost at the end of 1970 when I had an appointment with the United States Environmental Protection agency and I was invited to speak at a WAPA meeting and as I recall, I reflected on my very happy experience with the Environmental Protection Agency and really took some of the anthropologists to task a little bit, who were, it seem to me, almost totally consumed with the need to do research and their unwillingness to apply their anthropological skills to other kinds of activities in government for example, where most of the jobs were held by political scientists, economists and others who were both skilled and happy with being administrators and doing programmatic work and I still have that feeling [chuckle] that . . .

SCHAFFT: Well . . .

SIBLEY: . . . anthropologists sometimes . . .

SCHAFFT: . . . it's, it's a disconnect.

SIBLEY: . . . do the mo . . . selves a disservice by refusing to do other than pure . . . research kinds of things.

SCHAFFT: Well the disconnect between academia and the professional world and, I think [coughing sound] it has a lot to do with status, considerations, and . . . also the ability to continue doing what you were trained to do and so for many people that it, it is a big jump

and it's a culture shift between working as a, as a researcher and having your independent agenda and working as a cooperative member of, of a group or an agency and that's really difficult. We tried to bridge that by giving workshops at meetings for many years, and Kirk Gray and I developed one for many years, being a professional anthropologist, being a consultant . . . and then Bob Wulff developed one in working for the federal government and we all stress those very issues that you just brought up, and I remember having worked very hard at an interactive workshop one day and at the end two young women from the University of Chicago stood up and said: 'Yes! But is it anthropology?' And, you know, we had just been discussing how it was [chuckle] anthropology . .

SIBLEY: Well . . .

SCHAFFT: . . . couldn't be anthropology, whatever.

SIBLEY: Uh, uh.

SCHAFFT: They still, you know, just felt that it really wasn't.

SIBLEY: Well I recall very poignantly a talk with my late wife Barbara Sibley gave at an anthropology meeting in which she talked about her experience working in an engineering firm in Cleveland and pointing out that there was some very raw opportunities and I also recall very vividly more than one anthropologist getting up, and one particularly in tears saying, you know, this is essentially evil work and you mustn't do this. And it was to me so out of tune with the realities of the real world that it reflex the kind of disconnect I think still in academic anthropology, particularly among some of our de-constructionist friends who don't seem to be connecting with what's actually going on either in the world or in the minds of their undergraduate and graduate students who I think have a real sense of need to connect with what's going on around them.

SCHAFFT: I did wonder if the . . . failure in our analysis of the situation occurs in that we don't look at the compromises which one has to make both in practice and in academia and believe me there are a lots and lots of compromises one makes in academia.

SIBLEY: Indeed!

SCHAFFT: And they may be a little more obvious, and a little more . . . immediate when one is in practice.

SIBLEY: Well, I think that's right and I spent close to my thirty-four thirty-five years in academia trying to resolves some of these compromises and then paid the price!

SCHAFFT: Mm-mm.

SIBLEY: Because . . . the private do practice and to try to bridge different disciplines on important problems gets flack from everybody on all sides of the issues [chuckle]

SCHAFFT: That's right.

SIBLEY: You can't be correct.

SCHAFFT: Right.

SIBLEY: And . . . but WAPA has changed and th . . . it has changed in large part, I think because of changes in the economy and changes in perceptions of anthropology as a useful discipline. I'd like you to reflect a little bit, if you would, on your feelings about how for attitudes of the anthropological colleagues in WAPA changed over the years with respect with job possibilities and to their own sense of . . . fulfillment in whatever work place they're in.

SCHAFFT: Oh I think we did many things that helped make those changes and I think WAPA was really a, an educational . . . organization in many respects. Not only did we have the workshops, but our monthly meetings stressed what people were actually doing and able to do and what their frustrations were. A, a recurring theme for certainly twenty years or more has been how do anthropologists influence policy and that is constantly coming back in new forms and many of us got really very tired of that topic [inaudible]. It's something that everybody was very, very concerned about and reflected a, a naivety about how policy is made, and policy is not made in think tanks, policy is an inter, interactive process and often anthropologists aren't in the positions to make policy. In the beginning we also were very concerned about helping people to find jobs outside of academia because the job market was so poor in the seventies and eighties.

SIBLEY: That's right.

SCHAFFT: And we had our own job service. Charlotte Miller and I worked on that for many years and then other people took that over, and we collected information about where jobs were to be had. I remember I placed Mickey Crespi in her National Park Service job for which she became legitimately well known and famous and . . .

SIBLEY: [Inaudible]

SCHAFFT: . . . was very active and productive. And I also helped Ruth Cernea find a job and [inaudible] and other people who had long careers in their, in their jobs, and we simply combed every possibility and tried to match everyone, but we also met with all the job hunters and talked to them about how to build a resume that wasn't academically based, how to do interviewing, how to present oneself, how

to look like one would be a cooperative member of a, of a team rather than being an, an iconoclastic anthropologist. I remember Kirk Gray telling the story many times about being interviewed at random. The interviewer said to him, 'Oh you're an anthropologist! You're the guys who squat naked by camp fires!'

SIBLEY: [Laughter]

SCHAFFT: And that's the kind of perception we were always battling that we were . . .

SIBLEY: Where else do you pick up stones?

SCHAFFT: . . . some strange places [Laughter]. We were a strange breed. But I always use the word anthropologist, and I think a lot of other people did too and we I . . . we informed many people that anthropology was okay and that we were employable and I think WAPA had a very large influence in enlarging the field of opportunities, both from the employers' perspective and from the anthropologists' perspective about what was appropriate.

SIBLEY: Given this history of the evolution of the organization of, where does WAPA stand now and what can . . . do you think it can do best to, to continue to attract the interest of practitioners and academic people . . . now and in the future? Because, clearly, it is not 1970, and there're lots of anthropologists who're employed usefully both in academia and, and, and enormous variety of jobs abroad and domestically, and it presents, it seems to me, some new kinds of opportunities and problems perhaps I'd like to be interested in your perspective about that?

SCHAFFT: Well we had, in the . . . eighties a few very charismatic members, Bob Wulff and Kirk Gray in particular. We also had leadership from Shirley Fiske and Setha Lowe and Erve Chambers and George Roth and other top, top ranked anthropologists in the United States, and they created a real core around which the organization quickly built. They also formed a social network for themselves, and they were all very good friends and socialized together and, and when WAPA had parties with this core of the group, everyone felt that, that it was rather special to be with these very dynamic people. They eventually went on to other interests and developed other networks and WAPA became more secondary to them, and I think they were not replaced. That often happens to organizations. The, the, that core group was not really replaced by another dynamic charismatic group of people who could attract the membership in the same way. I think Washington became a more difficult city to maneuver in the evening

and so nighttime meetings became more difficult to arrange downtown in Washington.

SIBLEY: Hum.

SCHAFFT: People were more hesitant to go out at night for a while. I think that's, that goes, that comes and goes, but I think it is a factor and as the membership aged, I think there was less commitment to going out at night to go to the meetings, and that's something we've never really looked at, but I think it was . . .

SIBLEY: That's a very interesting point. I wonder how that . . .

SCHAFFT: I think it is a factor.

SIBLEY: . . . might speak to the issue of what the organizing body of WAPA should do to keep attracting an interest if indeed there is a reason why WAPA should continue to do that sort of thing.

SCHAFFT: Yeah. Well, I think some of the issues have been solved. I think there's no longer the feeling that one can't enter a non-academic position and have a respectful career, respected career that is pretty well done away with today.

SIBLEY: But that may reduce the need for the support group.

SCHAFFT: Yeah, and that may reduce the need for WAPA. I think the aging of the core group has meant that it has less to say to students and to young people entering into the field and there is . . . I would be interested to look at an age pyramid of, of WAPA. My feeling is that there are a large number of older people and a large number of students and not so many in the middle, not so many mid level people attending WAPA meetings. I don't know if that's true [inaudible]

SIBLEY: That's an interesting . . .

SCHAFFT: I wouldn't be . . .

SIBLEY: . . . interesting question.

SCHAFFT: I wouldn't be surprised . . . whether WAPA fulfills any social functions anymore for people is also a question – do people need WAPA for socializing, and do they need WAPA for making friendships on for [developing the] idea of anthropology as a positive force in the community, and maybe WAPA needs to look at new issues, [inaudible] how can we be a factor in the way the world is developing, climate change, violence . . . conflict resolution. I think that unless we adapt ourselves to current big issues, perhaps it isn't going to fill the needs that it once did.

SIBLEY: Well I think that may be an interesting point, it's going to be interesting to watch WAPA's program during the coming year because apparently the new management [group?] is going to have less formal

evening meetings but a larger number of somewhat more focused subsets meetings. It will be interesting to see whether that works and who it attracts and for what reasons. I found personally that the monthly meeting is sort of a fun thing because I see old friends, but the older I get, the older my friends become and . . .

SCHAFFT: Yeah.

SIBLEY: . . . some of them have disappeared, unfortunately.

SCHAFFT: Right.

SIBLEY: And . . . it's more and more difficult to connect with the younger ones although I think many of them are very receptive to the association, if we spend the time to cultivate them and talk with them.

SCHAFFT: Right, and I, I think when we see our old friends only once a month, we are anxious to speak to our old friends.

SIBLEY: We do.

SCHAFFT: And it's, it's an effort to be as open as we need to be to, to build the membership.

SIBLEY: Right.

SCHAFFT: But . . .

[End Tape 1, Side 1]

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

SIBLEY: [The side?] we know that we are commencing. That was a bit of a surprise. I thought I was reading the reel and I had lots of tape left but let's stop for a moment and see if we're . . .

[Pause]

SIBLEY: Okay, we're all right.

SCHAFFT: [Inaudible] So maybe what the older people need to do is form their own discussion party circuit or whatever and, and do something together and then try to get everybody together for other events or maybe not, I don't know, I don't have a strong opinion about it. I know that it's harder for me to make monthly meetings but when I go I always enjoy it.

SIBLEY: Yeah, me too, and I'm delighted you mentioned Kirk Gray. Is he still in the area and available to talk with us?

SCHAFFT: I don't know.

SIBLEY: Because I think he would a person who should be interviewed. I hadn't thought much about him but Bob Wulff is expressing interest in talking about the history and I'm sure that would complement nicely what you have had to say.

SCHAFFT: My feeling about Bob Wulff is that he is really one of the really extraordinary people in anthropology. He . . . combines a very charismatic personality with a wide, wide range of interests and abilities and always was open to producing more and more activity within WAPA, not all [of it?] was successful, but he was such a dynamic force he really pulled the organization along . . .

SIBLEY: Well . . .

SCHAFFT: . . . during the years.

SIBLEY: He's expressed the willingness to work with us on this next round of the Praxis Award which delights him very much and he's had an extraordinary career in the business world as well because he's now with some major land development corporation after his career with the federal government. So he's been a multi faceted person – but I think anthropology still informs what he does.

SCHAFFT: Right.

SIBLEY: And I think he thinks so too.

SCHAFFT: Mm-mm.

SIBLEY: Well, maybe we should stop here at the moment and . . . and . . . maybe we can look at this tape and, and see whether they're other kinds of questions, maybe you have some final comments and reflections on this whole history, it's been a long one for you?

SCHAFFT: I think it's, it's been a long history for me, it spans thirty years . . .

SIBLEY: Right.

SCHAFFT: . . . or so, and . . . it's been the basis of many of my best friendships and my best relationships, and it's been a support for . . . times when, career wise, there didn't seem to be a lot of support out there. It's always been a very fine supportive organization as well as the people within it, but the organization itself has offered venue, a venue for, for making statements, for developing a resume for developing a career path and it's provided with lots and lots of . . . broadening experiences through discussions with other people and their work and what they've been able to do, what their ideas are, things that would be lost within agency life became real through WAPA, through our ability to step forward and explain to others what we're doing, what we're

accomplishing, what our frustrations are, where we need to go further, and that's been invaluable, 'wouldn't trade it for the world.

SIBLEY: One of the things that . . . I learned from one of our graduate school mentor's Sol Tax, was that anthropology is truly relevant for any human activity anywhere in the world and we have to persuade ourselves of that and still try to articulate that so that the administrators, the policy makers can understand it. On the other hand I think anthropologists have to continue to try to learn what faces the policy makers, time constraints, budgetary constraints, and the need for immediate directives rather than the very nice academic comment, more research is need, which can sometimes be very self defeating
[inaudible]

SCHAFFT: I think also they're political concerns . . .

SIBLEY: Oh [inaudible]!

SCHAFFT: what will fly, you know, what will get them fired, what will get them an accolade. You know these things have not been insignificant.

SIBLEY: Specially in these days of demands for loyalty above all.

SCHAFFT: Right.

SIBLEY: Well, I think maybe this is a good point to stop at the moment. Thanks to . . . Gretchen Schafft for her willingness to be interviewed. I will review this tape, and, and perhaps have additional questions as we move on to interview Bob Wulff and perhaps others in this enterprise of learning about WAPA's history. Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]