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Apr 20, 2010 By Meg Sullivan

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Untold stories of early environmentalists come alive in oral histories

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A sign warns beachgoers at Cabrillo Beach of pollution in 1973. Many of the early leaders of Los Angeles' environmental movement were housewives and mothers, educated women motivated to take action, according to Jane Collings, producer of a series of oral histories that trace the growth of L.A.'s environmental movement. Photos from the Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive.

Riverside activist Penny Newman was asked to leave her church because a campaign she was waging against a toxic waste dump in town made other church members uncomfortable. Those members included the family that owned the dump.

Early on, TreePeople founder Andy Lipkis wondered why he was having trouble retaining volunteers for reforestation efforts. The U.S. Forest Service, it turned out, was treating the do-gooders like the labor force they were used to working with – prison inmates.

While being sworn in as an early member of California's Air Resources Board in 1972, Gladys Meade thumbed her nose at the dress code instituted by then-Gov. Ronald Reagan and wore a pantsuit.

While it's popular to be green these days, the pioneers of the Southern California environmental movement can still recall the early trials and tribulations of being ahead of a wave of environmental consciousness that would eventually sweep the nation. And they are talking about it in a new series of oral histories.

"Environmental Activism in Los Angeles" features 25 in-depth oral histories with local environmentalists, half of which will be unveiled on Thursday, April 22, on Earth Day. Their accounts will be posted online both as written transcripts and digital recordings at the [UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research](#).

With an exclusive focus on Southern California's homegrown environmental groups and leaders, the series is believed to be the first collection of oral histories of a regional environmental movement.

"Southern California has the largest, most comprehensive environmental movement in the U.S., and it's tackled some of the country's thorniest environmental problems using some of the most sophisticated approaches in environmental activism," said Jane Collings, the producer of the series and the principal editor at the center. "The Los Angeles

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environmental movement is really distinctive, and its story needed to be told.”

The inside scoop

Consisting of more 130 hours of interviews and 5,000 pages of transcripts, the series provides an insider’s perspective on such environmental trends as air and water quality management, wetland restoration, environmental justice and sustainable living experiments.

Collings’ interviews typically ran no longer than 90 minutes a session, but she had to return repeatedly to nail down complete life stories. She went back to one subject nine times. “Putting together a series like this requires enormous patience and perseverance,” said Teresa Barnett, head of the Center for Oral History Research. “We’re getting life experiences, not sound bites.”



**Jane Collings, producer of
"Environmental Activism in Los Angeles."**



A smoggy day in Elysian Park in 1980.

You’ll learn, for example, the incredible story behind the discovery of smog: It happened at CalTech while researchers were exploring ways to make canned pineapple smell fresher.

You’ll find the poignant details on the grave medical problems that radicalized residents of local port communities and Glen Avon, the small Riverside town that is home to the now defunct Stringfellow acid disposal pits. And you’ll learn about the role of Hollywood producers, writers and other movers and shakers.

Additional groups represented in the series include Communities for a Better Environment, which targets environmental issues in poor and working-class communities; Friends of the Los Angeles River, which is devoted to restoring the waterway; the (Trade, Health, Environment) Impact Project, which fights health and environmental impacts associated with Los Angeles and Long Beach ports; L.A. Eco-Village, a community of 500 residents dedicated to living according to sustainable principles; Long Beach Port Teamsters’ efforts on behalf of the Clean Trucks Program, a push to replace aging big rigs with less polluting models; and the Wetlands Action Network, a group dedicated to preserving and restoring the Ballona Wetlands.

Also telling their stories are Eco-Village founder Lois Arkin, Ballona wetlands activist Marcia Hanscom and Julia Russell, who for two decades has opened her Los Feliz home for tours of sustainable living on a residential scale.

The series is part of a larger effort by the Center for Oral History Research to tell the story of local social movements, including community-building in the wake of the Watts civil unrest and community-organizing among Korean American immigrants and Mexican Americans.

Local activists on the frontline

“Environmental Activism” targeted only players active in locally formed and controlled organizations – not groups with a larger reach such as the Sierra Club and the National Resource Defense Council. “The story of nationwide environmental groups deserves to be told, but it’s a different story from the one we wanted to tell,” Collings said. “The UCLA Library’s Center for Oral History Resources is dedicated to telling the story of our region.”

The series’ timing was determined by the advancing age of the movement’s old guard, whose members first got involved in the early 1960s. Ellen Stern Harris, sometimes called the mother of L.A.’s environmental movement, died two years before the project started. And Heal the Bay founder Dorothy Green, the series’ first interview subject, died not long after telling her story. Meade, who was instrumental in the establishment of the Air Quality Management District, had retired from public service by the time she was interviewed.

“We wanted to get this first, seminal generation before it was too late,” said Collings.

A movement of housewives

Collings was a natural for the series because of her track record in documenting the women’s movement, including the founding of UCLA’s Women’s Studies Program and an ongoing series on women filmmakers.



Cranes load freight containers onto a cargo ship at the Port of Los Angeles in 1986. Air pollution at the port would eventually become a concern.

"A lot of the early leaders of Los Angeles' environmental movement were housewives," said Collings. "They were educated women who knew how to get things done, but they didn't have jobs. So they had the time and skills to throw themselves into issues nobody else was thinking about."

The series illustrates subtle but profound changes in the types of activists and their causes. While educated women from comfortable economic backgrounds initially led the charge, a less privileged group of women emerged early on, Collings found. Newman and other Riverside County mothers from working-class backgrounds mobilized after they noticed a troubling spate of illnesses among their children that they ascribed to the Stringfellow acid disposal pits, now a Superfund site.

A change in leadership

Toward the late 1960s, the movement surged with an influx of men with backgrounds in the anti-war and counterculture movements, including Lipkis and Lewis MacAdams, a poet and an early advocate for revitalizing the Los Angeles River, Collings said. Whereas the earlier group had been motivated largely by health concerns, this new group brought an artistic perspective to the cause, Collings found. With the emergence of concerns around wetlands as typified by the 1980s quest to preserve the Ballona wetlands, the environmental movement started to take on a spiritual cast, she explained.

"These activists were concerned about the health of that environment, but they also mentioned how spiritually renewing it is for people to be able to come to these spaces," Collings said.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a new group of activists joined the fray, she found. Working-class people of color and immigrants, they started to mobilize around health and environmental impacts from the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and the huge trucking and rail operations that service the ports. The movement had, by far, its largest geographic spread, stretching from the ports to Riverside cargo storage facilities.

Along the way, what had once been a grassroots thrust has become increasingly professionalized, Collings found. On several occasions, environmental pioneers voice concerns of being pushed aside by environmental specialists with finely honed technical, legal and marketing skills. But as much as the movement has evolved, it never strays far from the leadership of mothers, Collings said.

"The canaries in the coal mine tend to be children," said Collings, herself a mother of two. "They're the ones who tend to show signs of contamination, which then motivates their mother to activism."

A powerful influence

The series, which took some four years to complete, had a powerful influence on Collings. Already a frequent user of mass transit, Collings found herself increasingly aware of the environmental toll of consumerism. She cut back on purchases and started, where possible, to fill needs with gently used items.

"I don't think I'll ever be the same," she said.

Yet for all the insight that the series gave her, it left her more mystified than ever on at least one score.

"I just can't explain why some people become activists," she conceded. "Many people in these communities went through the same experiences, and they weren't stepping up and performing these almost heroic actions. Some people just have the capacity to be extraordinary. I guess that sounds like a Hollywood movie, but it's true."

See the "Environmental Activism in Los Angeles" collection by clicking [here](#).



Patches of oil washed ashore at Santa Monica in 1969, apparently from a leaking Santa Barbara well. Union Oil Co., while not admitting responsibility, sent a crew to begin cleanup.

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