Today is Wednesday, June 23, 1993. The following is an interview between graduate student Michael Milligan and Professor Emeritus of Art, George Sorenson, who was here at San Diego State University from 1946 until 1976. The interview is being conducted with support from a John and Jane Adams Humanities Minigrant.

[Ed. note: This is a briefly edited transcription. Unless otherwise noted, names in brackets have not been confirmed.]

Michael Milligan (MM): Where did you grow up, and where did you go to school?

George Sorenson (GS): I grew up in San Diego. The first school I went to was Jefferson Elementary School, which was a brand new elementary school in those days when we moved out to North Park in 1915, to a brand new house out there. My first day of kindergarten, the teacher says "I want each one of you to stand up and say what your name is and how old you are." So I stood up and said "My name is George Sorenson, I'm five years old," and then I sat down. At home later I told them all about this, and I was triumphant; I thought gee whiz, this is a great place to go!

MM: Where is this school?

GS: Across the street from the Silvergate Masonic Temple. It bordered University Avenue, Utah, and then the next street over,
the name of which I can't remember. It was two city blocks in there. The old school has since been torn down because it wasn't earthquake proof, and they have built a new one. They did leave up some of the tile from the old school's Spanish motif. It was built with a big courtyard in the middle, and the little kids played inside there where they were protected.

Then I went to Roosevelt Junior High, and T. Milton Brown was the Principal. They used to say that before school assemblies he would go home to shave before he appeared before us, which we thought was marvelous.

And then they finally built Woodrow Wilson my last year there which had been my senior year, so I had to transfer. That almost broke my heart, because I loved Roosevelt, and Wilson was all brand new, with bare ground and no trees, no nothing. But there I was.

Then I went to San Diego High School. All those years... third room building, stage [ ], I was the property manager so I had the privilege of pulling the curtain, you know. I must have graduated somewhere around '29. One interesting thing is the fact that I learned to play the drums, and I played in the Junior High School orchestra, and [?] Marcelli's wife came around and directed all of the orchestras in the junior highs. So when I got to San Diego High, why I started in with the Symphony with Marcelli. A fellow named Dudley Nauvole had the band, and I finally became the drum major which was big stuff you know. And John Philip Sousa came to town, and our band escorted him up
Broadway, and at the old "C" Street entrance to the Grant, why he came out of the coffee shop, and the band was circled around on the steps there, I was on one side with my baton, and old John Philip Sousa with a cigar in his hand was there, and they took a picture. I had that picture for years and I finally lost it. I hope some day somebody... I've checked with all my friends, the newspapers, and at the San Diego Historical Society, but I can't locate it. Some local photographer took it.

MM: What did you take when you first came out to San Diego State, the boondocks?

Go: Well, it certainly was the boondocks, there's no question about that. By then I think I had a little Model A Ford, just a little one that I used to go out and play dance shops with my drums. I played to help put myself through, plus my good folks helped. I played all the big hotels, the Hotel del, the El Cortez, and the U.S. Grant, you know; I played with the local big bands. And then of course I played quite a few beer gardens where the sailors came. I watched them get a pitcher of beer and then go out and put some bourbon in it. Then they'd get in a fight over, you know, who was going to take the waitress out that night... Sometimes you'd have to hide under the piano!

MM: Did you ever play dance music with Ralph Losey out at the College?

Go: I never played with Ralph; I played with Cliff May for quite a while, and then I played with Johnny Crofton at the Grant. His brother was one of the Croftons who with [Bear and Long] owned
Callente, in the old days when they had the gambling there. So naturally, Bear and Long let him come in and be musical director for three nights a week during the Depression. We had a big band, twelve, fourteen pieces, and two girl singers. They wore $15 flannels and they complained that they had to change two of them, that's $30. and when you only got paid $5.00 a night, why they didn't like it.

MM: Did you ever play in the Crystal Ballroom?
G8: No, I didn't do many ballrooms. I did at Mission Beach, a one-night stand, but never permanently. And I also finally started playing in the San Diego Symphony under Marcelli. I was still in high school at the time, and we used to play summer concerts in the old Organ Pavillion in Balboa Park. We'd rehearse there, and play Sunday matinees. I was with him for five or six years.

MM: I find it interesting that you're very musically talented, yet you went into art.
G8: Well, that's one reason, I think, why I got to be a division chairman. Should we get into this now? I started out as a professor of art with Everett Jackson, right after World War II. I was in the Navy for three-and-a-half years -- imagine an art teacher being a gunnery officer -- in my first year-and-a-half of duty I made three trips to the South Pacific on board a merchant ship, and I was the armed guard officer who handled all the guns and all the communications for this ship. They had about 32 kids, you know, plus people with radio background, plus
signalmen. Imagine an art teacher with the guns; we had the cleanest guns of anybody. We came into San Francisco once, and they inspected the ship and we won the Port Director's Cup for having the best looking guns. The reason why that worked out was, the inspection crew came, with their little boat, and anchored, and had lunch aboard the ship, and all of a sudden their boat got loose. Somebody yelled "Hey, your boat's going down the bay!" Luckily that crew on the merchant ship lowered the life boat real quick, got ahold of the thing and brought it back. I think that's why I won the cup for having the best guns; they were embarrassed.

And then I got into recognition school after I taught for a while at Little Creek, Virginia. I was sent to Ohio State for a month, in the dead of winter. That was the first time I ever saw a collegiate football game with a major university, Ohio State. And they still had the big band on campus there, you know, marching up and down with the spats and all.

When I was there in Ohio, they had about 150 officers in the school and we took over one of the buildings there. They had a reception where we met the commanding officer and his assistant commanding officer, a fellow by the name of Commander Malcolm Love! And so I shook hands with him, and then forgot all about it. And then one day I was watching Harold Keen on television, and he said "I would like to introduce to you the new president of San Diego State, Malcolm Love." And I said to my wife "I already met him." He looked like a Naval officer then, just as
during his years here he looked just like a president should.

So by then I had become a division chairman, and he had us all come in and tell him what we were doing. I told him, and then very quickly I reminded him that I had met him along with 150 other people at Ohio State -- I thought he'd like to know that. And he never fired me; he kept me on . . . ! And when he retired, why he was very kind, because I had put out, with the Alumni Association, one of our magazines there which we put out for the Phi Beta Kappa on campus, and I got everybody to write distinguished-looking articles, and I had a fellow downtown to photograph everybody. That magazine was very instrumental in getting the chapter on campus. We had Malcolm's picture on the cover, so when he retired, why he remembered that, and he included me and my wife in just about everything he did where he was being honored upon his retirement.

MM: I would like to return to when you were a student at SDSU. I was going through some of these annuals, and in 1936 I see these nice political cartoons drawn in here, drawn by Luscomb and Sorenson. Who was Luscomb?

GS: Donald Luscomb, was a great cartoonist, and he could, just with a line give you a feeling of the character of a person. He was the artist, and I was the art editor, so that's why, whenever you see our names, his is bigger than mine; he did most of the work. I was art editor of three of these things.

MM: You were quite the distinguished man on campus there. Art Guild, and . . . .
G8: Yes, Art Guild, Blue Key, Skull and Dagger. This person here [referring to Del Sudoeste], Bob Kennedy, was the editor.

[Ed note: tape stopped. Subject changes to Sorenson's early teaching.]

G8: ... There was nothing in the City Schools then, but there was one at the Southern California Military Academy in Long Beach. A guy named Ray Perry on the faculty here who finally went up to USC, and he was my friend and benefactor, and he had a brother in law who was the commanding officer of all the teachers. So I got a job up there with the rank of captain, $45 a month and board and room. And I stayed there one semester, and then Ray Perry got me into the City Schools after that. Woodrow Wilson, then Hoover, then to the War, and then out to State. But anyway, Bob Kennedy was the editor [Ed. note: of Del Sudoeste]. And so I was up at the military academy and also getting my masters at USC, when he had an offer to go up to Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo. And we said "why would you want to go to that cattle school? You're an english professor; you'll just die on the vine." He had the job of teaching english, working in the library, and being the assistant to the then president, who was a very powerful man not only on the campus but in Sacramento. We said "You're a dummy to do this Robert." So anyway, as the years went by, he became the assistant, and did nothing else but help the man [the president], and he became the president at Cal Poly.
Pomona. And then the first thing you know they brought him back to San Luis Obispo and he became president there. So you see, when he retired, I told Abe Nassatir, who was master of ceremonies, that we had encouraged him not to go there! [laughter]

When they were evaluating the current president here, Thomas B. Day, Kennedy came down to serve on the evaluation committee. They suggested ways that he could maybe improve his position, and I think it helped him.

MM: When you were a student, who influenced you the most?

GS: I think my strongest influence was Everett Gee Jackson, as he was chairman of the department. I never knew I was going to be in art, or even be an art teacher. I started out to be a hotel manager. I thought, "Boy, this is the thing. You walk around the hotel and shake hands with people." You get all your food and drinks free, you know, and all. They failed to tell me at the time that a good hotel manager has to know how to balance the books. So he's got to go to business school and learn all of that, plus be charming. So when I found that out, well just by accident I had a friend by the name of Dick [Orfam] and he wanted to go to work for the San Francisco Examiner, and he had an in there where they were going to put him into advertising. He said "When I graduate from here, I want to take at least one course in how to draw because I'll be selling advertising and maybe I'll have to draw little picture or something for a client. Why don't you come down and take this class with me. There's a
fellow named Jackson down there who's teaching the course." So I did. And one thing lead to another. And I took another course, and another. And I said to Mr. Jackson, "You know, I'm really a professional musician, but the big bands are beginning to fade. Do you think maybe I could be an art teacher?" He said "You'd better do that because if you stay on as a musician you'll probably lose your shirt!" So I'm glad I took his advise.

And then there was a lady named Patty Patterson who was very instrumental in helping me out. She had been at Chinard Art Institute over the years and came down here. She was very knowledgeable. She also handled all the educators in all the education classes. And she was very, very good to me, bless her heart, and did a lot for me. And of course, I mentioned Ray Perry over in Education; he had charge of all the cadet teachers. In those days to be a cadet teacher you had to do one semester in the Training School and one semester out at either a junior high or a high school. Well I did mine at Hoover. And he helped me get that job up in Long Beach. Those are the three people, particularly, that influenced me the most.

MM: Do you have any stories of the Aztec Bowl construction, since it was built when you were here?

G8: I can remember the Bowl from the standpoint that, it was done by the WPA. I think there was one steam shovel, and hundreds of people with picks and shovels, you know. On campus, too, there were a lot of WPA projects for students. I remember I had charge of one which did posters for the theater, and I hired guys to
make the posters. I remember we had our games in Aztec Bowl before the big stadium (Jack Murphy) was built. I didn't play in the school band here because I was too busy, so I never really got to any football games. That's about all I remember.

MM: Were you a part of the dedication of the "Aztec" statue [Ed. note: "Montezuma"] and base. I noticed that it was done by the class of '37.

GS: That, of course, was Donal Hord, whom I knew quite well. I remember when he was working on that. Everett had hired him to teach here, and he taught a class in sculpture. I took a course from him. I remember at the time that they decided to put the sculpture in the Quad because the Quad was the center of all the activities, and a logical place. For the dedication ... Hord was a very shy man ... he could hardly say a speech in public, he was fine all by himself. He was there all dressed up in a suit, which he didn't usually wear. It was quite an event.

Open House was a great event in those days. We'd get parents out here; great P.R. They finally gave it up, but then we used to have thousands of people out here for an open house. Each department which could had displays, and of course art was just great for that. Music department had singers, and musicians playing. Theater did something a-ruther. Chemistry did whatever they did.

MM: Why do you think they stopped the Open House?

GS: Maybe they weren't as fashionable as they used to be, and didn't draw the people. I remember coming back here after WWII.
I taught at Hoover for one semester, and then Everett Jackson very kindly asked me to join his faculty. Then they decided that year not to have the open house, although we had things fixed up if they wanted it. From then on it sort of went downhill. It continued, I think, for several years, but for some reason they gave it up, and I can't remember the reason other than maybe attendance fell off. It wasn't quite as exciting as it used to be.

MW: Did you see a lot of changes, progressions in the Art Department?

GJ: Oh yes, well of course in the old days, when I started out, there were only five members of the Art Department, plus part-time people. And then when I came back as a teacher, I was glad to get the job here because I had an offer to go to San Jose as an instructor. This fellow I had met at USC, his name was Mark Witzel, he was a middle western painter of farms and silos and that kind of thing. Made a fortune off of it. And he offered me an instructorship. But down here, why, Hardigan was around, and Walter Hepner, and I said "I think I've got an offer as an assistant professor." I think I fibbed a little bit. So then they found they did have an assistant professorship, so I got the job here.

Then we began to build because of all the G.I.s coming back, and all the great growth after the war. And we kept adding faculty, and adding faculty. And pretty soon it grew from five to ten to fifteen to twenty. I think before they had this drop
here because of the money problems, there were 32 faculty members in that department.

MM: Did you see a change in the hiring procedure?

GS: In the old days, Everett thought he could hire anybody he wanted to. And he had a tendency, of course, to hire somebody who had been one of his pupils because he was sure of them. Where if he had to take somebody from off campus he wasn't too sure. Malcolm Love finally called him in -- they became good friends over the years because Eileen was very instrumental in introducing the Loves to all the very powerful people downtown, and from the county, and helped him get started. Gave him a firm footing. Love said "Everett, you can't hire any [more of your people]. . . ." [Ed. note: train of discussion lost while turning tape.]

SIDE B

GS: (cont.) . . . Well that's because most of the professors are doing research and there's an awful lot of students teaching the classes [at UC]. Most of our professors most of the time are teaching. I think the kids here get a better education as a result of competent professors. Over there, gosh, all the guys teaching, even graduate classes, are graduate students. You don't get as good an education.

MM: I just read a survey of the graduates of San Diego State. And our graduates who go on to post graduate work finish in the top 2% of the colleges that they go to. We have more lawyers and doctors graduated from this university than UCSD, and maybe more
than other schools in the CSU system. To me, this is an academic
tradition, and we have a fine athletic tradition. This
university is coming up on its 100th anniversary and it's very
important to make connections with those people out in the
community who went to school at San Diego State.

This is a great institution here, and these people who have
the idea that this is a party school are missing the point.

GS: I think that's newspaper talk. you know.

MM: But don't you feel we need to change that?

GS: They can party up at UCLA too, you know, it's just a short
drive down to the waterfront, to Venice and Santa Monica.

MM: Berkeley's more of a party school than this one is.

GS: Sure, they party up there just as much as anyone does. This
is ridiculous to think they party more here. And you're right in
that the city and the county are not aware of us as much as they
should be. The public sees the big medical school at UCSD, with
the new buildings and facilities. With all of the prestige of
the name, which started with Berkeley, a lot of people think
they're more important, while we still have our little teacher
image. Which is unfortunate.

MM: But not really, considering we're probably still in the top
five percent in the country.

GS: Sure. We're about the biggest west of the Mississippi too,
aren't we? And we've done fair in football off and on.

MM: The other thing is, here we have the possibility of a
Heisman Trophy winner. [Ed note: Faulk] I'm real proud to be a
G3: ... and he (Aubrey Wendling) did a good job of getting it started. And after about a year, why he asked my wife and I to come in and do all the events that they're doing, and we did the two, two-year terms with him. And now Grant's (Neilsen) in his second two-year term. And then we're going to quit. This will be next May when we're all done, so there will be a big turnover. I've designed the flyers, and we do as many things as we can because we're firm believers that an alumni association (retirement association?) is something were people want to be with their old friends, whether it's on a ship on a cruise, or just a little thing in town, or a local dinner, or you name it; there's togetherness. It keeps you active. Particularly the people before and during World War II, they were the kind that loved the school. You know nowadays, some of these faculty members don't love the school, and I don't know what's going to happen to the association as the old guard leaves and the people coming in after World War II start to retire, which they're doing right now. you know. So what's going to happen? That's how I know Grant, much more than I would have otherwise.

MM: I think that a lot of it has to do with the current budget crises. Prior to this crisis you probably would have had a lot
of faculty involvement. My teachers love teaching here. They've had offers from other big schools, but they came here.

Well, let's move on to what you brought. What is this here? G8: I just had this handy because this is a breakdown of something I was doing at the Arizona State Fair, and thought I could refer to it if I needed to. You can participate only every three years, and over the years I've been there six times. I think the reason they've always had me back is that their art show isn't even as good as the county fair here is by any means. They have these little gals there who are running it, not much experience, and they get juries in there some of whom are so strict, you know, that when they get all through they say "But I don't have enough even to fill the barn where we're having it." Well, I know that, so I make it a point to help them to have enough to exhibit. Good or bad. Otherwise they'd be out of business. So with that in mind, that's why they have me back.

When we had the pre-50 reunion for 1937, I was the speaker for the class, and I said "I'm going to tell you what happened 50 years ago on this same day, which happened to be a Sunday." So then I started out to tell them about it, and this is the speech I gave (indicating item in scrapbook). In those days then, we were a small town. Navy and tourists, and all that. Anyway, they sent this out as a Christmas thing to all the people who were involved. Kathy Koss called me up and told me they were going to do it because it went over so well, which made me feel good.

HN: "Sit-in strikes are common across the nation" [Ed note:
reading from scrapbook.) This was in 1937.

GS: Same day in 1937. This is from the San Diego Union.

And just recently, they're doing a history of the Alumni Association. There's a fellow whose name fails me at the moment who is doing it for them. Trish (Moulton) told him about me so he called me up and came to my house, and I told him about the years that I did the thing. I think it was 1969 to 1976. somewhere in there.

[Ed. note: tape recorder turned off. When turned back on, subject changed to old/new-guard faculty, and administration.]

GS: ... You see where they were originally the young Turks who were complaining all the time that they didn't like this, and didn't like that. Now they're the old guard, and they've got these new guys in who are doing all the complaining. They're sitting there thinking they're a bunch of bums.

MM: What caused you to go from professor to administrator? Isn't that what happened ...?

GS: That's an interesting story. I think I was an Associate Professor. I'd been here several years, ten or twelve years, probably even more. I was teaching a class in the first art building, and I came down into my office there right where the entrance is, and I could hear people talking inside. Well once I had some kids climb through the window, and they were rehearsing a speech. The daughter of Sue Earnest was in there, and I caught
her and asked her what she was doing. She answered "Well I have to practice cause I'm going to give a speech, and they're going to judge me and all that." Anyway, I heard these voices, and I thought "Virginia." I opened up the door and there's Everett Jackson and President Hepner in there. "My God. I'm fired! No I'm not. I've got tenure!" So they looked at me, grinned, and said "George, we borrowed your office because we didn't want to be in Everett's because there's too much traffic in there. We're talking about something, in fact, that might concern you. So just give us another fifteen minutes." And of course I said "Yes," closed the door and wandered around. Well after a while they came out, and Everett said "President Hepner wants to talk to you. He has asked me to be the Division Chairman, but I told him no, I wanted to stay on as the Department Chairman." Patty Patterson had been the Division Chairman, but she died so they were looking for a new one. Hepner waited about eight months before he looked to appoint anybody. Everett said "He wanted me to do it, but with Eileen and all of her social things. I have to get out and be with her. I'm happy here and I don't want the job. I've recommended you. George. I told President Hepner you are a great guy to do it, and beside that you always have a clean, neat desk."

MM: We're back to your clean gun award. [laughter]

GB: President Hepner explained that he didn't want anybody in Music for the job, but he'd heard I had been a percussionist and knew music. He knew I was successful in art and had done some
good things around there. Had done this and that, and thought maybe I could handle it. "Now if you do handle it, you won't get a big head will you?" I said "Dr. Hepner, if I do, you better fire me." So then they announced it at the faculty meeting when all the faculty met together in those days, and the reaction was pretty good. You know James Crouch? He became a division chairman. John Adams reacted well to it, and everybody else did. so I became a division chairman. Don Watson was my boss. Don Watson started with the division chairmen, and when he retired, just about then, we became a university and the division chairmen were no more. And they began to hire people who had been trained to be deans rather than professors who were picked up, taken away from their classes. Dr. Love said "You are in essence 'deans' but being that we are not a university, we can't call you a 'dean', it's against the law. But we can relieve you of your classes and pay your professorial salary and do it." Well that's what happened to me and some of the rest of them. So I was in essence a dean. We used to kid each other -- "Good morning Dean Essence . . . " [laughter]

When they started bringing in people who had more training to be deans than we had, why most of the division chairmen went back to the classroom. But after you've been a full professor and had your choice of classes, and then become a division chairman (see by then I'd put in well over twenty years), the thought of going back to teach Art 1, or such, didn't appeal to me. So I was able to talk them into working with Vice President
O'Byrne as his Administrative Assistant, and for a while with Don
Walker when he was acting Vice President. They gave me little
jobs hither and yon, but the main job was to coordinate Alumni
Affairs and start building it up. For a long time, up through
Love, they said "we don't need an alumni association to raise
money for us. We don't need the money for the simple reason that
the State of California gives us enough funds to operate
everything we need." And then slowly beyond that then, it came
to where they needed the alumni association, plus the giving
units that they have here that are tied in with estate planning
and all. And so they began to feel that maybe they ought to build
this thing up. So they asked me to get in there. At that
particular time, Bill Ericson was in charge of the Foundation and
was instrumental in getting me in this thing with Love's support.
But I had to do that on the Q-T because technically there was no
spot for an alumni administrator in the California system. But
gradually they began to know that that was there and there were
people helping out. When Glen Dumke was the Chancellor he
recognized that fact. Once a year he would have a meeting up
there in his office, and invite us out to his home for cocktails
in Bellaire and treated us royally, knowing full well we were
doing this on the Q-T, but pretending that he didn't know. And
the years that I did that I had to have a very low profile and
pretend I wasn't even there. So when we put the El Campanario I
pretended I was just one of the editors, but I was really the
senior editor and chief--ran the whole thing and everything else
around there. I worked with five good presidents who were dedicated people, and the other officers, vice presidents and board members. We had no budget whatsoever; we just had to use primarily the membership. We had a little bank account; in those days we tried to stay away from the Foundation because anything you did had to have their okay. Like when Everett Jackson retired, we had him paint a picture of Love for the Library for free. So we honored him at one of our meetings, and we said "We're going to give you a present, what would you like?" And he said "Well I'm drinking bourbon nowadays." So we give him a case of bourbon. Well the Foundation was mad at us doing this, but Love OK'd it and it worked out fine. That's the sort of thing where we did low-key things on low budgets. But at least I think we got it started toward what it is today. And then from the time when I retired, why I think they've had five different Alumni Directors. You know there are a lot of things going on over there where they weren't doing the job right or they were running out of money. Or there were so many changes they couldn't keep track of it. (Now things have changed) with Trish over there, and Barbara (Barrow) over there as the new Director. . . . I worked with Barbara last year when we had the farewell to the Lab School. I was in charge of that committee. Now we're going to figure out the plaque that we raised the money for, to put somewhere in that new building, stating that it had been the last site of the Campus Lab School on campus.

MM: Good! Maybe one should be done for the building they just
tore down here on the southeast corner of campus, Quetzal Hall.

G8: That was built the first year I went to State. They had a real estate office in there. The company that did it was the same company that built Bell Aire in Los Angeles. This was going to be called Mission Palisades, and this was going to be a small version of it. . . . there was going to be a golf course down there past Resida Drive, and that little plaza in there where they have the Texaco station, was going to be a plaza honoring the missions. That building had their office, but also in there was a soda fountain-restaurant, and upstairs was a boys dormitory. In the restaurant in there, once a week they had dancing. From eleven to one, they'd invite people in to dance. And I got a little five-piece orchestra together and we played, and we got a meal and a chocolate malted milkshake out of it.

MM: That's great!

Why is it, even though there are many state-funded campuses in the country, such as Ohio State, UC, and others, which started their alumni associations so early, SDSU started its so late? This university is lacking a tradition, or it's underground.

G8: Well I think you have to take the fact that we started out as a normal school, and then became teacher training oriented. Then here's the university (UC) giving out the Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s. We were nothing to them, and we had to fight to even get various types of bachelor's degrees, but of course also the masters degrees, and in a few cases we have a joint doctorate degree. That's as far as we've gone so far, but that's progress.
when you consider we were an old normal school. It's been a
long, hard road.

MM: Thank you for this wonderful interview. It's been quite a
pleasure.