

Transcript of Interview with Frank Smoot by Shane Carlson

Interviewee: Frank Smoot

Interviewer: Shane Carlson

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Transcriber: Holly Barnard

Abstract:

Frank Smoot explains how the pandemic has affected his daily life in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He touches on the state and federal responses to the pandemic, comparisons between the current pandemic and past ones, and his predictions for the future.

Shane Carlson 00:01

All right. It is May 7, 2020. I'm Shane Carlson, a graduate student at UW Eau Claire. We have Frank Smoot with us today. And this is an interview as part of the series on the COVID Oral History Project. All right, Frank, if you could tell us a little bit about your day to day life, for example, job, extracurricular activities, where you live and what it's like to live there.

Frank Smoot 00:37

Sure. Well, I'm a museum developer at the Chippewa County Historical Society. And so I work in Chippewa Falls, but I live in neighboring Eau Claire [unintelligible] in the town of Union. And here, the –this museum is closed, for the pandemic, closed to the public. It has very limited hours anyway. Even when it's open, it's only open Tuesday. The reason they hired me was to develop a new museum, which is going to be built [unintelligible], and that museum will be open certainly when everything is like normal. We'll be open some six days a week. So right now, I have been there since I've been here, an army of one most days a week except on Tuesdays. So one of the things that's probably different, my experience, and maybe in most people's is that my work, life hasn't changed very much at all. I still go in to work every day, I still don't see anybody. And so that was true before the state shut down before the stay at home order was –and still is true now. So the next thing, that part of it doesn't feel much different, except it doesn't feel much different than it did before the pandemic caused this big check in. And also, weirdly enough this particular coincidence, I had moved back from Oregon, [unintelligible] as long as I could. And that worked for quite a while. But she was slipping badly on here. Back and that was in February, February 4. And so this was before God, for the sacred home. So I have been tied to a home life. Making breakfast for her. We're getting some people in the back eating. And so because she went into memory care and life, then I might take care of my social life. And my evening, our living changed that much anyway, because I've been sort of a homebody while she was at home, and very, very shortly, I'm thinking, well, I should go out to a coffee shop. At this chance is tucked away. And then of course, fairly shortly, and of course, starting [unintelligible] so probably differently than almost anybody else. In America, my life has changed tremendously for a couple of different [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 04:11

Um, could you tell us a little bit about when you first heard about COVID and what maybe some of your initial thoughts were if you could go back to that moment?

Frank Smoot 04:22

Yeah, you know, I've been hearing the news coming out of Wuhan. And there was a fellow independent filmmaker, and was uploading videos certainly not his which was something [unintelligible] but he was uploading videos coming out of the [unintelligible]. Starting early. The first time I remember was probably is really very bracing dramatic footage, people put into hospitals being overwhelmed, people dropping over in stores, here in demand. And so that seems to me that it was much bigger deal than we were thinking about this. A lot of the thinking here was that this was in China. [unintelligible] And up –but this it seemed it seemed like it would be like other pandemics that would spread. And then we started hearing news, I started hearing about the really severe sanctions that China was taking, which I thought were probably warranted so that in other closing roads and using bulldozers to block 10 feet of dirt roads forcing people to be home their apartments at gunpoint if they had to take law enforcement action. And so they were taking it seemed obvious the news coming out of China, as a very, very serious thing. And then you started to see –so I started following it online with the kind of spread of it spreading a little bit outside of the province. Then you started picking up a couple of other cases, but I was that because I'm provincial, like all Americans. I was, I was not gonna understand the standing of how big our cosmopolitan limits with billion people with flights. I mean, it's a it's a big world class city. They're Americans and sort of geography that goes on outside of the US. And so then you –I started hearing report, [unintelligible] fly from left Wuhan into CPAC or San Francisco. [unintelligible] we start seeing cases in Europe, [unintelligible] and then no deaths, but I think we started seeing cases in February in Washington state. So sort of around [unintelligible]. And then of course, there was some of the big first news that kind of broke into I think the mainstream consciousness was Princess cruise line, whatever cruise ship was sequestered because there were people who were infected with the virus. And that's when we got the reports from the Trump White House that well, no, we're just going to keep them on the ship because we don't want our numbers to go up. That's not the way pandemics work it's an unrealistic expectation. And one of [unintelligible] but, so from that point, I had some expertise.[unintelligible] but I really didn't know. [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 09:13

And it's, it's pretty clear that there are communities are changing all around the US. And, you know, a year ago, I don't think anybody could have seen this coming or imagined what life would look like now. But could you speak a little bit on how COVID has impacted your community specifically?

Frank Smoot 09:38

Yeah, one of the things –I mean there's –I talk to people about this, the probably, the biggest feeling is the most in depth. There's a feeling of weariness around it. I drive to work every day at the time of day most people do, both home and office. So I've spent half a year or more going to take a lot of cars on the road, here and there, and people used to [unintelligible] the grocery store. I was one of those commuters who did that now when I drive to work, there's no, there's no cars on the road. But a lot of places, a lot of establishments, businesses you go and there's not many people. There's –it's eerie. That's, that's the word that keeps coming to my mind. And then, you starting to see it keeps changing a little bit. I think that it changed toward the more serious, now, I think it's relaxing. But you know, I

stopped at the grocery store fairly often because I'm not an organized person. And so, you know, I stopped and I'd get whatever I was going to eat for the next day or two. Then I started seeing plexiglass shields between the cashiers and the customers then started seeing the cashiers wear masks, [unintelligible]. And then a good percentage, a few customers wearing latex gloves. And now I'm seeing relaxing on the part of the customers but not on the part of anybody at the store that, you know, the [unintelligible] audiences have been so minor, hopefully [unintelligible]. Again, because I'm not a very organized person with coffee in the morning, but then I got the habit of just fascination at noon, and get a cup of coffee. And so one of the first first changes that I saw was a Holiday Station. It couldn't you know, they had push bars with coffee and make coffee. So then I buy Starbucks cold coffee and come back. Well, I've got to change my habits a little bit. So we broke out the coffee maker here and started making coffee here. But that was one of the one of those changes that that's just a little detail of life, but it makes [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 12:51

Could you, could you speak to the role of maybe quarantine and self isolation and flattening the curve? I know, there are a lot of phrases that are being thrown around right now in the media and citizens are getting a pretty good understanding of what is expected of them. But how do you see those playing out in the community?

Frank Smoot 13:18

Well, my thing, I only have a little bit of anecdotal evidence for this. But some people don't understand why you might use the terms social distancing, and quarantine, safer at home. And people, people understand what those terms mean, but I'm not sure that they understand why they're –I get the idea from people that they think that this is going to stop the virus. It's not going to stop the virus, the vaccine will stop the virus. The reason that we're doing this, the reason we're doing the distancing, quarantine, safer at home, is so that hospitals don't get overwhelmed. People die on the street and die at home it doesn't necessarily lower the total amount of cases. It just means that there will be so many cases at one time that the health system is overwhelmed. And I don't know that people are understanding that, I don't know that they're taking it seriously. One of the things that is true is that the virus is patient and adaptive. And people are impatient and dismissive. And that's a very bad lesson. Because now when we start relaxing on our own, and especially as the virus leaves, all these pandemics they come into cities that are –In the past port cities, or cities with great concentrations where there's a lot of travel, as we know more about COVID-19 a lot of it wasn't actually coming directly from China, it's from Europe. That's why New York had it so hard because everybody flies into New York when people come from somewhere else. And so then you see that right you see that in New York. It comes to Miami, it comes into Louisiana. And as it's filtering out, we're seeing a big change in what areas are being hit hard. New York's tremendously, tremendously hard. But a couple days ago, New York State was not the top state in the country. And so patients are actually going down in New York, it makes it look like it was going down in the country, because New York had so many more cases. But the number of cases has actually gone down it's just that 80% of them, were outside of New York state. I think that's the thing that people aren't understanding is that like all pandemics, it's creeping out from the big cities into other areas of the country. So, so this area of the country, which is –which we don't think about, because we're, we live here, but it's actually fairly remote. [unintelligible] So we're really in quite a rural area and everything takes longer to come to us like fashion, news, and the same is true of the pandemic, it's, it

has yet to reach, that may not be as bad because we're not, we're not as –we don't live in such a compact way. We're, you know, we've got –we're already social distanced, we're already but it doesn't mean it's [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 17:43

Yeah and there, there seems to be some disparities in information. And you've kind of hinted at this and how people are seeing this and growing impatient. As you said, I think it's important that as, as we collect these oral histories, we see where, where our interviewees are getting their information from. Could you, could you speak on where you primarily get your sources of information from and what role you see sources and information playing in, in you know, this brave new world?

Frank Smoot 18:29

Sure. Huh, I'm a digital online subscriber to The Washington Post. I'm also a digital subscriber to The Guardian, was subscribed to The New York Times and then I follow some Twitter accounts, I think responsible accounts, people who –not just the blue checkmark people, but people who are you know, former FBI or health department so I get some of my news off of Twitter but I try to distinguish [unintelligible] and then I do [unintelligible] because like everybody else, I'm a jerk and abandoned local news. But I do check a little bit online to WQOW which is a local ABC [unintelligible] local NBC [unintelligible]. You know, I mean, I do talk to people too on the phone, they have –like, my beautiful bride is in Oregon and so she felt because of what's going on, on the ground out in Oregon. I get a little bit of information about Oregon, a little bit of information about Wisconsin, a lot of information.

Shane Carlson 20:32

Could you speak a little more about your –so with your wife being out in Oregon? I know before you had said that, you're, you're being impacted in kind of a unique way. And that your daily life really isn't changing? How is COVID? Or is COVID changing the way you interact with your family? Including your wife? And how do you –what comes up when you talk about COVID as an experience in Oregon versus COVID, experiencing COVID in Wisconsin?

Frank Smoot 21:12

Sure. Yeah, I'll talk about that. I'll talk a little about my mom too, because that's, that's interesting and a little bit sad. With memory, you know, the big change for us, –I bought a ticket some time ago, Expedia, you know, had plans to go out August 4 through –April 4 through 18. Of course, those went by the wayside. You know, we're not going to get on an airplane. It's not like I'm gonna bring COVID single handedly, to Southern Oregon. And so we hadn't seen each other since October. [unintelligible] But this is going to be, I have two weeks there, we're going to get that straight sell, moved back to the west. And you know, had all these plans for 2020. Well, all of that, all of it, not only the trip, was put off. But now we're wondering. The future is unwrote, that chapter of our future, we don't know where we're going or what we're doing, or, or what we should do next. Everything's just in a hovering stasis. And it's not like either one of us are particularly bothered by that. We're flexible people. I mean, we'd love to see each other. But –and we've, both of us have kind of stumbled from one thing to another lives. So it's not like not having a plan has doomed us. We've gone through decades like that, both of us. But this is, it is sort of –it changes the nature of our conversation because our conversations [unintelligible]? Well, you know, she was –when she came in October, [unintelligible] she gets up to about Sturgeon Bay, she

loved it, [unintelligible] you've ever seen so, you know, maybe she lived there, and I'm saying Chippewa. So instead of four times a year seeing each other I can see every week so that's helping. Oh, and we don't we don't know what's, what's the future. So that has changed. Not our relationship, we're strong, we love each other. But it seems the nature of our discourse and what we talk about. With my mom, it's quite different. The memory care site that she went into before the pandemic really erupted shutdown early, which was good, nobody there was sick. Everybody there is safe. But she's at the point in her cognitive decline that she does not understand. She understands at the moment we're talking that I, I can't visit today because there's a big virus out there and nobody [unintelligible] but that resets every day and so every day I have a conversation with her, you know, she calls up or I call, she says "Well I don't know where I am now, but you know, I just need you to know that I need to be picked up. Get on down here, because I want to go home." [Frank replies to his mother] "Well, you can't go home because of the virus." So I go through that every day. "But you're safe there. I'll tell everybody, you know, where you are and that you're safe there, you know when you [unintelligible] so you can just stay there, it's going to be fine." And the next day, it's, you know, it's Groundhog Day, it's the same conversation. And you know, I think it's I think at the end of the conversation, we sort of reassured one things that it took me a long time to figure out was one of the sources of education was the she had been thinking that the people in her life knew where she was and I thought it was that she desperately wanted to get out of memory care and go home. But she just wanted to know people knew she was there that they –people might be troubled, they might be worried because they didn't know where she was. Once I figured that out, then that was a big wake up call. But still, it's you know, I'd been going to kind of get her transitioned. I'd been stopping over there every day after work and having dinner over there but because of COVID I can't do that and it's hard and so I was quite lucky, and she was quite lucky, that we have that time before the, before the shutdown that she could kind of get used to that environment sort of toned down a little bit I'm just glad that she didn't go in two weeks later [unintelligible] to go there every day for several weeks and make sure that she felt like this was –I'm not sure if she feels that way now but I think she feels [unintelligible]. So that, that's been one of the things about COVID that's probably been the most, sort of, not disruptive, but disconcerting, not knowing –some people, they are stand outside the window waving people people out I just have that feeling that would never fly there at all [unintelligible] so knowing how to gauge my behavior to make her feel comfortable when I actually can't go down I'm grateful for grateful [unintelligible] but then the way in which I mean [unintelligible] it's, yeah, that's, that's the sort of agitation for her and I don't want her to be agitated at all, so yeah, that's that's kind of never really anticipated that something like that would be in effect –this. Although history will take it down for another day there's three times a week and whatever [unintelligible] that be like [unintelligible].

Shane Carlson 28:55

Yeah, I'm sorry you're in that position. That's –like you said it's good, there's some silver lining that she's –she was there before COVID really broke out and that you understand how to adjust your role to the situation and understand how to meet her needs.

Frank Smoot 29:17

I hope so, yeah.

Shane Carlson 29:21

Yeah. I think there is, in many different ways a lot of that throughout society where I know just with my teacher, friends, I'm just, we're just, trying to find ways to meet student needs and, and keep it as normal as possible. But the one of the hardest things is identifying those needs and trying to understand how students are experiencing it. But I suppose that yeah, that same thing must be happening, you know, across the social spectrum as far –with, with all types of relationships,

Frank Smoot 30:02

Sure, you know when somebody's –How do you explain to a four year old? How do you explain that to a person in prison? How do you explain it to a person with memory deficit? How do you, you know, –I mean for all of us it's frustrating enough, but we don't have –all we have is a bunch of impatience and selfishness. We could understand it if we let ourselves, right. But a lot of people are not in that position. The young are in a place where they can't make adjustments. [unintelligible] Like you and I.

Shane Carlson 30:53

And we haven't –we haven't really talked about this much yet, but I was wondering if you could describe how local state and federal leaders have responded to the crisis and, you know, for better and worse.

Frank Smoot 31:10

Sure. Well, one thing that has always pleased me, I've lived in and around the Eau Claire area for much of my life, perhaps nobody can ever seem to really get away, and one of the things that's pleased me ever since I was a kid is that for a long time, much longer than most communities in the country, the city county of Eau Claire has had a combined –so probably 70 years– [unintelligible], so they've always had a very robust response to any crisis. One of the things that happened, this is, this is forty years ago now, but there was an outbreak of Legionnaires disease, one of the really fairly early outbreaks, right here, in Eau Claire at a hotel, it was probably three years after the first outbreak that was actually named Legionnaires disease. And they did a whole tracing of how it came to be. This was the first time as far as I know, this was the first the country that they'd actually done contact tracing through credit cards to find out what these, what events these people would sign up for where they bought like their food or whatever, how about that they did all –that none of them had stayed in this hotel room. And then they did contract tracing and found out that the Legionnaires disease had come from a water cooler up on the roof of this hotel. So I mean, it's like CSI Eau Claire, and they've always had that kind of response here. And so that's been gratifying, you get a lot of straight, good news out of the reporters who talk to us. So if you checked with WEAU, you get good local news, and the pandemic hasn't been so bad here so far, we've got between 25 to 30 cases, confirmed in Eau Claire county, more or less the same interpret more or less the same. Which means you know, [unintelligible]. But, so I think the local response has been good with that at least it's clear. I think a lot of businesses are taking their cues from local and state government. And you see Walmart, you see grocery stores of course taking part to add distance between people and you know that's coming on and so I'm pleased with that, pleased with the state of Wisconsin [unintelligible] he's faced a great deal of resistance on all fronts, from the assembly, but he's hooked on and holding his own. I think keeping Wisconsin as safe, as we can, like every other state in the country, places with higher concentration of population in the state or the places that are [unintelligible] didn't come around Madison. Really pretty funny [unintelligible]. But, so I'm pleased with the state response. I think that the states have had to pick up, some states have been doing well and some states have been doing not well. The reason they've all had to pick up someone's slack is

because the federal response has been atrocious. It's not only been useless. [unintelligible] I'm not surprised, but I'm horrified at the federal response, it has been, it's been grotesque. [unintelligible] It's been, it's the reason we have more cases in this country than anywhere else in the world it's federal, it's a failure [unintelligible]. So I'm, I feel lucky to live in Wisconsin. And I feel lucky to live in Eau Claire in particular, but I think [unintelligible] the grotesque nature of the federal response.

Shane Carlson 36:24

As far as the –what implications thereof for the future, do you see this changing the nature of I guess, how businesses operate? Or, or what –what differences do you think COVID might have on how we conduct, you know, our everyday activities?

Frank Smoot 36:53

Well as I said that –I said the other day, and I'll repeat it, [chuckles] historians sort of loath to try to guess the future. That's not what we do. That's, that's the opposite of what we try to figure out how we got here to the present. So we try to figure out the past, but one thing is that the story that's in front of you is preparing people for the future. Whatever future they come, and –but since you ask, I'll try to see what I see is the kind of present situation where that height –where that might take us. Anthony Fauci is probably, probably the best man in America right now because America believes, and he's a scientist, that there'll be –that one, we're not over that. This is not a question. You can see that. He also believes that there will be a second wave in the fall, and in the 1918 pandemic, the second wave was much deadlier than the first. The first wave was bad. The second wave was absolutely catastrophic. You know, twenty million people died in the second wave of the 1918 pandemic. So, you know, I think we're relaxing too soon, we're opening up too soon, particularly a lot of states are –one of the things that we didn't have the advantage, we never learn, and Americans don't want to [unintelligible] go blindly on and do things [unintelligible], but we have a lot more data. That data comes from surprising places. So we saw just a few days ago, Georgia has opened up its businesses and there's not a lot of locals going into those businesses. We know that from cell phones, you know, the cell phone location, but there are a lot of other states [unintelligible] to Georgia. And we know that from cell phone data, so that seems like the worst of all, right? That people get that because Georgia is opening up and other people know that, they're coming in there. They're bringing infections with them, they're taking infections home, spreading it out. [Unintelligible] closing down evenly [unintelligible]. And people are traveling around. And so you know, it's like if you've dump vodka in one half of a punch bowl. That doesn't, that doesn't help right. It doesn't keep the other half of your punch bowl nonalcoholic. But we can't push disease like that we're not –it's American [unintelligible] always thoughtlessly optimistic, that's an American truth [unintelligible]. So, so I predict that there will be another wave in the fall, we'll see if I'm right. I predict it to be worse. I predict that our numbers won't go down for the whole country, but they'll keep changing in areas. So we'll have 25,000 cases a day and 3,000 deaths, but they'll be in different areas of country, every month until the fall, when it gets really –I think, at that point, people are going to be really gun shy for very long about things that they would point us for one of the things that we worried about a little bit, but not very much, was the idea that you might, you might fall victim to a mass shooting, you know we've had a couple of, not only in schools, but at big concert events particularly in Las Vegas, [unintelligible] but I think this will really, especially by the end of the fall, it'll be a long time before people go back into a big arena with 10,000 people. It'll be a long time. I think people will slowly start to engage with customers again. We've got to wave through over the last, since World War Two, away from going

into cooking at home. And as we got busier, as we're doubling families. So we've gotten used to this. Now. It's something easy way back. So and people are still doing them a little bit, but it also got used to going out to eat. I think people will be a little bit scared. One of the changes that I don't know if it's by the State [unintelligible], really, is that because the federal government's response has been so [unintelligible] you see a bunch of states organize themselves of North States in the Northeast eight states on the West Coast, they're doing that in order to get an economy of scale, and also to get protection from the federal government. And you're actually seeing governors who are ordering supplies and M95 masks and test internationally and then having to hide them from being commandeered by the federal government to explore. But they're forming these [unintelligible] Midwest. That harkens back way back in our history, not back to the [unintelligible]. And so the progress I think in the United States from, say the War of 1812 to World War Two had been increasing power, this incompetence on the part of the federal government. Now, we've seen that challenged over and over again. Since FDR saw that talent, in different ways in the Vietnam War. This didn't come out so well right. Tell them to play the spacebar never lost the war. This is what we're about to get number Watergate. In a series of ideas come to the forefront. The government shouldn't be as big as the Reagan Revolution. The Tea Party [unintelligible]. And so the idea that the federal government has to be the answer has taken a lot of body of work since the 60s. This may be, this may be one, I don't want to go Don't want to play a wagering, but it may be one that really the federal government really takes. It puts its power, its influence in the world, its ability to be a national spokesman for the whole country. Really, I think it's seeing an eruption. That idea. It's very it's under, it's under some you've got to get these economies like the company in New York, California, they're big. And if they work in Washington, Oregon, and California, Oregon, what is going to be the role of [unintelligible]? How does the federal government respond to things that it needs to respond to? I think that's, I think that's what we're seeing is that it might just pass as soon as the virus does, but it's one of those things that I think has the potential to change, then, that we stand, instead of saying, you know, we're all standing strong, right, or Boston strong, all of these things strong, then we think, well, that place doesn't have anything to do with one's itself, at least mine were over the West Coast. So that idea isn't true. It's, it's in the error. The seed's been planted. That I think would be the really, besides, the idea that it's going to be hard for people to imagine going back into a mall, it's gonna be hard to imagine going back with the theater, it's going to be hard to go back into a big concert. I think the idea that our relationship [unintelligible] is a bigger idea than those that don't know how that's [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 47:30

I guess, only time will tell and then, you know, it'll be the job of public historians to

Frank Smoot 47:37

Slowly.

Shane Carlson 47:38

Yeah. Alright, um, do you have any questions for me? Or do you feel like we might have missed any areas that you feel we should talk about yet?

Frank Smoot 47:52

No, I think [unintelligible] I think we went over most of the same stuff. And I think we –there's a lot more to say about it. I don't know if I'd said any of it. Well, but you know, this is a great, it's great to think about these things. It's what we can't solve yet. So yeah, it's always telling us –it helps me think through things too. When I talk to people. I'm glad to be part of the project. And I'm sorry, your semester took a left turn. I know, [unintelligible]. But this is, this whole project, which you had said the other day, was not only campus wide, but nationwide, International. This area matters much for clients. But you know, you think back to the teenage, that's quarterback the other way. You wish you had documents more, you never have enough. You're going to be part of something which is [unintelligible]?

Shane Carlson 49:17

Well, I'm certainly grateful that you participate and provide us with some background into history, because that's, that that's a huge benefit that you bring to the table is that that background and context into, you know, previous experiences of you know, our American past and I guess we'll have to see how this all plays out.

Frank Smoot 49:50

Yeah, we will. That's no question. Now one thing that I think was Churchill who said, "so if you're going through hell keep going" and seems like it's seems like everything else is that funny and smart [unintelligible]

Shane Carlson 50:12

All right well I'll, I'll stop the recording.