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## Simon Messing oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, January 16, 2004

Simon D. Messing (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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Narrator: Dr. Simon Messing  
Current Position: Retired Professor of  
Anthropology  
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Dr Messing taught Anthropology at USF from 1960-1965.*

*Background; early educational experiences*

Dr. Messing was born in Germany in 1922. He came to the United States at the age of seventeen, after spending a year in England, meeting up with some distant relatives who were living on the East Coast. He worked various jobs to support himself during the day while attending classes in the evening to earn his high school diploma. He then enrolled at the City College of New York, where after “some interruptions,” he graduated and decided to begin studying anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

*Academic focus*

As an undergraduate, Dr. Messing was interested primarily in psychology and economics, though he soon became dissatisfied with the subjects. “When I encountered anthropology ... I became interested, because it included both economics and psychology.” Because of his interest in both Africa and the Middle East, he chose to center his dissertation on the ethnography of a nation that captured the essence of both worlds: Ethiopia. When he procured funding, Dr. Messing was able to travel to Ethiopia, where he traveled the hinterlands on the back of a mule.

*Employment*

When he returned to the States, he began looking for a teaching position while continuing to work on his dissertation. The employment office at CCNY found him a job at a black Methodist college in Georgia, where he spent two years teaching and completing his dissertation. Having been awarded his Ph.D. in 1957, Dr. Messing then transferred to a position at Hiram College in Ohio, where he also spent two years. The employment office at the University of Pennsylvania then contacted him regarding an employment opportunity at the University of South Florida, and he met with one of the deans from the University who was traveling around the country interviewing prospective candidates. After meeting with the dean, Dr. Messing was hired, and made his move to South Florida in 1960.

### *USF*

During his interview, the dean from USF told him that South Florida was a “fast developing institution” where he would have the freedom to actually create his own program – “the kind of freedom you don’t have at an established institution ... And I liked Florida anyway because I had visited [it] before ... So, it worked out very well.”

### *Service in the U.S. Army*

Dr. Messing served in the United States army, where he gained his citizenship, after having been in the country for only three years. “The Army was concerned that if any non-American was taken prisoner, they would not be covered by the Geneva Convention.”

### *Initial impressions of USF*

Dr. Messing recalls that when he first arrived, USF was a “very small institution” with only around seven hundred students. In fact, when he began teaching, he was the only anthropologist at the university, situated with the College of Arts and Sciences. Physically, he remembers the campus was largely bare, though surrounded by orange groves at the perimeters of the university.

### *Courses*

In September he began teaching introductory courses in anthropology in addition to a course on Africa, where he was able to draw from his own experiences. In addition to reading and writing assignments, he incorporated his own slides into the class discussions, something that he remembers the students were particularly fond of. While he was generally impressed by the quality of his students, he recalls that many of them were particularly deficient in world history and geography. “Imagine trying to teach anthropology when the students have no idea of geography, not to mention history.” His goal of the course was foremost to “remedy those deficiencies,” and introduce students to foreign countries, ethnic groups, and the concept of cultural relativism. “I tried to explain all of the cultural aspects but didn’t go too far into the politics of it because that would have complicated it too much.”

### *Research in Ethiopia*

In the spring of 1961, Dr. Messing received a call from Washington, D.C. that “changed my life.” He learned that a public health team was being formed whose mission it was to educate Ethiopian students. They were dispatched to the African nation for a year from 1963 to 1964. In addition to the aid they were providing to Ethiopians, Dr. Messing and his team were also assigned research responsibilities, which included testing for diseases and community studies of the area. “I no longer had to ride a mule – we had three Land Rovers.”

### *Political climate in Ethiopia*

“When I was in Ethiopia, I was very lucky – it was very peaceful. Emperor Haile Selassie had a reputation for wisdom, govern by wisdom rather than force – a benign ruler ... Things were really quiet. It became much more difficult later on.”

### *Relationship with USF*

He recalls that officials at USF were “rather flattered” that one of their professors had been chosen to do such work, and thus were entirely supportive of his efforts. His experiences enriched his classroom discussions upon his return to the United States. “I had done applied medical anthropology. I had become a medical anthropologist – on the job, with hands-on training.”

### *Return to Ethiopia*

He also made a second trip to Ethiopia from 1965 to 1967 as a result of the U.S. government’s request that the research be continued. When he returned, he found that USF had replaced him, and he was forced to look for another job. He was able to find a temporary position in the Baltimore area for the length of one year, at which time he found a teaching job in Connecticut, where he spent the remainder of his professional years. While in Connecticut, Dr. Messing was married and started a family. His daughter is currently in her first year as a professor of anthropology at USF.

### *Retirement; current work*

While working at Southern Connecticut State University, Dr. Messing continued researching and writing about Ethiopia, publishing many articles on the region. He retired at the age of sixty-seven. Since then, he has continued attending conferences and publishing articles “from time to time.”

### *End of Interview*