He had kind of an interesting medical insurance deal. If he became totally disabled he was to get $500 a month which in the early '20s and '30s was a lot of money. But they had a policy that you couldn't leave the country, so he made a deal with them that he would take half the total amount if they let him leave the country. They said OK, so he got his $250 a month disability payment, if needed. He made three trips around the world and one trip through South America. It wasn't very much longer after Dr. Harry came back from his last trip that he died in June of 1941. He traveled on freighters. As an example of his sense of humor, he would always have a Peruvian birthday—a phony birthday—on every ship he got on. When he got on the ship why he'd make friends with some of the passengers, generally on a freighter with maybe 15 or 20 people. And he'd just let it be known, that, let's say, next week on such and such a date he was having a birthday. And, of course, the first thing these people would do would be to go to the captain or the chef and say "Dr. Harry's having a birthday," so they'd put on a big party. So he had a birthday party on every ship that he traveled on. And, when he had the San Diego Hospital and Clinic, he pulled the same trick down there on the nurses. They gave him a beautiful onyx fountain pen and pencil set to go on his desk, and they fixed him up real good. They were really mad when they found out they'd been taken.

Did Dr. Schroeder tell you about the turkey industry here in San Diego? The turkey industry here was given a real boost because every year when Dr. Harry went back to John Hopkins he would stop at the county fairs in the various states on his way back to California. He would go in and buy the prized turkeys and chickens, and he had a whole selection of different kinds of pigeons. My mother had a little ten acre ranch out in Paradise Valley, and he put these things out there. He had one turkey, a tom turkey, and that rascal weighed just under 50 pounds, and he had a hen turkey that weighed right up around 45. And the farmers came in from the neighboring turkey industry and they wanted to buy eggs from him but he said, no, he didn't want to sell them any eggs. They kept pestering him and so finally he told them that if they really wanted these eggs, they would cost $50 apiece. And he sold them. He had little wooden boxes made up, all felt lined with little sliding tops and everything on them, and he was selling the eggs at anywhere, I guess, from ten to $50 apiece depending on the turkey that they came from. The Depression came along in 1929 and just wiped that business out, but the stock he brought in founded the real turkey industry here in San Diego. Later the turkey industry was in trouble when the eggs were infertile. Research up at the Zoo solved that problem, and the turkey industry flourished after that.
And along with all that, he had these little bantam chicks, and he found out that when the little tiny kids came into the Zoo, they couldn’t care less about seeing a lion or a tiger or an elephant, but to chase a little bantam hen and her chicks around the Zoo, oh that was just great. So that’s why the bantam hens are in the Zoo, it would give the little kids something to do. And he brought in squirrels and guinea hens and peacocks, and they’re all running around loose too.

I remember another thing. I used to drive him around the Zoo in this ’31 Cadillac coupe that he had, and at that time we had a food stand for popcorn and candy and ice cream and such right up near the elephants. They used to have these big boxes of marshmallows for the people that came up there to have picnics. He’d get one of these big boxes of Campfire Girl marshmallows, take them over to Queenie, and I’d figure he was going to feed Queenie a few marshmallows. But no, he’d just take the whole box, give Queenie the whole thing, and down the box of marshmallows would go with the wax paper wrapping and the cardboard and the whole works. And Queenie knew every time Dad was coming because she’d be out there to get her box of marshmallows.

Which recalls another incident. My grandfather had for some reason decided he wanted a couple of chimpanzees. So we bought these chimpanzees, and of course they were very young at the time so you could handle them pretty well. He had a cage built for them there at his house on the corner of Laurel between 3rd and 4th. Well they grew up to be a little bit too much for him, and so he gave them to the Zoo. Bongo, the big male, got to be a real big chimp. That chimp became ill and Dr. Harry had to operate on him. From then on, after the operation, Bongo wanted no part of him.

TAPE 2, SIDE A

That chimp knew when Dad came in the front entrance of the Zoo. I’ve been down by that chimp’s cage when Dad would come into the Zoo, and the hair on that chimp’s back would just stand straight up, and he’d start shaking the bars of his cage. I tell you, if he ever got out, Dad had better of taken off for other parts of the world because that chimp just hated his guts.

SAC: I understand that your father, in addition to collecting animals, also traded animals with other zoos.

MW: Yes, that’s just a part of the normal operations of the Zoo. This is one source of revenue. We’d sell or trade those animals which we were able to breed to other zoos those operations which we weren’t able to. That has been normal procedure right along. I’d say at the start of the Zoo though, the big deal was the California sea lion. Up until not very long ago,
the Zoo had trained something like 85 or 90% of all the trained seals in the world; they started that training here. And they went to the circuses, and were shipped to Europe, and that was one of the big sources of early revenue for the Zoo.

I went to the Coronado Islands one time on a seal expedition, and I've never been so seasick in my life. We got over there in this little fishing boat with some cages and they stretched a net across the entrance to one of the caves in the center island, and then the fishermen shot off a twelve gauge shotgun and these seals came out of that cove and swam into the net. We gathered them up and got them on board the fishing boat and brought them back to San Diego. More trading stock.

SAC: There is a comment in It Began With a Roar that he was so effective in making these trades with other zoos that he had a nickname of Trader Wegeforth.

MW: Yes, he was a darn good horse trader. He was good at that as well as good at raising money, and it was through his efforts that the Zoo got to the point where it could take off and others could take over and do a job with it. I think after he died, Belle Benchley who was the Executive Secretary, kept the Zoo going, just operating, during the war and up to the early '50s. Dr. Schroeder came in '53, I think it was, took over, and he had the imagination and the ability to start putting money into gift shops and into the restaurant and into the things that would make money so that we could take that money and build new exhibits. And I think he filled in the next gap that put the Zoo on the map.

SAC: Your father was, of course, the founder of the Zoo, but I understand he was also the President of the Society, and there was a succession of directors while he was active at the Zoo. But in 1927 the San Diego Zoological Society had the idea, as they had in England, of having an Executive Secretary. Wasn't that when Belle Benchley was appointed in that capacity under your father?

MW: Yes, I'm not quite sure where she picked up the title of Executive Secretary, but that was her title after he had died. She was head of the Zoo as far as paid employees were concerned. She came to the Zoo in 1925 and was the bookkeeper and ticket taker to begin with, and I remember Belle at the original gate. We had one of these boxes that they had on the street cars with a crank on the side, you turn the crank, and you drop your money in the top and turn the crank. She ran that thing, and then she became interested in the Zoo and eventually went on to become Executive Secretary. Then of course she wrote quite a number of books that became
very popular. I think one of her books became a best seller, so that was excellent publicity for the Zoo too.

SAC: She and your father had a very good, very close working relationship; he must have had a lot of regard for her. In other things that I have read, he had spoken very highly of her.

MW: I think one aspect of Belle Benchley that not very many people realize is that she came awfully close to being fired for, I guess you might call it, insubordination. She was given specific instructions before my dad made his last trip around the world as to what she should be doing in relation to animals that were sick. The veterinarian was to take care of these problems and she was not to get involved with it. And when Dr. Harry came back, he found that she had been giving instructions contrary to what the veterinarians wanted to do regarding some of the animals that were sick. Specifically, there was a problem with the gorillas which, obviously, were some of our most valuable animals in the collection. And so it was almost a break-up at that point. And also prior to that time, Belle had said that she was going to quit the Zoo. And I remember sitting at the dinner table one night with Dad and he made the comment, "If she makes one more crack about leaving, she's gonna' have her walking papers." So, she came awfully close to not being Executive Secretary.

SAC: What was Dr. Harry's role as a researcher at the Zoo? Was there any medical research that he was particularly involved in at the Zoo?

MW: Well, to my recollection it primarily involved the Research Committee that he had at that time which was composed of some of the finest physicians and surgeons in the city. And so actually, if the animals became sick or anything, they had better medical care than most people would ever think of having; if something had a heart problem, why the top heart specialist in the city was working on that animal to help out. Or if it had some other type of a disease or something, there was always a specialist called in and their services were always given free. So the Zoo had really, really top-notch medical talent besides those doctors who were actually on the research staff and were contributing their efforts along that line.

But I would say... well to make one comment about Dr. Harry, he had a fantastic interest in practically everything that you could think of. And after he had his heart attack, and when I guess I really began to get close to him, he had slipped quite a bit by then, he said that at the time that he went through medical school, he could take
and read a page in a book, close the book, and give it back to you verbatim. He was extremely well read, he had a knowledge of all kinds of subjects, medicine, science, pathology. There was almost nothing that he couldn't carry on a good discussion about with somebody who was knowledgeable on the subject.

SAC: I am interested in some comments you might have about a few things that I have picked up about Dr. Harry and some particular animal stories. Specifically, I believe it was in *It Began With a Roar*, that there were a few pages about a particular alligator. Could you elaborate on that story?

MW: There was a contractor in town here, and I think his name was Anderson. And this guy had an alligator in his back yard, and I guess the alligator at the time was maybe five or six feet long. Dad had approached him and asked him if he would give the alligator to the Zoo, and the guy said hell no, he wouldn't give it to the Zoo, it was his alligator and Dad wasn't to get it. So, I think Dad timed the thing out so that the regular meeting of his poker gang that used to come to the house and play poker every once in a while, why they came to the house when Anderson had taken a trip to Los Angeles. I think they'd had a few drinks, and Dad said to this gang, "This guy Anderson has got an alligator out in his backyard that really ought to be at the Zoo." And he said, "You know, I just happen to have a cage in the back of my car." So they go out there and they stuff the alligator into the cage, and take it down into the Park underneath the Cabrillo Bridge and turn it loose in the lily pond. And the next day Dad calls up the Sheriff's office and reports the fact that there's a live alligator in the pond, and they find, they find the live alligator in the pond and don't know what else to do with it but to give it to the Zoo. The last time I saw that alligator, I bet that rascal was at least 16 or 17 feet long, and he's still there, I'm sure. But that's the way the first alligator arrived at the San Diego Zoo.

SAC: In the September 1957 issue of *ZOOKEEPER*, there was an article by Mr. Faulconer in which he was reminiscing about the Zoo, and he had some comments about your father. One of the stories he had was about a certain skunk which had a very adverse effect.

MW: I can add to that one. Well, I told you originally that everybody in the community, if there was anything that was of a wild nature and it moved, why they'd get it and they'd bring it up to the Zoo, and we were always getting a supply of skunks. Dad used to go up to the Zoo every noon for lunch, and somebody had delivered some skunks, so he went about de-scenting them. He de-scented this family of skunks, and he gave them to the Zoo...
baby skunks, and I guess he had all the sacks sitting up on a table or something. Somebody else was there, and Dad was explaining to him that it was a muscle that held the scent on the inside and that the skunk would squeeze down on this and it would squirt out the scent. And Dad put his finger on the thing, and it just doused him. So he came home to our house on Maple Street and he went up into his bedroom which was on a second floor and right along side of the driveway, changed his clothes and threw all of his clothes out onto the drive. But that didn't do it, my mother had to burn all of the drapes and re-do the whole room. I mean we were skunked up for I don't know how long.

SAC: Dr. Schroeder spoke of your father being likened to Johnny Appleseed with a stick for planting in the Zoo.

MW: Well that was another thing he did on his trips. Everyplace he went he collected seeds, including from all over the United States. Sometimes, why he couldn't bring the seeds into the country, they weren't allowed to import certain ones, but anytime he could get his hands on anything he could bring in, he'd bring these seeds back, and the nursery people here would say "Well, that won't grow here," or what have you. But it didn't make any difference to him, he planted it anyway, and we've got all kinds of plants up there now that originated from his planting. A lot of the seeds didn't grow, but an awful lot of them did. He'd go around with this cane which I guess was primarily used by golfers--it had a fold-up handle on the top of it which made a seat when you opened it up, and on the bottom there was a metal spike. He'd walk around through the Zoo, and he'd take a seed and poke it down into the ground, and if the ground was too hard why he'd sit on the seat and make a bigger dent in the ground and drop a seed in and cover it up. He kept that up for all of his life. Originally, when the Zoo first acquired that property up there, it looked just like Florida Canyon--it was sage brush, rocks and cactus and a few rabbits and hardpan.

SAC: Did he have any contact with Kate Sessions?

MW: Oh yes, Kate Sessions was a very good friend of his. She helped him out a great deal, donated plants. I don't believe I ever met her, but I heard my dad talk about her numerous times, that they were getting ready to do some planting or something, and he'd be going down to see Kate Sessions to get some advise or plants.
SAC: Do you have any elephant stories, specifically about the elephant Mighty?

MW: Not about Mighty, but one of the elephant stories I always liked was when Dad went out on a limb and bought a couple of elephants. I think he got them from a circus, and they came in on a railroad car down to the depot at the foot of Broadway. Dad and Frank Buck went down to look at these elephants and Dad asked Frank Buck if he'd ever ridden an elephant, and he said "No, have you?" Dad said "No. Well we're going to." So they got on these two elephants and they rode them up A Street up to Park Boulevard, and they rode them up Park Boulevard and rode them in the back gate of the Zoo and put them in the corral. That's how the first two elephants got up there. That's the kind of thing Dr. Harry would do. I think if I had never ridden an elephant and I was with somebody who never had either, and all I had was an elephant book to tell me what I was doing, I think I'd be going in the other direction rather than climbing on that elephant and heading up through the middle of town with automobiles all around. And then, of course, you've read the story of how he got John D. Spreckels to pay for them.

Another funny animal story is about one of the tapirs that got out and went up towards, I think he went up towards University Avenue. At any rate, somehow or another, another tapir got into one of the storm drains and got clear back downtown where some San Diego Gas & Electric Company guys were down to do some repair work in one of the manholes down either on Broadway or "B" or "C" Street. These guys went down there, and all of a sudden here they are face-to-face with a tapir. So you can imagine they came out of that manhole pretty fast. They called up the Zoo and of course the Zoo knew what they were looking at. So they managed to right away what they were looking at. So they drove the tapir clear on down to the embarcadero where the drive the tapir clear on down to the embarcadero where the storm drain dumps into the bay, and they put a cage down there and drove the tapir into the cage, and picked him up and put him on a truck and brought him back up to the Zoo. Another tapir got out and got into a furniture store up on University Avenue. We had a bear get out. I think they shot the bear when he got out because they didn't want a lot of people getting around and cornering that bear because somebody could have gotten hurt. This was right after World War II when that happened.

See ZOONOOZ, Vol. 30, No. 9, September 1957, for an account of the elephant "Mighty."

See It Began With a Roar, page 99 for an account.
SAC: Were there any other animals, as you recall, that had gotten out of the Zoo, had escaped from the Zoo and created some problems?

MW: Yes. We used to call them green monkeys but I've never seen them in the collection called that. But anyway, they're kind of a mean monkey, and they attack by dropping out of the trees. They drop down and hit their victim with their fangs. Where Tom Faulconer lived was right about about near the edge of Wegeforth Bowl, and there were a lot of trees around his home there at that time. Phillip was Tom's youngest son. One of the monkeys got out, and this monkey came down and got Phillip across his side of his face. Well, of course, recently the orangs have gotten out. And of course, I guess it was in 1927 when we had the big flood, that the seals were washed down through the canyons to downtown. One of the seals that went downtown with that flood was washed down to a little bungalow down on 16th Avenue near Broadway. The woman opened her door to see what was going on, and the seal came into the house and wound up in the bathtub. And that's where they went down and caught it. Whether that story is really true or not I don't know, but it sounds pretty good.

SAC: I was just thinking about an article in yesterday's or today's newspaper about a keeper who was killed by an elephant at the Lion Country Safari. Were there any such accidents during your father's period and when you were on the Board?

MW: Yes, we lost a keeper to an elephant. We had a bull elephant at the Zoo, and he finally got through and got the keeper, killed him. And of course, I guess I was not in favor of having bull elephants at the Wild Animal Park for the reason that we lost that man down here. Talking with Dr. Schroeder the other night, he commented on the same thing. He said "Every time you get a bull elephant, whether we're smart enough now or the facilities are good enough to prevent that, I don't know, but this is why the circuses don't want them, they're unpredictable. So we'll have to see, but of course, we've got some nice young African elephants running around up there right now, and that makes a great show and it made a good story, and if the keepers can stay out of the way of those guys everything will be great.

SAC: Yes, Dr. Schroeder mentioned that in the interview I did with him a week ago, of the problem with the bulls.

MW: Yes, when they get in the musk, I guess it is, why you just don't handle them. Just recently I was up there and we were standing outside of the enclosure there for the bull...
African elephants. And boy, he sticks his tusks and head up over there, and this trunk out over the enclosure wall, and you can just see the look in his eye... "Hey, I'd sure like to get at you guys." I don't want any part of him [laughter].

Of course, you know, we lost a keeper to a black panther a while back. And there's disagreement amongst some of the members of the Board, but I remember one of the reptile men in the first reptile house when they had the cages with lids that lifted up on the top, and this one guy would lift up the lid and put his arm down inside and drop the rats down to feed the snakes. Dad told him not to do that, but the guy kept on doing it, and he got hit with a rattler. They got him to Mercy Hospital, but he died in a couple of days. Never again... it's just stupidity on the part of the man that's playing around with rattlesnakes and not realizing what he's doing, or thinking that he's getting away with it. But he didn't.

Just one last little story. During Belle Benchley's time we had the two big mountain gorillas, Mbongo and Ngasi. They were in these big wire cages that I'm pretty sure Miss Scripps had given us. But at any rate, a fellow from Hollywood came into Belle's office and said that he wanted to make a little short film on the gorillas. And he said "I'll have to get inside the railings in order to take my movie." So Belle said alright, and she wrote him out a note and told him to go down and see the keeper. This guy couldn't find the keeper, so he climbs in, inside the fence and gets his camera and tripod and everything all set up and he's got a nice lens and it just fits in through the wire mesh of the cage. So he gets in there and he's busy cranking away and taking the movie of, I've forgotten whether it was Mbongo or Ngasi, but at any rate, he didn't know that the animal that he was not photographing was coming around. And this gorilla just hated to be photographed, just hated the noise of a movie camera. And let's say it's Mbongo, gets up there, and grabs hold of the lens of that camera, and just with a big jerk pulls the lens right out of the camera, and pieces of the camera and everything come flying through the wire. This guy left and got outside of the fence in a real big hurry. But it just ruined his camera. [laughter] You know, things like that always happen.

I can think of another story of the little little sun bears that look like they're real innocent. We had them in a small grotto up near the top of the bear canyon, and a sailor decided he was going to go in and play with them. And it was just lucky there was a keeper washing down one of the other bear grottos, because this guy got in there with these little bears and they just started taking him apart real fast. The keeper happened to have his hose with him
and he turned the hose on the bears and they got this guy out of there. But that was a sad mistake.

SAC: Is there any other thing that really stands out in your mind when your father was President of the Society? Any particular event, or any visitors who were particularly noteworthy?

MW: Well, of course, there were dignitaries coming into the Zoo from all over this country and from all over the world. I was talking earlier about the aquarium. One of the things I recall that I don't think many people realize is that Captain Hancock had come to my dad and said that he'd like to put in some money and finish up the Zoo. And my dad told him no, he didn't want him to do that. I don't know what he told Hancock, but at least he told me that he didn't take the money from Hancock because the Zoo was essentially finished, and he wanted to build an aquarium, and wanted Hancock to build the aquarium. And so he didn't take the money from Hancock at that time to finish building the Zoo. But since then I've thought of that many, many times because usually he had pretty good vision, but I don't imagine that he could possibly have had any idea of what the Zoo was growing into. I was talking to Dr. Schroeder a couple of nights ago and I said "Charlie, do you remember what the annual budget for the Zoo was when you came here?" He said "No, I was probably somewhere about $100,000." He said "No, I think it was $88,000." I think our present annual budget this year is going to be right in the area of $45 million, and next year it will probably be close to $50 million. Entirely different ballpark, and of course the whole complex of the Zoo has changed. While Dr. Schroeder was there, there wasn't much that we didn't rebuild.

TAPE 2. SIDE B

SAC: I want to ask you to speculate if you will. If your father was offered the position of Director of the Zoological Society today, in what directions would the Society evolve under his leadership?

MW: Well, that is a very difficult question. As I see it, Dr. Harry was able to do what he did because of the times. Today you couldn't begin to do what he did. The Zoo is a big business, it has become sophisticated. For example we have, what, a four-and-a-half million dollar a year advertising program. At the time Dr. Harry was President of the Zoo, I doubt there was any money in the budget for advertising. Everything that was due whatsoever for advertising, everything to publicize in the paper. He had some excellent publicity, good magazines like Time and Life and all that.
Another reason why it worked for him was because of some of his techniques in raising money. Let’s say he wanted to put up a cage. He would go down and burn enough concrete to put in a foundation. Then he’d bring somebody up to the Zoo, let’s say John D. Spreckels, not that it was John D. Spreckels, but let’s say it was. He would take him all around the Zoo, show him what he was doing, what was going on, and then they would come by this place where the foundation was. And usually he would get this somebody, whoever he was taking through to say ‘What is that?’ And he’d say ‘Well, that is going to be a new bird cage, but we ran out of money, and all we’ve got is the foundation.’ And in most cases this prospect would volunteer to put up the money to put up the cage. Sometimes he would want to get some money from somebody, so he’d go downtown and ask them for an outlandish amount of money and they’d cut him down to about half. But he figured that all he really wanted was a quarter of that, and he’d get it.

In many cases, the cages had no drawings, and they didn’t have to get a city permit to put up the cages. He could just go ahead and build as he saw fit. In fact, the Zoo was exempt from having to get any building permits from the City, and it wasn’t until just recently that we’ve had any restrictions from the City. Now, of course, if we do any major building it has to be approved by the Park Board and it has to be approved by the City, and you have all of these restrictions.

I’ll give you another example of what the difference is. You know water has gotten to be terribly expensive, and at one time we had a survey made and had decided that we were going to drill a well down in the bottom of the canyon and see if we could get water. Even if it was brackish we could use it in our seal pools and down through bear canyon to keep the water changed so that the exhibits would look better. We could have put a well down at that time for about $10,000, and Lauri [Laurence] Klauber said “No, you’re not going to drill a well down there, we don’t want to drill a well.” We were talking about it just recently and I had suggested that we drill a well down there and try to get some water. And the answer came back that we would never get it by the EPA, we’d never be able to justify it. Back then you could go ahead, and without getting anybody’s permission you could hire a guy to drill a well. Today you can’t do those things, it’s a different ball game. So as to which way he would go today with the Zoo, I think he’s kind of hard to answer. In one respect, I think he probably side with Dr. Schroeder on a very high emphasis with respect to research, because research is going to be the answer to propagating endangered species. At the time Dad started the Zoo, the animal population in Africa was unlimited, so were the animals in this country. And if some of them didn’t survive, why you went out and you got
some more the next year to replace your collection. You kept turning it over. No longer can we do that, you have to breed whatever animal you’re going to display. I think probably he would have gone along with the current idea that you reduce the number of species that you’re going to show, but those that you keep, you keep in larger numbers. You reproduce those animals and supply them to other zoos that don’t have any of those animals. And by the same token, other people are going to supply you with animals that they are capable of breeding. So it’s a different game today than it was in those days.

And another thing that I think is a real big difference in what’s going on today and what was happening with building the Zoo under Dr. Harry is that he had such a fantastic sense of humor and such a good rapport with people—he really enjoyed what he was doing, he had more funny stories to tell about the Zoo and how he was working out some scheme to get something built or get somebody really interested in it. And today it’s all business. The people who are running the Zoo today are doing their job, they’re interested in their job, but it’s pretty serious business, and they’re not getting all the laughs and fun out of doing it that Dr. Harry did. I don’t know whether I make that clear or not, but he just got a big bang out of finagling somebody into doing something for him, or getting something built, or getting the City to do something for the Zoo.

SAC: So in a few words then, I think what you’re saying is that your father would have been happier in his time.

MW: In his time, yes. He was a natural for his time. Charlie Schroeder came along and he fit in and it was a natural for the way that he took the thing over and brought it along. One man fit in at the beginning, the next man fit in and carried it to a world-wide success. It took both men to do it.

SAC: Well Mr. Wegeforth, thank you very much for your time, it’s been delightful and informative.

END OF INTERVIEW