

Peter Miljanich interview by Sarah Sheehan, Bishop CA, 2005

(Note: Peter was employed at WMRS – Barcroft Station in 1951-54)

When and where were you born?

May 29, 1923 in Watsonville, California. My father was an orchardist. He came to this country in 1906 and landed in Tehachapi in March 1906. He worked for a cement making business making cement for the Owens Valley water project. I don't know how long he was involved with this before he moved to San Jose. He was there during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. He used to say that he had to wear a mask.

My mother came over after the First World War. She landed in California also. She was from a neighboring village on the coast of Yugoslavia near the town of Dubrovnik, on the Adriatic coast.

Q. Where did you grow up?

R. I grew up in Watsonville, graduated from Watsonville High School in 1941, went to Berkeley, completed three semesters before the draft age was lowered to 18. At that point I went into the service March 1943. I had sort of a checkered career in the Army Signal Corps being shipped from here to there and ending up in the Aleutians as the war was ending.

I was also in several other services including a program at Stanford. The Armed Services had a special program to educate a class of people, who because of the war, were being eliminated from our colleges. I was in electrical engineering at Stanford so I was sent to the Signal Corps after the program was ended.

After the war in 1946, I went back to Berkeley. At that time I changed my major from chemistry to physiology. I completed the degree in 1949 on the GI bill and hooked up with Dr. Pace, professor of physiology. At that time there was both academic and medical physiology. Dr. Pace had his graduate students taking all kinds of interesting courses like physics. He insisted his students had a good grounding in physics and chemistry. In those days first year medical school was taught in Berkeley.

At that time in 1949, they were exploring the possibility of establishing a high altitude research environmental physiology station here. Dr. Pace dragooned us graduate students into being coolie labor during the summer of 1951. Crooked Creek Station was already established but it was mostly a base camp. I don't believe much heavy -duty research was going on there.

In the summer of 1951, a group of graduate students was brought here to build the Barcroft Laboratory at 12,500'. So we worked that summer for three months pouring concrete and putting this 40' x 100' Quonset hut together. Then we went back down to Berkeley and resumed scholarship. Then he hired other people out of Bishop to continue the work up here.

Those days everything was operated very much on a shoe string. The equipment was almost all borrowed or begged or stolen from the Navy. Dr. Pace had been an officer in the Navy and a reserve officer later. He was very careful about continuing his Navy stuff. As an aside, I think he was one of the first to go into Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped. Here it was pretty much catch as catch can. We had surplus weasels which we used as snowcats as they were track vehicles. They were really an amphibian critter not a snowmobile. We had a lot of trouble losing and breaking tracks. He was able to obtain a lot of surplus tracks. A great deal of time was spent putting on new tracks.

He had established relationships with people in the valley who supplied all our diesel, tires, etc. In particular with James Nicolas, "Jimmy Nick", the proprietor of a gas station in Big Pine. I guess he supplied everyone in those days. He also had a relationship with a man named Henry Thorne who worked for the Forest Service. He was an excellent mechanic repairing a lot of our diesel and gasoline engines in his time off.

Q. Were you up here only that one summer?

No, then I started coming back as one of Dr. Pace students and with Dr. Paola Timiras. Sadly I was up here the summer of 1953 when my father died. I also brought some dogs up for blood volume studies using phosphorus 32 as a marker. When Paul Manis, the manager up here, had a heart attack, Dr. Pace asked me to run the station. So I came up in June or July 1954 and spent almost a year at Barcroft. I had a schedule of 20 days on station and 5 or 6 off. I spent my off days going to Oakland where we lived at the time.

How would you get up and down?

With a weasel. I was here for a full winter basically by myself. There were people down at Crooked Creek but we could not get together very often. We had radio communication such as it was. It was really old equipment and there were quite a few times we were not able to communicate.

I also flew in a couple of times on a small plane, which could land near Sheep Mountain. The snow is blown off and you have a nice, flat mesa surface. I think it might have been a Symons Flying Service from Bishop.

There were basically three ways in and out. Some were passable and some were not. The regular route from Westgard Pass was pretty much out as it would take so much snowplowing. It was hopeless. I made one night trip in a weasel up Wyman Canyon. Another way was up Silver Canyon. We would leave a weasel on the upper edge of the canyon and shuttle up there.

What research were you doing during that time period?

Not much actually. I was more involved in making the place habitable. I put in the framing for 12 or 15 skylights upstairs. I was busy keeping the place from freezing up. I built stuff like stairs. I also completed an animal shelter on the south side of the building. For a long time the rats were in the main building and I had to feed them and change their bedding. I did have a weather station and called Inyokern to tell them about the weather.

It was pretty primitive. I understand now it is all electronic.

Were you up here by yourself?

Yes, except for the better parts of year when a man named Bill Roche who spelled me. I do not remember who spelled me during the winter. There was a constant turnover of people as it was pretty hard to keep people.

WE MOVED UP TO BARCROFT STATION continuing our interview there.

What can you add to the narrative about the building of the station now that you are here? We have some pictures of how we gerry-rigged a cherry picker in which we had a double tray sink. In one photo, there is Dr. Sherburne F. Cook, professor of physiology in Berkeley and me putting it together. He was a big help to Dr. Pace. The two of them put this whole thing (station) together. Dr. Cook would come here with his plant press and go hiking around getting all the different plants up here.

Q. So what was the initial vision as to what science was going to be here?

It was principally high altitude physiology. There must have been discussions about astronomy and space communication. I know that one time there were a couple of graduate students from UCLA who were studying cosmic radiation here. I don't know if it was successful or not. They were with Dr. Tico.

Initially we were all physiologists who came up with Dr. Pace. I don't think a great deal was done up here in the early years. Nor was much done at Crooked Creek other than some meteorology and a couple of visiting geologists would come through.

In 1949 and 50, Dr. Pace was able to organize the materials to build this place. A lot of the materials used here were war surplus. There is very little new stuff here.

Q. Was this building built in one summer?

R. It was enclosed in one summer. The finishing was done over the next several years. In 1954-55, I did the window boxes for the skylights and built stairs. Looking at it now, this is really pretty plush. I came back in a consulting role in 1956 when they were putting in a power line to Barcroft. That was the last time I was up here.

I spent 35 years in nutritional sciences at Berkeley. I did not complete my thesis which was going to be on effect of high altitude on dogs and I did a few experiments on getting some baseline values on blood volume using . I had three dogs up here.

I was a research associate in the Department of Nutritional Science.

Q. What sort of projects did you work on?

R. Dietary effects on rats...changing their amino acid intake. I did not do the philosophical part of it. I did more of the technical part. I killed alot of rats, injected alot of rats and extracted alot of fatty acids from rats.

Q. Was there a particular thesis you were proving or disproving?

R. I was working for a professor in the department. He was looking at the effects of deficiencies say on longevity. Research was much more restrictive and you had to have your plans very well monitored.

It was a very interesting career.

My father came here from Yugoslavia so we have about a 100 years in this country.

Q. Going back to your Dad, is there anything that you remember? You mentioned that he made the cement that was used in the building of the Los Angeles aqueduct. The cement plant was in Tehachapi. There was a large Croatian community there. He was a single male living in a boarding house. There is a story that the first year here he worked for a dollar a day plus room and board and sent \$300 back to the old country. He was not on the actual aqueduct construction site. He also did some quarry work in Nevada but I don't know much about it.

He ending up moving to San Jose and settling in Watsonville in Santa Cruz County. My two brothers and I were born there as well as our four kids.

Q. Then you went to Berkeley and met Dr. Pace? How would you describe him?

R. He was a live wire. He made this place possible. There is no two ways about that. He had a vision of this place. He expended all his energies on it. He was a pretty good man frankly. He did alot of other things as well. He went on the Makalu expedition in the Himalaya Mountains as well. He also co-led a research project in Korea...something about the environmental (?) impact on soldiers in combat sometime before the end of the Korean War.

Q. Did you keep in touch with him?

R. No, I didn't. I did see him at a couple of meetings after that but we pretty much went our different ways. I did go to his memorial service in the faculty lounge in Berkeley. There are some other people you might want to get ahold of..Dr. Paola Timiras. She came to work as an associate and eventually became chairman of the department. I think she is still alive. She could give you quite abit of the departmental ascepts. She came up to Barcroft. In fact, I have a picture of her up here in the lab.

Another is Milt Smith, A. H. Smith, professor of poultry husbandry at Davis. He brought chickens up here...but that would be after my time. He was studying thin egg shell problems in chickens.

Q. Today you are back here after 50 years, what changes to do you see?

R. Oh my, this is a wonderful operation. Does this operation stay open in the winter?

A. Not every winter due to funding.

P. In the early days, Nicolas from Big Pine used to haul up diesel fuel and we stored it in huge tanks that were right up behind. We heated with diesel fuel and ran diesel generators. We managed to stay warm and that rat colony was in this building. We had a small colony of 55 rats. I helped put up the building for the rat colony.

Q. Do you see alot more buildings today?

R. Oh yes, I see really big changes at Crooked Creek. The tar paper shacks that used to be there are gone. The shacks had corrugated roofs and tar paper walls. Off to one side was a tar paper shack with an International Harvester diesel generator. There were two of them....one on standby all the time. Things broke down pretty often. We had two little gasoline engines so we did not any power during the day. We had propane so we had a refrigerator on propane.

So of course it did get cold. We wore double pants and surplus flight gear and things like that. The coldest I remember it getting was minus 10. We monitored the weather stations and called into Inyokern. The windows have changed quite abit. What we had was surplus stuff from the Navy.

Q. Were you involved in the building of the summit hut?

R. No, but I was here. I don't know anything of the mechanics of it. It must have been quite a job to take the water up. You had to have water to make the cement. I doubt that they carried the stones up. It was a very rudimentary building.

Q. What kind of research did they do up there?

R. They did some very simple blood work....checking oxygen levels, hemateins, I guess.

Q. Who designed it?

R. Nello, he had visions and I am sure he consulted with various people....trying to persuade them to come on up here and do their research. It was the love of his career. He was a very positive person.

Q. I have seen pictures of Navy operations around here.

R. That was in 1949. That's how I think Nello found out about Barcroft.

Dr. S. F. Cook was a dour sort of person but a very nice man. Story had it that he was a volunteer in the First World War driving ambulances in France. He went there as a volunteer before the U.S. got into the war. Henry Thorne was with the Forest Service and did all our vehicular repair. There was a Symons Flying Service out of Bishop. They used to fly people up here. In fact, I had one or two trips up here with them in the winter when there was no other access.

Q. How big was that group of students that first summer you were up here?

R. There were about 12 of us. Some were grad students and some were just friends of theirs that he picked up. One who a brother-in-law or cousin, Jack Schriber, who went to be Dr. Pace's animal caretaker in Berkeley. There was a group in Berkeley involved in a burn experiment and Jack was there. He had the dogs in kennels up the canyon in the residential area. So he learned to snip the dog's vocal cords to quiet the dogs in the kennel.

Q. Did you have dogs up here?

R. Yes, just ordinary dogs and some were my own dogs. I was doing some preliminary studies on blood volumes.

Q. That summer the twelve of you were up here, did you have several tents?

R. We had a big shack, a tar paper shack with dining room and kitchen. Dr. Pace had hired a cook, maybe off the street. He was not a professional chef but we were fed. It was kind of rough. We slept in surplus Navy housing trailers. They just had bunks in them, no windows or amenities. There were no showers, just a basin for bathing. I think there is one parked there on the meadow by Crooked Creek. It is painted the old Navy gray. I don't know how many of those were scattered around. If you wanted to take a shower, you had to go down to Crooked Creek. So we went down there about once a week. But being young, it was not a big deal. It was an adventure to rough it.

Q. Were you here all summer?

R. We must of had some breaks as I know we used to come up here in vehicles from the university motor pool. I can remember alot of flat tires. They were regular passenger cars. They would only go as far as Crooked Creek. Then we would come on up here in 6 by 6 trucks (big Army transport trucks) and surplus jeeps. That's what Henry Thorne kept running for us as they were constantly breaking down.

It was hard to keep everything under control. Dr. Pace would not be around. We had people down at Crooked Creek who were sort of station managers but that was it.

Q. What did you do in the evening for fun?

R. Just talk I guess. I don't recall playing cards. We did not have ping pong or pool tables. That was it. We must of had shifting staff but I don't remember. Maybe you could get ahold of Bob Choate and he would remember. I believe Choate was a recent graduate in Civil Engineering from Berkeley. We spent time talking about research. As he wanted us to be well grounded, the first couple of years, Dr. Pace had us take alot of lab classes as well as statistics and chemistry.