CJB: My name is Corey Braun. I work for the Center for Regional History at San Diego State University. The following is an interview with Robert J. Sullivan who joined the Zoological Society's Board of Trustees in 1935. The interview is part of an oral history project of the Zoological Society of San Diego which is a collaborative effort between the Zoological Society and the Center for Regional History. The date of the interview is March 29, 1984. It is being conducted in Mr. Sullivan's home and is being videotaped. First question, I'd like you to tell something about your background and how your family came to arrive in San Diego.

RJS: My mother and dad were born in Traverse City, Michigan. My dad's father was in the lumber business in Cedar, Michigan, and my mother's father was in the lumber business in Kingsley, Michigan. They both went to Traverse City High School and that's where they met. They were married in Traverse City. Then my granddad sold out his shingle mill in Cedar and decided he'd come west and enjoy retired life. He came to San Diego around 1910 and he lived with retirement for about six months. Then he went out and bought Sullivan Hardwood Lumber Co., or that is, he subsequently named it Sullivan Hardwood Lumber, so he'd have some way to keep busy. His two sons—my dad, Herbert, and Uncle Jerry—were going to forestry school, called the Biltmore Forest School back in Asheville, North Carolina, and subsequently went over to Germany to the Black Forest where they both studied forestry and got pretty adept at that. Granddad decided that he needed help, so he summoned the two boys out here to help him, and that's when my family—Dad and Mother—moved to San Diego, California. They bought a house up here on 3762 First Avenue, which is still there and looks very nice to this day, and proceeded to raise three children, myself, my brother and sister. When they came to San Diego, both of them went to work for my grandfather. My uncle, being the eldest son in an Irish family was sort of lead man in it, so there wasn't enough business really for the three of them. So, my dad went over to Benson Lumber Co., which was the logging corporation right on San Diego Bay that used to bring in big
log rafts and saw them into lumber. My dad worked for Benson Lumber for several years until the Sullivan Hardwood Company grew large enough to support them all. At which time they bought Western Lumber Co., which was down on Market Street, and my father proceeded to run that business. My uncle managed the Sullivan Hardwood Co. with Granddad in charge of it all.

CJB: When were you married, and what is your wife's name?

RJS: August 14, 1933. Her maiden name is Lettie Knight. She was born in Washington D.C. Her dad worked for the government in procurement for the Airforce before it became the Airforce. They set up this big establishment on North Island in San Diego known as Rockwell Field and transferred him out here. She was only, I believe, two years old, so they moved to San Diego about 1918. He worked at Rockwell Field until his retirement, at which time he moved up to Redondo Beach and puttered around. He had a couple of interesting jobs to keep him busy.

CJB: Where in San Diego where you born?

RJS: I was born right here at Mercy Hospital, February, 1913. It was called St. Joseph's at that time and was at the corner of Sixth and University. Subsequently it became Mercy Hospital and moved up the way a bit. At that time the family was living over here on the 3700 block of First Avenue.

CJB: Could you give a brief history of your educational background?

RJS: Somehow, my folks' friends got them interested in sending me to a military school at the tender age of sixth grade, and I went up to Los Angeles and attended the Page Military Academy. I liked the military life and so when I got through with Page Military, which ended with the eighth grade, I came on down to San Diego and went to the Army and Navy Academy in Pacific Beach. I went to San Diego Army and Navy all through my high school years and graduated in 1930. Then went to San Diego State, which was then located on Park Boulevard and El Cajon Boulevard. During my first year, they proceeded to move the campus out to where it is now, and I kept on going from there. I graduated from San Diego State College it way out on El Cajon Boulevard. San Diego State became a University. But, I was called then, and has since become a University. I didn't graduate because the pressure got too thick. My father passed away and I had to go to work. So, I went for the period of about a year to what we call Kelsey-Jenney Commercial College, so I could learn to do something besides read literature and all that sort of stuff. I got pretty well-founded in accounting and business letters and all that...
sort of thing. Then I went to work for my uncle at Sullivan Hardwood Lumber Company in 1933.

CJB: Then you worked there how long?

RJS: I worked there for 45 years. In 1969, Western Lumber and Sullivan Hardwood were sold to Boise Cascade Corporation, a big corporation operating lumber mills and paper plants and all that sort of thing, adding to their retail chain of outlets in a lot of states. They took us over in 1969, at which time I went from Sullivan Hardwood Lumber down to Western Lumber and worked in sales until my retirement in 1978.

CJB: What's your earliest recollection of the Zoo?

RJS: My earliest recollection was when the old lion cages and things like that were located along Park Boulevard as a part of the 1915 Exposition, which was about the same time that Dr. Harry discovered the lions and created the Zoo. My granddad used to take me over, I vaguely remember, to the old Midway of the Exposition of 1915 and we used to ride a thing called the Toadstool, which turned around and around and finally ejected you out onto the street. Then we'd go over and look at the lions. I think that was my first interest in animals and the Zoo, even before it was a zoo really.

CJB: What was it that made you want to become a part of the Zoo, to become involved?

RJS: Well, it grew on me as I went along through school. I was always interested in the place over there. I had no connections at that time. One of my dad's best friends was Ted Mercier, who was President of the San Diego and Arizona Railway and he was on the Zoo Board. He knew I was interested, and he and my father would get together over there a number of times. Then Mr. Mercier was made President of the Southern Pacific Railway Company and had to move to San Francisco and that's when he recommended me to fill the vacancy on the Zoo Board of Directors at the San Diego Zoo. I was not very old at the time, but I was quite interested and that's when it happened. I attended my first Board of Trustees meeting at the Zoo March 6, 1935 and I've hardly missed a meeting since.

Currently, I'm on the Board of Directors, and am Chairman of the Membership Committee, and am Vice Chairman of the Research Committee. I am very active on the Zoo Board and in Zoo affairs.

CJB: And you served as the Treasurer?
RJS: I've been everything. I was Treasurer, Secretary, Vice President, President. My three years of Presidency were around 1950. So, I've been in every office. Since then, I think I've filled in a year or two as a Treasurer or a Secretary when we needed signatures and things like that, but I've always been on the Board of Directors from which those officers are chosen.

CJB: Do you remember any particular issues at the Zoo when you were Treasurer?

RJS: Well we had things like the O'Rourke Zoological Institute which gave us a little trouble for a while. O'Rourke was occupying a building on the Zoo grounds actually which he inherited from the Exposition and he called it the O'Rourke Zoological Institute. He and Dr. Wegeforth were quite heavy rivals. Subsequently that was solved, but it was a problem for a while. O'Rourke would never give in to Dr. Wegeforth. When he decided to retire from the zoological thing himself, he turned the building over to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who proceeded to occupy it and it became a problem for the Zoo, this social outfit on the Zoo grounds. It took several years but the building was built for them. But this disorganized the tennis set because we had to move a bunch of fine tennis courts open to the public to make room for the Veterans' building. Everybody was mad at each other for a while. But then they settled the tennis players over on Morley Field. So now everything is settled down, quietly in the Zoo environs.
ship down here called the Star of India, a three-masted schooner, which had been given to the Zoo by I forget who, and the problem was what to do with it. The schooner was where Navy Field was, and it was a problem for a few years. We decided that we might give it to Oakley Hall, who ran the harbor services on small boats, give it to him for a fishing barge. We might give it for a truant boys home, or give it to Captain Gene Storrs for his Sea Scouts. So, that was a problem for a while. I think we finally finished it by just giving it away to the City and subsequently it has become the Maritime Museum here. Dr. Wegeforth had always wanted to have an aquarium. For years he worked real hard to get an aquarium in connection with that Star of India, but he could never get the financing that was necessary and finally the idea was given up. Of course, Sea World has done a huge job on that since.

CJB: When was the Star of India incident?

RJS: Well, we had the Star of India in 1935. Now, I don't remember exactly what date we got rid of it, but it wasn't that many years after '35 that we had to do something with it. It was too expensive to maintain. We were afraid that it would sink and land on the bottom of the Bay and then we would have a problem.

CJB: What do you remember happening when you were President?

RJS: Well, back in those earlier days, before Charlie Schroeder, there were interesting little things that happened. Like the Barnes Circus gave us a bull elephant, another problem. Bull elephants are rather difficult to handle!

We created a Building Committee because we had a zoo full of dusty roads and pretty old things that needed a lot of doing. So, the Building Committee started working with Les [Lester] Olmstead as the Chairman, and I was on the Committee. We proceeded on some developments for the place, and ultimately got to the construction of the Klauber Reptile House, which was our first really fine building.

At the time we had a little cafe that was run by a fella named Howard Miner, who also had fishing boats out on the harbor. Howard wasn't too interested in the Zoo cafe bit. We decided that we would take one of the old Exposition buildings and convert it into a cafe. We chose

1The Star of India was purchased in 1927 with funds donated by James Wood Coffroth, owner of the Foreign Club and Agua Caliente Race Track in Tijuana. (See Star of India: the Log of an Iron Ship. Jerry MacMullen, 1961.)
the old reptile building. Our veterinarians always said it wasn't healthy for snakes, so let the people eat in it. So, we converted it into a pretty good little restaurant and it ran there for a number of years until we finally tore it down and built the present restaurant in the Administration section.

We created our first Finance Committee in 1936. Frank Spalding, Les Olmstead and myself would supervise expenditures and assist in making a budget to control our finances. Due to the poor Exposition attendance, we had a problem with financial troubles. So, that committee got the thing on a proper track and properly budgeted. We began charging a little more admission and getting things going straight again.

CJR: Do you remember any specific activities or campaigns that you did to raise money for the Zoo, or to increase membership?

RJS: The first campaign was in November of 1935. Mr. Dustin was our fund raiser. We wanted to raise $50,000 dollars for the purchase of animals to inhabit the African animal mesa. The Junior Chamber of Commerce helped sponsor this project. Their chairman of the Junior Chamber was Fred Kunzel, who subsequently became a judge of the Superior Court and who, subsequently became a member of the Board of the Zoo on which he served until his death. So, that was a fairly successful campaign, kind of the first time we really had any real outside effort to raise funds. Up until then, it was anybody Dr. Harry Wegeforth could meet, who he thought he could tap for funds, and there were a number of them.

In July, 1937, we had an interesting thing happen. We had a deal going with the Federal Music Project, which was part of the WPA which at that time was employing many people affected by the Depression. Incidentally, the WPA labor projects did many things for the Zoo in rebuilding roads and surfacing and all sorts of building projects. They had this music project to employ musicians and singers who were out of work, and so forth. In July '37 we put on a show in the bowl called the Gay Grenadiers, a musical sponsored by the Federal Music Project of the WPA, and the San Diego Zoo. At that time, we had an arrangement for a 60/40 cut, that is, we would get 60% of the admission ticket and the WPA would get 40%. So, the Zoo appointed me as the liaison with this WPA music project. This was really the premiere of Starlight music project. This was really the premiere of Starlight Opera because it was from this project that Starlight was born in 1946, some years later.

After World War II came along everything like the WPA was disbanded for the war, and most of the singers went off to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and all to war, or to entertainment groups for the soldiers and
and technical people came back to San Diego and they were interested in revitalizing this WPA-type project, but there was no WPA. So, I got together with Bill Dean, who was the producer of the WPA project, and there was Bruno Ushier, who was the California Representative, and several other people of management were here, and we decided that we ought to start one of our own for San Diego. So, we called for auditions. We put a little ad out that we were going to have auditions, and Harry Calloway of Thearles' Music gave us this auditorium down on 7th and Broadway. Two hundred and fifty people showed up to audition, including singers, dancers, actors, piano players, all sorts of people. One of the ladies jumped up and volunteered to be an accompanist, so she sat down at the piano and we proceeded to hear a lot of people sing and decided right then that we'd start rehearsals on the Mikado, because we could get it practically free. I think we had to pay $200 for the rental of the books and music from a library in Los Angeles, and there were no royalties. So with that, we put 100 of these people to work in a chorus and acting group and dressed up the Mikado which we proceeded to put on in the Zoo Bowl in 1946. So that's where Starlight started, incorporated as a San Diego Civic Light Opera Association with the nickname, Starlight Under the Stars.

CJB: How long were the performances in the Zoo Bowl?

RJS: We did it in 1946 and '47, two summers in the Zoo Bowl and then our crowd had grown, and the Zoo Bowl only seated 1200 people at the time. We asked the Zoo Board if they wouldn't give us an increase in the seating capacity. There was a way to expand the Bowl outward and upward, but the Zoo Board decided at the time that show business was not to their best interest, so they wouldn't do it. At that time, Starlight proceeded to negotiate for what was then known as the Ford Bowl in Balboa Park. In 1948, they opened in the Ford Bowl and proceeded from there.

CJB: Are you still actively involved?

RJS: I'm still on the Board. I was President of the Starlight for the first fifteen years and then subsequently, I've been on the Board of Directors, ex-officio ever since.

CJB: You were also the President of the San Diego Symphony?

RJS: I was President of the San Diego Symphony in 1969, I think it was. It was a very difficult year, and I was so involved in my work.
I got back on to the Board where I didn't have so much responsibility. The Symphony, as usual, was having problems with finances, and one thing they needed badly was somebody with plenty of time to devote to help finance it.

CJB: Was there any relationship between your interest in the Symphony and the Zoo and the Starlight Opera?

RJS: I guess you might say I was interested in show business because they all three were great shows. Subsequently, I was also a member of the Globe Theater Board of Directors. I was on the Globe a number of years. My term expired three years ago and I decided that I'd better let it expire because I was having too many things to do in my peaceful retirement years. But, I did have a wonderful year in helping to build a new Old Globe Theater. The Board made me a liaison with the building contractor and the architect. Building that theater was quite an experience. I got a couple of suitcases worth of paperwork out of that one. I had to okay every change order and check that everything was being done on schedule. It was quite a problem, but it came out beautifully. Show business has been an interesting thing to me, and getting involved with running several of them was a big experience. My favorite unpaid jobs!

CJB: You once said that the Zoo is one of the greatest shows on earth.

RJS: Well, it's certainly one of the greatest shows in an animal exhibit on earth, and I don't believe there are many zoos that can challenge that. We've always made it a point to expand it in quality as well as quantity and try to maintain a fine force of people running it as we could. I think there's a lot of knowledge among them in all forms of work: research, keepers, food handlers, merchandisers—all under the Zoo's own control.

CJB: You also have an interest in the advancement and development of education. What do you think is the Zoo's role?

RJS: Well, I think the Zoo's Education Department is really outstanding. We've been very fortunate in having some excellent people managing it. Dr. Charles McLaughlin, who

8San Diego's Old Globe Theater was destroyed by arson in 1978, and was rebuilt and opened in 1982.
was the previous Education man and Zoo Curator, has now become the head of the San Diego Natural History Museum. Then Pegi Harvey came in and she has done a fine job of organizing a staff of teachers and various programs, starting with the Kinderzoo for little kids 4-6 or 7 years of age, and now the Junior Zoo, a program for older kids. Then we have a huge summer program which involves thousands of children, plus the thousands of children we bring to the Zoo all year long on our bus---I believe every second grade in San Diego attends the Zoo; a lot of the public schools and some of the private schools take part. All together, we're contributing a lot of fine knowledge to a lot of children. Of course they're our future zoo keepers too.

CJB: Do you think the Zoo's main function is more towards entertainment or education?

RJS: Well, the entertainment is necessary because there are not enough people who would go constantly just to view animals. We probably have 400,000-500,000 people attend a year and they may go once to see the animals, but by having the entertainment we find they'll come several times, and everytime a person goes through the Zoo gates there is a per capita income created. They buy things to eat, things to send to their friends, souveniers and all sorts of goodies, as well as the six or seven or eight dollars per head. So, we try to keep the entertainment on a high level, so it isn't trashy in any way. Of course, the shows like the seal show are sort of a part of animal behavior, which we like to exhibit and show the people what an animal can learn and what it can do. But, I think the Zoo has become more and more interested in maintaining and preservation of species. As they are poached upon we are losing more and more species all of the time. We have found the San Diego climate is conducive to procreating many species of animals. So, that's what eventually led to our Wild Animal Park development, which has become a huge area to raise many kinds of animals and is doing very big research department and they're doing everything they can to find out how to preserve the welfare of animals in captivity keep them healthy and properly treated and properly fed, which is now leading to frozen tissue and frozen sperm bank and all that which can lead to future animal development. So, the Zoo is become a pretty big animal development. It thinks, not just a place to go and look at the elephants, but it's doing a lot of things for the world at large. It has become very well known throughout the world for its work.

CJB: Do you remember any particular incidents involved with the development of the Wild Animal Park?