Interview with Melvin Levet


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Abstract

Interview with Caltech alumnus Melvin Levet, BS '39, MS '40, in two sessions on February 20, 2015. With memories of Caltech that stretch back nearly eight decades, he describes growing up in Monterey Park, California, in the 1920s and 1930s, with "orange groves all over the place." He talks about his family background and youthful interests, his experiences during the Depression, and his decision to enroll at Caltech. After a rocky start with the core curriculum, he thrived as a geology major, working with professors I. Campbell, H. Fraser, R. Jahns, and W. P. Popenoe. He recalls the rigors of his daily commute between Monterey Park and campus; his enjoyment of his geology coursework and field work in Ensenada, Pala, and the Inyo mountains, as well as the Grand Canyon; and his participation in Caltech baseball, including winning the Institute's Rawlings Trophy and capturing the varsity team. After receiving his MS, also in geology, Levet married his high-school sweetheart, Perle Wilkins; and after Pearl Harbor he enlisted in the Army Air Force meteorology program, based first at UCLA and later at the University of Chicago. He served as a weather officer, first stateside and then in the Pacific at every Headquarters 13th Air Force location (except Fiji)—South Pacific, South West Pacific, Asiatic Pacific and the Philippines. He vividly recounts some of his wartime experiences, including island hopping in multiple aircraft, his introduction to "persistence forecasting," visiting Tokyo following V-J Day, and "taking in stride" the experience of being aboard a B-17 lost in a typhoon over the East China Sea. In the 1980s he and Perle returned twice to Guadalcanal with fellow veterans and their spouses. After the war, Levet spent 35 years with Standard Oil California (later Chevron) as a research geologist and manager with the company's computer services department. Beyond his career, he enjoyed hiking, backpacking, and other outdoor activities with his family; and in retirement he and Perle traveled extensively, including trips with the Caltech Alumni Association and Caltech Associates, led by, among others, geologist R. Sharp. This oral history concludes with Levet's account of his ongoing relationship with Caltech, his observations of how Caltech has changed since his undergraduate days and his reflections on the Institute's impact on his life and career.
France. But then, in a weird way, in the interviews with the characters, it almost gets to be mockumentary. But at the end it does become a documentary, so it changes forms. And it also feels like at times it's a making of, like someone had walked around with a camera, capturing this wonderful time, when you had all those people, you could see Janet Jackson and Jimi Hendrix and Santana on the same set. And today it would be black radio, Latino radio and rock and be fragmented.