East-West Center Oral History Project: Alexander Spoehr

In 1961, the UH Board of Regents selected Alexander Spoehr to succeed the Center's first leader, Acting Chancellor Murray Turnbull. When he took office in early 1962, Spoehr's main job was "to get the show on the road." During Spoehr's tenure, the Center built its campus, launched its first organizational structure, and established its major support offices. In this 1975 interview, Spoehr notes the challenges of balancing the interests of the State Department, the U.S. Congress, the University of Hawaii, and the State of Hawaii. After two years on the job, Spoehr resigned, effective December 1963, and shortly after that joined the University of Pittsburgh as professor of anthropology. Retiring in 1978, he returned to Hawaii where he continued his research and professional activities until his passing in 1992.

Prior to being EWC chancellor, Spoehr served as director of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu from 1953-1961. He was an anthropologist specializing in Oceania and Southeast Asia, serving in leadership positions on the National Research Council, the American Anthropological Association, the South Pacific Commission, and other groups. He was elected to the National Science Foundation in 1972.

Read Spoehr's interview narrative (see separate pdf)

THE BIRTH OF EWC

- The Center’s Buildings
- Land for EWC Use
- EWC Clerical and Non-Professional Staff
- International Advisory Committee
- EWC-UH Relationship
- Setting Up the Original Institutes
- Early Student Selection Process
Interview Quote
"I think one of the gratifying things to me has been to have gone through Asian countries and to meet people who have been at the Center in those years, and though indeed their experience was not perfect, I do think they got something out of it that was quite unique. I’ve been in Japan and the Philippines, etc. and talked to Asian students who’ve said that this is the first time they had had any real understanding of other Asians. So I think the Center served a function in terms of the personal enrichment, not necessarily through courses, or through research or training projects, but rather of meeting like-minded people from other countries and I think the impact was greater on Asians really than on the Americans."

These narratives, which reflect interviewees’ personal perceptions, opinions and memories, may contain errors of fact. They do not reflect positions or versions of history officially approved by the East-West Center.

LINK (as of 06/12/2020)
https://www.eastwestcenter.org/research/research-information-services/oral-history-project/alexander-spoehr