

Transcription for 1preexpedition.mp3

*Livingston:* When did you first hear about the Cordell Bank and what did you learn in those first hearings?

*Schmieder:* Well I remember this so clearly. This process that I just described where I kind of evolved in my diving, I was starting to say is this all there is to diving, namely sport diving, and for many people yes, that's all there is. That's what they want to do. It was not for me. So by that time for about a year, this was in 1977 around that time, I was starting to get a little itchy, looking beyond the sport diving picture and saying, "Is there a project? Could I collect some data for somebody? Could I make a chart or a map or something for somebody? Can I do something that's useful and worthwhile?" Because my day job is as a scientist, this is the process I know. You go somewhere, you observe something, you document it, you preserve it, you write about it, you share it with people and you carry on with that kind of intellectual metabolism, so I was really ready. The event that triggered me was a couple of articles written by a reporter for the *Oakland Tribune*. Fred Garretson, we called him Skip, he was the science reporter and he was a very good one, so he published a series of semi-expose articles about the radioactive wastes that had been dumped in the ocean near the Farallon Islands, and it led to quite a stink if you like, a public response and eventually governmental response with submersibles to go out and find these drums of waste, and there were inflammatory reports about giant sponges growing on warm drums containing radioactive materials.

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I knew that was all nonsense because I had worked not only at Berkeley where most of the material had come from but also at Livermore, and there's a lot of radioactivity and as a physicist I worked with radioactivity and radio chemistry, so I knew that these were not really dangerous materials and yet there it was. So voila, there is a project. Could I go out as a physicist and a diver? I had the right combination of preparation. Could I as a physicist and a diver go out and shall we say examine these things, document them in some way, collect some data? Then I would be able to make measurements. I knew about

instrumentation. I knew about radiation counters. I know about the activity. We could take data, we could analyze it, we could find out if this is a problem or not and that would be a useful thing for me to do. It was a nice project.

That's where I was when I opened the chart to find out exactly where these wastes had been dumped off of the Farallon Islands in three or so places, and completely by shall we say a prepared accident, there were some contours to the northwest with the name of Cordell Bank, one contour of which was a small circle about a quarter of an inch in diameter containing the number 20. So I learned that that meant 20 fathoms or 120 feet was a sounding there, and that clicked because even though I had not yet ever dived to 120 feet I knew that in principle one could make at least one-way trips with scuba to 120 feet and we could maybe even return alive. My attention just shifted. I kind of abandoned Skip Garretson and the *Tribune* and the radioactive waste and I got interested in just asking the generic question, what is Cordell Bank? There must be a lot of knowledge of Cordell Bank at the Cal Academy and I was of course familiar with the academy and even knew some of the staff.

So I started asking questions. The generic question was, "What do you know about Cordell Bank?" and the inevitable answer was either, "Well, um, I don't know, I use Wells Fargo myself;" or if they were a little more savvy they would say, "Yeah, it's this place out there. Nobody knows anything about it. There's no specimens from out there. We don't know anything about it," which was inflammatory to me of course. When I heard comments like, "We don't know anything about it," that was exactly what I was looking for. So the question was, could I turn that kind of a trigger into some kind of a project? The rest we'll elaborate as we talk some more, but that was how it was triggered.

*Livingston:*

So you've explained some of our next questions then. At this point then did you immediately have some goals with the idea of exploring the bank?

*Schmieder:*

Sure. The reflexive goal was “what’s there?” Actually before that was, “what is already known about Cordell Bank?” For a couple of months I went on an odyssey to learn what was known about Cordell Bank. In fact the very first information I got other than “We don’t know anything about it” was at the Marin Civic Center in their library, and they had a copy of the *Coast Pilot*. *Coast Pilot* is the handbook for navigating waterways up and down the coast and in waterways. This particular volume of the *Coast Pilot* was written by George Davidson who had been on the west coast since about 1850 and had authored this *Pilot* in the 1850s as multiple successive volumes, and by now they’re considered historically valuable, but they’ve been revised, updated, and abridged so that now you can get a *Coast Pilot*, but it’s very utilitarian. In those days in the early volumes it had a lot of descriptive material.