

Interviewee: Jack Selzer [S]
Interviewer: Caroline Koons [K]¹
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

K: This is [sound of recorder being positioned] an interview for the RSA oral history project. I'm Caroline Koons doing the interview for Jack Selzer.

S: [singing] Da da, da daaa!

[both laugh]

K: Alright. When did you first join RSA?

S: You know, I don't remember exactly when I belonged to RSA, first joined RSA, but my first involvement with it was when Jeff Walker became the editor of *RSQ* in the early to mid-90s.² At that time, the journal had fallen under very hard times. When George Yoos gave up the editorship, people were doing their best to pick up the baton, but for various institutional reasons that I'm unaware of, you know, the thing had kind of, like I say, ran into difficult times. And Jeff decided he wanted to bring the journal to Penn State, and honestly, I thought he was crazy to do it. It just looked like it might be something of a losing proposition. You know, what was going to happen to this journal? It was really more of a newsletter kind of thing. It wasn't something that you were going to be proud to bring up to a tenure and promotion group, to be very frank about it, and I just wondered what Jeff had in mind. But what he had in mind was to make it into a really substantial academic journal, and he made the thing look differently, made it look like a journal. [cell phone dings in background] He improved the reviewing procedures. He did everything necessary to make it great. I mean, that was one of the most significant things that ever happened to RSA, in my opinion, was when Jeff Walker took over *RSQ*. Because your journal is your most important product for your membership. And here it had become compromised. But Jeff really not only recovered it, but really substantially improved it. And then these subsequent editors have just built on that, and it's really become something fantastic. Anyway, [both chuckle] one of the things that Jeff did was to make his colleagues at Penn State part of his editorial board. So all of a sudden we were reading the manuscripts that came in and advising Jeff informally about this or that or the next thing. And while I was aware of RSA before that, really, 4Cs³ was my home at that time. But that got me involved. Then, for some reason, in

¹ An interview with Jack Selzer was conducted by Derek Handley during the 2018 RSA conference. Unfortunately, due to problems with the recording equipment, the original interview footage was not usable. Caroline Koons, a PhD student at Penn State University, conducted a make-up interview with Selzer in State College, Pennsylvania, in the weeks following the conference. Thanks to Handley for conducting the original interview, Koons for conducting the make-up, and Selzer for taking the time for both.

² Walker's tenure as editor of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* began in 1996.

³ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

2002 they asked me to run for a spot on the board. And I don't remember who I was running against, but I know, as I remember, I was positive I was going to lose. And so, what the heck? I didn't really see myself as an appropriate person for the board actually because it hadn't been at the top of my interest list. But okay, I'll run. People ask you—I'm not gonna win anyway. This other person will win. And then all of a sudden, I found myself on the board in 2002. And then our first meeting, the first meeting I attended, was in the fall of 2002, and it turned out to be that that was one of the most important meetings that RSA ever had. Jerry Hauser had organized a board retreat. So we usually met at conferences and did our thing. And there really wasn't much time to really think about what we wanted the organization to do and because you had an hour over breakfast or something like that or not everybody could come to the conference. But Jerry decided we needed a board retreat. And all of a sudden there we were in Chicago on October the 26th, 2002. And I was kind of, "Okay, I'll go out there and see what's gonna happen." And when I got there, oh my god! Everything was happening. They had done a survey of the membership right before this—the Gaines report⁴ resulted from it—and it offered an agenda for RSA for the future. And it really, oh my goodness! All of a sudden, Jerry had these tremendous plans for what RSA could be, and I didn't really do much at that board retreat. I actually kept the minutes. That's my one achievement of it; I have them right here actually. But I was really impressed with the professionalism that Jerry Hauser brought to the enterprise and the organizational ability. You know, he inspired confidence that we could make a big jump in the improvement of RSA as an organization. I'll just tell you—give one more story about my involvement: I'm sort of on the board, and it was a four-year term at the time. And toward the end of the period, I was on the nominating committee. It's to pick the next candidates for races for the board, and to choose who was going to be unopposed for the next president of RSA. And Jerry and I—we were the whole nominating committee, and we agreed that Susan Jarratt would be perfect for the job. She was a great scholar, well respected, very active in the organization. Everything about Susan was absolutely ideal. I had met her at that retreat and subsequently. Jerry and I thought that was—the trouble is we forgot to ask Susan. And when we did ask her, she said she wasn't in a position at that time to be the president of RSA. [laughs] I don't—you'd have to ask her why. I mean, it just wasn't the right moment for her. And so now what are we going to do? At that time, there were very specific requirements: you had to be a board member to be the president. And there were some other reasons why there really weren't that many people available. And all of the sudden I was the president-elect of the Rhetoric Society of America! So that was pretty funny. So all of a sudden I got into the line of leadership. I was the incoming president. It was called the president-elect or something like that. And that gave me the chance to observe what Jerry and David Zarefsky and Mike Leff and some others had in mind. And I could really see all of the moves that they were making, I could learn from their management styles. They had hired Kathie Cesa as a kind of administrative assistant for the organization. They had hired an executive director to manage the affairs of things. They were planning the conferences in a very professional way. So I could watch that, and so I could handle the job when it finally came to me. Anyway, that's sort of my ten years from rookie to—at least I got in the starting lineup, I guess.

⁴ I.e., a report, developed by a committee chaired by Robert Gaines, on the future of rhetorical studies.

[08:16]

K: [laughs] Was the journal coming to Penn State how you first learned about the organization, or did you know about it before then?

S: Well, when I came to Penn State, I was hired as a technical communications person. And my—the organizations that I belonged to were the 4Cs and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing. And I got involved in the leadership of that organization. That was my community. I went to all of their meetings, went to all of their conferences, learned from their great leadership, and so on. But I also was hired with Marie Secor and Jeanne Fahnestock and Betsy Brown, three assistant professors, along with me, who were really very serious rhetoricians. In addition, I befriended Carolyn Miller. She was—you know, I really admired her scholarship. I remember when I was getting started in technical writing and communication I would just read what Carolyn was writing and all of the things that she referenced. It was like part of my post-doc. Meanwhile, Jeanne and Marie and Betsy also gave me a kind of post-doc. They told me what to read and stuff like that. So for two or three years as an assistant professor, I was just learning, learning, learning like crazy. And when Jerry Hauser was here, I actually took his course in classical rhetoric. Just learning, learning, and learning. And getting out of the—at that time, technical communication was considered not a part of rhetoric, but more of a separate enterprise, and Carolyn and others were insistent on seeing it was part of the rhetorical agenda. So from all of those people, I got interested in rhetoric in a serious way. And their participation in RSA let me know that the thing existed and so on. Then Jeff joined us in the mid-80s, and he was a rhetoric person through and through. So yeah, if I hadn't come to Penn State, I never would have become that interested in rhetoric. I would have seen myself as somewhat knowledgeable about rhetoric, but I would have stuck with my primary interest at that time in scientific and technical communication. That's what my first publications were in. I continued to teach that for a long time. I'm still very interested in that, but I just couldn't—my friendships with those characters were so formative to me and so important to my professional development. [laughs] That was—you talk about luck! You know, you wander in, and here your colleagues are: Marie Secor and Jeanne Fahnestock. Oh my god, these guys! And Betsy Brown. Betsy didn't stay at Penn State, but she later became one of the leading executives in the whole North Carolina university system. Marie published—Jeanne and Marie published one of the seminal textbooks in the field.⁵ And then Jeanne has continued to go and produce outstanding work. So just hanging around with them was so fortunate, really, and so pleasurable. So pleasurable, because we actually participated in the invention of the composition program in a way. The composition program had kind of been bumping along here, and then it was like we got hired to kind of fix it, and nobody minded what we were doing. They kind of gave us carte blanche: "Well, let's let these assistant professors—it's not going to get in the way of anything else," and we just had a blast inventing the whole thing and taking it extremely seriously and putting together all these materials and really

⁵ I.e., *A Rhetoric of Argument*.

creating what we think of now as a lot of the infrastructure for the composition program. Just a wonderful time.

[12:50]

K: Great! So how would you describe RSA when you first joined it?

S: Well, I've thought about this a bit, and I tend to characterize it as a souped-up club in those days. Very informal, very friendly, very open, full of serious-minded and extremely generous people. But as an organization, it wasn't very quote unquote "professional." So it was—I don't mean club in a pejorative way at all. Hey, who doesn't want to belong to a club? That's where your friends are made. So the intimacy is there. But it's now very much a professional association, and so I try to make that distinction between—and that's what happened. I think the key moment was this October 22, 2002, retreat in Chicago where the course was set—very deliberately. The agenda was: How are we going to deal with growth? Well, there wasn't much growth, so there was a lot of discussion of how to grow, and then what to do about it. So they definitely had the idea that they were going to make this a professional association. And I think we all decided that we were going to insist that it's going to be a *model* professional association. Let's figure out how to not just do things, but really do them well, with an emphasis on taking care of our young. Because, hey, we were younger. The whole field was, you know, in a relatively youthful state then, so there was plenty of room to invent and try things out and so on in that transition from club to a professional association. The key, of course, is try to keep the affability and professional generosity that I remember as part of that club even as we grow into a much larger professional organization. That'll be the challenge for the next 50 years, right?

[15:14]

K: [laughs] Yeah. What were some of those first RSA meetings like? So before the 2002 conference where things shifted?

S: Well, yeah, I think we typically met at breakfast or lunch at NCA⁶ or 4Cs in alternate years, depending on where we had gone the previous time. And those assembled would talk through an agenda prepared by the president, and everybody took responsibility for certain things. But there wasn't—there was a financial report, but there wasn't a budget.

K: Okay. [laughing]

S: The budget was more like, "How's our checking account doing?" and "What are our assets?" and so on. But there wasn't a sense of, "Hey, let's put together a budget for the following year," and "How much money do we expect to have coming in from what sources?", and "What are we going to do with those revenues?" That's separate from your checking account, you know? We had some very conscientious volunteers take

⁶ National Communication Association.

care of our financial affairs, but it was much less formal than in an organization where you would have a budget and so on. That was one of my contributions, actually. I would try to put together budgets when I became president. We would have a budget for the conference. We would have a budget for the institution—or, for the institute. And a budget for the organization, year by year. At that time, I was in the dean's office. I was associate dean, and I had an administrative assistant, Christine Laur. And she knew all about these budgets and so on. And she'd, "Hey, yeah, I'll produce a budget for you," and, "Oh, now I know what one looks like!" And then when I did the conference out in Seattle,⁷ Christine put together a budget for the whole thing. She went out to Seattle to arrange all of our social events and so on, worked with the conference management team and so on. So yeah. That was very different from the way we operated before then.

K: Wow. You've named a few people already who you worked with during RSA, but in your early years with the organization, who were some of the key people that you remember?

S: Well, I've mentioned Jeff Walker, partly because he was my colleague then and because he's a tremendous scholar and tremendously *generous* scholar. Gosh. And I mentioned RSA's debt to Jerry Hauser. I superficially mentioned Zarefsky, but what a character he was. What a *model* leader. I remember, all of a sudden, I'm supposed to put together this conference in Seattle, and whoa! I mean, I had done conferences before, but this was kind of a different deal. It wasn't going to be here in State College. This was going to be on the road. And I remember he said, "Don't worry, Jack, I'll be flying into State College, and I'll spend the weekend there. I'll explain everything that I did, and you can decide if you want to stick with it." It was that kind of generosity and that kind of professional mentoring that was invaluable to me. And subsequently, I became a great friend with David, and he's been very helpful to me, very generous to me, and just a great person to be friends with. So there's those three. And then I haven't said enough about Michael Leff. While all of this was going on, Michael wasn't one of the presidents of RSA, but he was definitely one of the leaders. He was either on the board or kind of silent mad genius behind whatever was going on. And he was so well-connected with everybody in the field. He was a great idea man, a tremendous scholar, *and* had time for everybody. So he was really the embodiment of the values of RSA to me. He embodied the intellectual sophistication, commitment, the professional style—that personal professional style that he stood for, and the inventiveness that he brought to the whole occasion. So I'll never forget him. He was tremendous. Although he did die at a bad time. That was a terrible, terrible loss for our profession when Michael died. And I remember at that time Michael was the president of RSA. He succeeded me, so he was doing the next conference. He was in the midst of putting it together, and we would talk back and forth about what he had in mind and so on. Everything was going great. And I think in December—this would have been '09—he went to China. Michael is very international in his collegiality, and when he came back, I remember we got this email from Michael that said he had been taken ill with lung cancer and that it was treatable, and he was meeting with his physicians soon, and he had every reason to

⁷ I.e., the 2008 RSA conference.

think he would be able to not just combat his disease but also finish out his term as president. But he was letting us know just in case. I think that was in January. In February he died.

[21:54]

K: Oh no.

S: He just went downhill so quickly. Of course, David Zarefsky—he kind of knew what was up. He was really good friends with Michael, and he sensed that there was a real health crisis here beyond what I was appreciating. Michael just seemed so, so *lively*. It seemed like he couldn't possibly stop his beating heart. But when Mike passed away, then David and I agreed to try to get us over this sort of mini-crisis. David then became president of RSA to fill out Mike's term. He picked that up because he had been the president before me, and then I agreed to take on the conference. So we got the conference in Minneapolis off to I think a good conclusion. The people in Memphis still stayed involved.⁸ They did a great job. Everybody stepped up at a tough moment. I don't think the RSA, in the short term, missed a beat. But boy, the loss of Michael Leff. One of the things that they did at that October 2002 meeting was to decide to have the summer institute, which I call RSA's greatest invention. I had nothing to do with it.

K: [laughs quietly]

S: I was just observing as they came up with this. Actually, there was a subcommittee with Glen McClish. He presented a report on what became the institute. Sue Wells and Stacy Day were on that committee. But when they put together the institute, Mike Leff organized the first one,⁹ which gave it tremendous credibility, got it off to a great start. I think we all miss Michael Leff every day at RSA. So those four characters come to mind. Then around the periphery, these guys became my friends. So Jeff Walker here. I mentioned Carolyn Miller. I got to be great friends with her. And then Greg Clark, another important leader. One of the most important people ever in RSA. We got to be good friends through RSA as well. Gosh, Greg's contributions as editor [of *RSQ*] and as board member and as president have been—he's provided such great continuity and professionalism. So if I start naming people, I'm going to start forgetting people. This has become—RSA was my family. My professional family. I stayed, you know, in 4Cs and continued my interest in tech writing, but more and more, RSA became my home, my family, stuff like that.

[25:17]

K: Hmm.

⁸ Michael Leff's colleagues at the University of Memphis—notably Michael Osborn and Camisha Smith, but others as well—had been assisting him with the Minneapolis conference, and they continued to manage much of the event.

⁹ The first RSA institute took place at Kent State University in 2005.

S: I've got many families. I've got my Penn State family, my *family* family, and my RSA family, among others.

K: So what was RSA doing when you first joined? We've talked about this a little bit periodically throughout the interview.

S: Uh huh.

K: But what were some of the main things you remember the organization was dedicated to or involved with?

S: Well, let's see. You're asking the wrong guy because I wasn't that involved. I think the 2000 meeting might have been in Pittsburgh. No, I think the 2000 meeting was either DC or Vegas.¹⁰ I can't remember. But I remember *not going*. I was a member of RSA, but I didn't even go to the conference. [scoffs] But its key product has to be that journal, and I'd say after the mid-90s that journal became formidable. So that's one of the things they were doing: they were looking after their key product. But membership, taking care of membership, that was also an informal duty farmed out to the board members. Rosa [Eberly] was our membership officer for many years. She was in charge of keeping track of who was in the group, sending out reminders, keeping track. What a *job* that people had to do on a volunteer basis, as you would with a club. Now we have our executive assistant, or whatever we call Kathie Cesa, to take care of things like that. But boy, the work that all those volunteers did. That provided the foundation. Yeah, so I don't know really. I know that they had those every-other-year conferences, and I know that the informal networks of mentoring were very important to RSA members. I think that a lot of them would go to these meetings, and you'd have 200 people who would show up. And if 200 people spend three days together, there's a lot of friendships that get made, and friendships of friendships. And those folks, that informal mentoring was one of the key functions, I'm sure. But it was beyond me!

K: [laughs] You've mentioned a few of the major projects that RSA developed in those early years that you were involved. Are there any others that you remember, or any overarching goals that RSA developed?

S: Well, the things I was proud of getting done—do you mean early or do you mean later? When I was in a leadership position, I wanted to make sure that that Seattle event went well, and I was really, really, really afraid that it wouldn't. David Zarefsky had contracted with a professional kind of conference organizing group, and David and that organization decided, "Well, we're going to go out to Seattle." And I'm thinking, "Why are we going out there? Who is going to travel all the way to Seattle?" And I was petrified that no one would show up. But instead they turned out to be a great choice, and we had over 900 people who showed up. And I think we had maybe four or five hundred in Memphis in '06. So that was a big step forward. And I was into this growth: how do we grow RSA? It was a big deal. So I came up with the idea that if you weren't a

¹⁰ The RSA conference was in Pittsburgh in 1998; Washington, DC, in 2000; and Las Vegas in 2002.

member of RSA, you had to pay an extra fee to participate, but with your fee came a membership. [chuckles]

K: [laughs]

[29:46]

S: So it was sort of like tryout camp. And people got the journal for a year, and many of them did not persist, but many of them did. And then when I ended up, by default, having to keep an eye on that 2010 [conference], we did the same thing. And the numbers, I think—I don't know what they were, maybe thirteen or fourteen hundred now in Minneapolis—same membership scheme. So that was good. I think that we made some money on these things. One of Zarefsky's innovations was to—back in the club days, our events were expected to break even. We didn't want to lose money on them. And David put in some sort of a guideline that the institute was expected to make a certain amount of money, and the conference was expected to make a certain amount of money. I'm sure that Kent State thing broke even, that first institute, but didn't make any money. And the one at RPI,¹¹ the second institute, that was a pretty informal—very successful, but informal operation. But that one in Seattle, I was very conscious of, "Let's make some money on this." [laughs] I remember I would only provide the—what do you call it when you have—oh, the audio-visual. I only provided for half of the rooms because that stuff is expensive. I had my budget! We were not going to— [both laugh] So anyway, then I got surprised when all these people showed up, and we made our money. And that really helped. You know, you can do a lot more if you've got some dollars in the bank. And then I also had a lot to do with the third institute at Penn State. And Jeremy [Engels] and I really cooperated in putting that together. Jeremy was just getting started here. He had never run a conference before, and I had run a lot of the Penn State Conferences on Rhetoric and Composition that we had in the summer. So I knew how to do those, and together we had a really good event. We made our money. So I think that David Zarefsky and Jerry Hauser really didn't leave much innovation for me to do, but I was able to professionalize some of the activities, yeah. We ran a really fine conference very professionally and made some money on it. We got our budget straightened out. Things like that. Then the other thing I tried to do, subsequently: we started a development council. It was basically the fundraising part of RSA. We started that about ten years ago with the idea that over the long haul, we wanted to create an environment where people would think about RSA as a place to make their gifts each year. And over the long haul, that will make a big difference in RSA. So I had noticed that other organizations had endowed funds. So now we are beginning to see the benefits of those, an endowed fund. So that's been fun too. I'm always forgetting what the question was when I start rambling on. I guess that's alright. Yeah.

K: Okay, what are some of your most important or prominent memories related to RSA? You've talked about quite a few of them already.

¹¹ Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, site of the 2007 RSA institute.

S: Yeah. Well, when I think of RSA, I think of the people that I've met and worked with. It's those personal relationships that come to mind first. If you, you know, name a conference or an institute, I remember this dinner, or that dinner, or that meeting where I met so and so. That could be a very large family. It has meant so much to me professionally and personally. So that comes to mind first of all, I think. There was something else, though. Well, maybe it will come to mind here.

K: We can loop back to it if you think of it. The next question that I've got here, I think you've answered already. And that's, how has the organization changed throughout the time you've been a part of it?

[34:43]

S: Well, I think the other thing—a model, professional organization. What does that mean? So I think we took that seriously. And so the nature of the institute has—we are people for the beginners in our field. At the beginning, it was more—it wasn't a graduate student organization very much. It wasn't—you know, assistant professors were welcome, graduate students were welcome, but it was more for these established scholars, was my sense. Well, you know, that's an overstatement. From the beginning, we've been conscious of taking care of our young. But putting into place specific mechanisms. So the institute: take care of your young. We put together the research network at the annual conference in Seattle: take care of your young. And then there was the gender equity task force. Cheryl Geisler noticed that women members of the organization were not making the same kind of professional progress as males, so she put together a proposal. And that generated a mentorship program that was really a model. There are now probably a couple of dozen people who attribute their professional success to what Cheryl and the team of people that she recruited had accomplished over the years. You know, I don't—look, I'm not bashing other organizations, but I don't see MLA¹² putting on a summer institute. It's a pain in the back to do it. It requires a lot of work. But the benefits are tremendous. The benefits to the *membership*; it's not to the organization. And the same with some of these other things. So not just having an organization, but the *model* [organization]. I think that's been the—and at one point, because in honor of Mike Leff, and Kendall Philips also has a big commitment to internationalizing RSA. So that's something we didn't have, so we set out to do it, and now we have a substantial international dimension to the organization. I think we have *not* been as successful as we would like in getting members—a more diverse membership in terms of ethnicity. So, I would be surprised if that's not the next thing that we do. We have some proposals kicking around. Everybody wants a more diverse membership, and I'll be surprised if we don't do some things that, again, are along a *model* kind of thing—to not just hope for more diversity, but actually accomplish it. I think the minority citizens who are a part of RSA feel welcome. I think they feel important. I think they know that they're valued. But there's no way we are where we want to be in that dimension. But I think that's where we're going to be heading.

K: Okay. Any other changes you think RSA will make in the years to come?

¹² Modern Language Association.

[sound of drumming fingers]

S: Well, I think the publication—see, again, are we going to just put out a journal, or is it going to be a *model* journal? It's hard to be a model journal, but our editors have consistently improved things. I would mention that fifth issue as an effort to do something that not everybody is doing. We're going to have a special issue every year, and we're going to promote it.¹³ Everything's—so I think the idea in the future will be to continue to be innovative. To, again, not just be what all these other professional organizations are, which is fine, but to try to be the one that generates some things that others imitate. Let's see if others put together these institutes, or the career mentorship for associate professors,¹⁴ or these research networks. Let's see if some of them get the idea that we've got some good things going.

K: Great. The final question I've got here is, what are some of your hopes for the organization's future?

S: [pauses] Well, I hope that it never changes. And that it changes.

[both laugh]

[39:49]

S: So I think the *feel* of RSA and the sense of what it means to be a professional in rhetoric, that the team is important. That it's not just—if you're a professor, it's not about you; it's about your team. That's the feel you get in rhetoric. I hope that we can maintain that in rhetorical studies generally and in RSA specifically. So that's sort of backward. Let's not change that. But in the future—you know, it's going to be interesting. We've had a whole bunch of graybeards. Well, that's not true.

K: [laughs]

S: We've had Kendall [Phillips] and Kris Ratcliffe. They've been—they're younger members of the field, and they've done great. But now we are really looking at a younger leadership team now that Kirt has taken over. Kirt Wilson and other members of the board. I don't even know a lot of them, but they are from a different generation. I'm just going to sit back and watch and see what they dream up. I'm positive that they're going to be just as innovative as people were in that October 26, 2002, meeting. And that's going to be fun to watch.

K: Great. Did you think of what you forgot earlier?

¹³ RSQ began publishing an annual special issue in 2010. Prior to that, the journal had been publishing four issues per year.

¹⁴ Presumably a reference to the Career Retreat for Associate Professors, an event RSA has organized in advance of recent RSA conferences.

S: Hmm. Let's see here.

K: Or anything else you want to add at this point?

S: Let's see here. You can tell I made some notes. It's cheating. [pauses, consulting notes] Yeah. Well, I didn't mention all the people I would like to. What the heck! They know of my regard for everybody who's been a part of the RSA, and they're forgiving as part of the ethos of RSA.

K: [laughs]

S: So, maybe we'll just let it go at that, Caroline.

K: Alright. Thank you very much, Jack.

S: Thank you. I really appreciate this chance, and you sure made it easy for me to yack away.

K: [laughs]