Today's date is July 11, 1991. My name is Lyn Olsson. The following is an interview with Dr. Andrew Olson, Professor Emeritus, SDSU. Professor Olson taught in the Zoology Department from 1946 to 1980 and still teaches part time. He is a native of San Diego as was his mother, and he attended the Training School of the San Diego State Normal School, on Normal Avenue, from grades 1 through 6.

[This interview was transcribed and edited with assistance from the John Adams Humanities Minigrant, 1994/95. Names followed by [?] have not been confirmed.]

Lyn Olsson (LO): I'm going to start at the top of my questions, and that has to do with your year of birth and where you were born.

Andrew Olson (AO): I was born, here, in San Diego on November 10, 1917 in Mrs. Oliver's Maternity House the east side of Front Street just north of Washington Street, on the road that goes into what used to be the County Hospital but what is now UC Hospital. Mrs. Oliver was the wife of the doctor, Dr. Oliver. Mother home after the normal 14 days.

LO: You weren't born at home?

AO: That's right but it was not in a hospital either. Dr. Oliver was there for the delivery. It was a regular facility. It looked like an apartment house when we went by it in later years, when
mother showed me the building.

LO: That's interesting. I didn't know they had such things. What house did you grow up in? Was it Capitol Street?

AO: No. That's 1952. When I was born, the family was living on Arizona Street, the 4600 block, near Adams Avenue in the Normal Heights area. We were there close to a year and, then, my dad (who was a ship's fitter) went up to the ship building yards in Wilmington and we lived in San Pedro for maybe a year's time. Then we came back to San Diego and lived on Arch Street, the 4400 block which is about four streets West of Campus Avenue where we moved in 1922. Then, I started school [at the Training School]. We moved probably that summer and I started school in September. Here's a picture of me on the first day of school with the campus in the background.

LO: That's one of the pictures we now have in the archives.

So, Capitol Street is out in La Mesa and you didn't move there until 1952.

AO: Right.

LO: When you were going to school at the San Diego Normal Training School, you lived close to the school.

AO: Right across the street -- catty-corner. Instead of eating lunch at the school, I was able to go home for lunch every day.

LO: Did you do that throughout your entire grades 1 through 6?

AO: Yes.

LO: That must have been wonderful. What was it like in that neighborhood?
AO: It was a rather quiet area. Some of the faculty lived around there. It was just a general, middle class area.

LO: It wasn't very densely populated, was it?

AO: There were some vacant lots around but many of the houses there were probably built around 1910. It had been established for 10 or 15 years. The streets were dirt streets.

LO: I was going to ask you that but I was a little embarrassed that they might have been paved.

AO: Even El Cajon Blvd. was not paved. Sometimes there were road races on El Cajon Blvd. east from Park Blvd. They'd go on out to El Cajon, or somewhere, on the big boulevard. University Avenue was better developed than El Cajon Blvd. University was paved before El Cajon but El Cajon Blvd. extended out to Euclid Avenue and was in pretty good shape. Beyond Euclid was way out in the country.

LO: It was probably really a dirt road after that.

AO: Hoover High School is not out as far as Euclid, but when I was in San Diego High in the early 30's the saying was that to graduate from Hoover High you had to learn how to milk a cow before you could graduate. It was way out in the sticks, or it seemed to be.

LO: I would imagine the student body at Hoover High must have been rather small.

AO: They took from Park Blvd. on east. I probably could have taken an interdistrict transfer. It wouldn't have been too difficult for me to have gone to Hoover. Ted Williams, who went
to Hoover, lived not too far away. He was a little farther to the
East. (I just saw him on television on the All-star baseball game
program.) He was a baseball player for the Red Sox. Back in the
'30s he used to come to bat balls out on the field across the
street from us.

LO: You touched upon something that I was going to ask you a
little later but I might as well ask you now. What were your
playgrounds when you were growing up close to the Normal School?

AO: Well, of course, right on the school grounds. The big field
that is occupied now by the Alice Birney school buildings was the
track, the football field and the baseball diamond for San Diego
State -- Normal School, anyhow. Then, we had the playground at
the Elementary School -- the Normal Training School. There was
the usual sand pile and swings, rings, and what not. And, then,
there was Mission Cliff Gardens which was a place where you could
go and play, and go and see the peacocks and ostriches. There
were gazebo-like structures on the edge of the Valley and you
could look out over the Valley.

LO: So, you saw Mission Cliff Gardens when it was still very
well kept up. Who was it... I think it was Spreckels that owned
it then.

AO: That was the end of the Spreckels' street car line at that
time so he developed that as an attraction. Right across from it
on the south side of Adams was a silk factory where they actually
boiled the cocoons and took the silk strands off and actually
made silk fabrics -- a little loom arrangement. I remember we
made a class field trip up there. It was walking distance, just up to Adams Avenue and west of Park Blvd., from the Normal Training School.

LO: How did they get enough mulberry leaves?
AO: I think they were importing the cocoons from, I don't know, China or somewhere.

LO: Do you remember the name of the company?
AO: No.

LO: How about any other unusual businesses or industries that were around at that time? Or the usual ones, like the soda fountain?

AO: Well, that, of course, was across the street from the campus. In the early 30's during Depression times, I was doing yard work. On Cleveland Avenue, one of the yards that I took care of, the house there was presumably occupied by Yogi Alfa [?] who did advertising on the radio. This was on the east side of the 4400 block of Cleveland Avenue. The office was there in a home and there was a lot of mail coming in and going out. I never did see Yogi Alfa. It might have been a fictitious character for all I know. But they did a lot of business. It might have been a big hoax. I don't know. Yogi could see all. I don't remember any particular details. I'd often thought it would be fun to go back and check on it myself to see what it really was. But as far as the domestic things, by the intersection of Park Blvd. and El Cajon on Park Blvd. there was a big market on the corner. Next to that was the college pharmacy -- College Drug or whatever they
alled it. That was quite a meeting place for the students. Next to that was Shaw’s Meat Market. There was a barber shop. A little bit later on, there was a good Malted Milk shop. On the other end of that block was Merriken’s Drug Store. Merriken’s had students attending the school there. One of the Merriken boys was a classmate of mine. There was also an older one, George, a SDS graduate. They had the stools and had a soda fountain type atmosphere. The family lived upstairs above the drug store.

LO: Was that a popular place for the students from the Normal School to go to?

AQ: Yes.

LO: And, you, as an elementary school student, probably went in there as well, of course.

AQ: Right. I lived at the house on Campus Avenue, you might say, until 1944 with time out for going away to school (1939-1942). But it was at least until 1939 that I lived there constantly.

LO: That must have been quite an experience to grow up in such a nice area -- so close to school, and so many different things to do -- right?

AQ: That’s very true. The college football and baseball games, and track meets were practically right across the street. When Lindberg was getting ready for his flight, on Sundays for a ride, we’d go down to Ryan Field. We saw "Lindy" there, next to his Spirit of St. Louis before he ever made his flight. Other Sunday activities included motorcycle hill climbs out here on University Avenue, east of 54th Street. There was a good steep hill on the
south side. Sunday afternoons there would be motorcycle hill climbing competitions where motorcyclists would go out and try to go over the top without spilling. Many of them spilled.

LO: Did you?

AO: No. We had a pretty good friend who was involved with it. He had a motorcycle shop out on University Avenue. He was one of the participants. They also had the hill climbs down at Tecolote Canyon. We'd go out Sunday afternoons and watch those crazy guys. In fact, our friend lost his life riding his motor bike out on a winding grade going out toward Poway on Pomerado Road after you leave Scripps Ranch. At least in the old days it was quite a winding road. He didn't make one of the turns and it cost him his life.

LO: It wasn't the hill that did him in.

AO: He should have known better. Those were the days before helmets.

LO: A lot of things were probably very different as far as safety goes. You obviously went to the 1935 Exposition as well.

AO: Oh, yes.

LO: Do you have some good memories of that?

AO: It was 1935 and our graduating class from San Diego High was the Class of '35. So, in June we had our graduation -- well, it's traditional for San Diego High School to graduate in the Organ Pavilion. We had 10,000 people at our graduation. 10,000 people, at that time, attending the Exposition was a pretty good daily attendance.
LO: So, you had a large audience watching your graduation.
AO: I've got a picture of our graduating class at the Organ Pavilion that I can give to the Archives. Our passes for the Exposition had our individual pictures on them.
LO: Do you remember if your pass is in that scrap book?
AO: I don't remember. There are tickets but I don't know about the passes. They might be. Anyhow, we went there quite often. It was a very peaceful place in the evening. Peaceful music played throughout the grounds and it was about dusk, twilight, when the colored lights would come on. It was very peaceful to walk around the grounds.
LO: It must have been nice. How late did it stay open?
AO: Probably 10 o'clock. At least the midway was open until then. The area of the midway was where the zoo parking lot is now. The aeronautical building now, the round one, that was the Ford building. At the back of that they had the convertibles and other Ford cars which they'd ride you around in on roads they had set up -- plank roads, cobblestone, and nice pavement. That was to show you how nicely the Fords drove.
LO: I didn't know that.
AO: John Dirks was one of the drivers.
LO: He didn't tell me that! Of course, I probably didn't ask him about the Exposition either when I interviewed him. What other things do you remember from the Exposition that were unusual or stood out in your mind?
AO: Sally Rand did her fan dance there. Alice Faye's husband,
Phil Harris, the band leader, played in the Organ Pavilion. In 1935 he was risqué just as he is today. He did quite a performance. I was impressed by a lot of the displays that were set up. The Zoo was actually a part of the Exposition.

Lo: So, if you paid to get into the Expo you could get into the Zoo or vice-versa?

Ao: Your Exposition entrance gave you an entrance to the Zoo as I remember. The entrance at that time was over where the little snack stand is now, across from the Spanish Village area. There were all of the usual rides, and so on, and even a parachute jump-type thing where they let you down on a cable. At the north end of that was the Indian village which was left over from the 1915 Exposition. It became the Boy Scout Headquarters but that, too, was a part of the Exposition.

Lo: You touched upon something that would be a natural. Did you spend a lot of time at the Zoo when you were a kid?

Ao: Oh, yes -- when I was old enough to do it, primarily from 1933 on, anyhow. I must have been high school age. I went as a junior high schooler down to the O'Rourke Zoological Institute next to the Zoo. I think during the 1915 Exposition it was a Red Cross building. Anyhow, it was a building left over from the 1915 Exposition. I took various nature study classes there -- insects, wildflowers, minerals, rocks, and the kinds of things that the Natural History Museum classes now incorporate. That was done there at the O'Rourke Institute. I can't think of the name of the prime teacher there, but it seems as though Mr. Frank Gander was
there briefly before he got affiliated with the Natural History Museum. I remember when I was in the sixth grade, Frank Gander came up to our classroom at the Normal Training School with a lot of bird skins. He talked about birds, and bird identification. He also emphasized the California Quail. He was very active and he might have been the instigator (I don't know) of our designating the California Quail as the California State bird. Apparently, he had a big, big part in getting that designated. That would have been around 1929. Just when the quail was established as our State bird, I don't know.

**LO:** I guess it could have been then. I always assumed it was earlier.

**AO:** I don't think so. He had a big part in that. It wasn't long after he had been to our class we had a linnet fly into the window on our front porch and it died. I took that down to him and he made a scientific bird skin of it with me there so that I could watch. That was the start. I've done hundreds of skins since then. I eventually worked a year at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley and collected birds for the University of Idaho Collection during my two years of graduate school there.

**LO:** You have to know how to do those things. They started you young.

**AO:** That got me off to a good start. He and I were friends until he died.

**LO:** I'm going to ask you another question that's related to that
later when we get more into that. I’m going to backtrack a little bit here, now and ask you about your time at the Training School. On that sheet of paper I gave you, I asked you, kind of, a nebulous question about what your tactile memories of the school were.

AO: It was, sort of, in the center of the old Normal School complex. The Training School occupied an area north of the center from the campus. There was a large boiler room and near that was a little one story wooden structure which was the first grade and the second grade building. I think the third grade was adjacent but in a separate building by itself. I know it faced off to the south and out in the front of it was a little portable sand table. We put dioramas in there. One time we did a Holland scene with windmills and another of a native Indian village. Associated with the first and second grade rooms was the little log cabin. It was not as big as this room here. It must have been 10x10 inside. Small groups of children could go in there for special occasions. I remember only one special time in there and that’s when Edith Hammack, our first grade teacher, took some of us in, and we learned inches, feet, and yards. She had a yard stick and we were introduced to that.

LO: Do you think that maybe because of the unusual environment you were being taught in, that it stuck in your mind better?

AO: It’s possible. I think there was method to her madness.

LO: It sounds like a really good idea.

AO: The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades were in the large brick
building which still exists over there on that campus. It was two stories and housed some of the training for Normal School classes such as home economics, sewing and art, I think, on the second story.

LO: What about shop?
AO: Shop was farther west. I don't think shop was in that two-story building. Not as I remember it, anyway. Anyhow, we had fourth, fifth, and sixth grades there. There was also a basement in that building which was where the restrooms were. So, if you were up on a second floor in class and you had to go, you'd have to get permission to go to the basement. That was a long way to go for little legs.

LO: That was a relatively new building when you started school. You were born in 1917 and that building was put up in, what, 1921?

AO: I was there from 1922 to 1929.

LO: So, it was almost brand new.

AO: Then, there was the college -- I don't know what you call it, manual training, industrial arts -- the shops building was farther to the west, and beyond that, farther west, was the men's gym. The women's gym was a part of that very long building that extended across east and west. It was on the west end.

LO: There are a lot more buildings involved in the Normal School and Training School than I realized. Whenever you see pictures of it, you always see the standard Normal School and the Training School; I've never seen any of the other out-buildings. That's
interesting.

AQ: To the south of the main building (speaking of recreation) there were tennis courts. When I was the right age, we went out to the tennis courts and played quite often. There were some nice trees in one little area at the south end which I tend to recall now. There was a big flag pole. Each spring, I remember the University women did a Maypole dance in their bloomers. That was quite a thing.

LO: How about the instructors, your teachers, and the other students that were there?

AQ: Edith Hammack, my first grade teacher, was very nice. She eventually came out to this campus. Her sister, Isabella, is, what, 102 years old now? She's still living. She got me off to a good start as far as I'm concerned. I liked school. Miss Katherine Corbett was the fifth grade supervisor. At that time, she seemed to be kind of an old witch. She was very strict. I got to know her later through colleagues out here and we were good friends. It amazes me that when I was in the elementary school I thought of her as being an older, bitchy type person.

LO: ...and she didn't turn out that way at all.

AQ: Not at all. Then, in sixth grade, I had Mrs. Peter Smoor. Her husband had a gallery down on Laurel Street. He was in art. I know we went down there for our sixth grade graduation party. Of course, at that time, we had the Zoo open air bus which would take the classes out to the Zoo grounds and bring them back again. We probably did that twice when I was in elementary
Each spring, Dorothy Harvey, botany teacher, set up a display of wild flowers with the names in her laboratory classroom which our whole class got to go over and see. That was a good introduction to botany and so on. William T. Skilling was the astronomer. If it had been today, he would have been displaying the eclipse of the sun. [ED. note: on the day of this interview, San Diego experienced a partial solar eclipse.] There was one day, in the middle of the day, when Venus was bright and close. In fact, you could actually look up and see it with the naked eye but he put the telescope on it so that we could see Venus in the day time. One other night he had our class (those who could make it) come back and look through a six inch telescope at the moon and planets, whatever was visible. That was a good introduction to astronomy.

LO: That sounds like a nice, personal introduction for the kids. Did Professor Skilling have a nickname, by any chance?

AQ: I don’t know of any. He was a slim, athletic type. He rode his bicycle to school, as I remember. He lived about 30 or 40 years after he retired. He got his money’s worth out of retirement. He had written books on astronomy. He retired in June of 1938. I think Dr. Clifford Smith came in the Fall of that year. That’s when I took astronomy -- after Skilling retired.

LO: So you were around him for a good number of years. Did many of your other classmates that attended the Training School come
out here to San Diego State College for their college education as well?
AQ: Yes. Of those that stayed in San Diego, a good percentage of them came out here. This was the place to go if you were going to do something after high school.
LO: Can you name any people in particular, any friends of yours?
AQ: Verna May Squires, who was a near neighbor. We started Sunday school together back in the primary classes of Sunday school. She came out here. She’s retired as a teacher, now. I’m trying to think of people who were actually in the Training School. I don’t know. I’d have to go back and look at the sixth grade picture and the class list. There were a number from the neighborhood from high school and junior high school, and some from Scouts who came out here. I can’t think of any names right now.
LO: You went to Roosevelt Junior High School which was within walking distance from your home.
AQ: Yes. I did have to carry my violin case but I didn’t have to carry a lunch. I worked in the school cafeteria at lunch and got a hot lunch which saved me some money.
LO: Every kid should have to work in the cafeteria every now and then. Then, you went to San Diego High School. How did you get there?
AQ: By trolley. The number 11 came in from Kensington on Adams Avenue to Park Blvd., and on down Park Blvd. through the Park by the Naval Hospital, and down to San Diego High. It went on
trestles to the east of present Park Blvd., over those canyons to the east of the zoo parking lot. At Roosevelt there was a nice landing made, a wooden platform, for the students to get off and on. There was also a good loading and unloading area at San Diego High.

LO: Roosevelt has been around for quite a while, hasn't it?
AO: Yes. T. Malcolm Brown was the principal, I remember. He was very active in education through many years. John Aseltine was principal of San Diego High School when I was there. Our Roosevelt class was the Olympic class. That was the year that the Olympic games were in Los Angeles. We had the five ring emblems that supported our ribbons. That was in 1932. I had three years of orchestra at Roosevelt. I was a violinist. I was never particularly good at it but I worked hard and tried to learn the things that we played at concert.

LO: Did you stick with it?
AO: There were three years at San Diego High and that was it.

LO: How about any of your other extra curricular things or school activities? What else were you involved with in junior high school and high school?

AO: Scouts, through junior high school. I worked through Scout ranks to Eagle and was a Junior Assistant Scout Master. In high school I was involved in ROTC. We had a good program there. There was the annual competition between Hoover ROTC and San Diego High ROTC. I worked my way up to Major and Battalion Commander of the San Diego High School unit. Of course, the Scouts, and the ROTC
got involved in a lot of parades on holidays. I started parading when I was in the Boy Scouts and finished in the ROTC. There was a challenge here because the San Diego High Band would be in front of the ROTC and, invariably, behind us would be the Marine Band. They were playing a little bit different cadence and we were supposed to stay in step with the San Diego High School Band and with the competition of the Marine Corps Band behind us we had a challenge.

LO: I guess there weren’t any major disasters though. You were able to stay in step.

AO: Earlier, when I was in the ranks, I did have the problem of trying to figure out which step we were supposed to be keeping. In ROTC the first two years we wore the wrapped leggings left over from World War I and then, in the last two years we got into slacks. It was a transition period, anyhow.

LO: Let’s move on to your time at San Diego State College. You were here from 1935, and in 1939 received your B.A. with a major in Zoology.

AO: My minors were in Botany and Geology.

LO: Were you always planning to go on with a major in Zoology or did you have other plans?

AO: Not necessarily. I majored in Math in high school but I always had this Natural History inclination. The faculty here that I intended to be working with, Dr. Harwood, Dr. Crouch, Dorothy Harvey, Myrtle Johnson, and Baylor Brooks in Geology, were all field study oriented. There were field trips involved
and they were all interested in interpreting nature. I started taking the field trips at the Natural History Museum on Saturday mornings. I would go on those. Any opportunity that there was to get out in the field and learn about the outdoors, I took advantage of.

LQ: Do you think it was the faculty members who opened up your eyes?

AO: It probably goes back to my mother who was interested in the outdoors. She kept me aware. When we went out, she would be identifying plants and so on. She had that interest. Even in the Boy Scouts, when I went on the required 14 mile hike, she went on it with me. We went out Mission Valley to the Mission and Grantville. That's where she had grown up (1895-1917) so it was fun for her to walk over some of her old girlhood areas.

LQ: That was a question I wanted to ask you before and I thought that maybe I'd skip it. But now that you've mentioned your mother and where she grew up, could you tell me something about her? We're really taking kind of a detour here. She was born in San Diego, obviously.

AO: Yes, in 1895. She was born at the old St. Joseph's Hospital at just about 9th and University. Their home at that time was where the oil tank farm is now at the mouth of Murphy Canyon. There were times when her dad was managing a watermelon patch where the Jack Murphy Stadium is now and he'd have to keep the coyotes scared off at night. Then, they moved over to Grantville and had the Hillside Dairy and she grew up there until part of