

Ron Winterrowd

Office of NIH History
Oral History Program

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Ron Winterrowd Interview

Dr. Victoria Harden: This is an interview with Ron Winterrowd about the history of the NIH logo on March 21st 2005. The interviewer is Victoria Harden. Mr. Winterrowd, thank you so much for talking with us today. What I'm interested in is the development of the NIH logo and I understand that you came to NIH in 1960. Would you tell me what kind of logos were in use in the '60s before we got a dedicated NIH logo.

Ron Winterrowd: Well as far as I can remember there were none, because of the restrictions that H.E.W. and the Public Health Service placed on us. We really didn't have an identity and I'm not sure that we even considered having an identity. This first logo happened, or was conceived by, Charlie Shinn who had been hired as the chief of Medical Arts and Photography. He --

VH: Let me interrupt you one second. Charlie Shinn, that's Charles S -- can you spell his last name for me?

RW: S-H-I-N-N.

VH: Thank you, go ahead now.

RW: He was art director at HUD and when Dr. Ferguson was relieved of duty he was hired and his claim to fame was that he cleaned up the old Public Health Service logo, modernized it and so forth. Actually he really should have left it alone.

VH: This was the failed anchor logo, right?

RW: Yes, right.

VH: And he modified it and brought it up to date?

RW: Yes.

VH: Oh that's very interesting. I didn't know that.

RW: You haven't seen that?

VH: I probably have --

RW: You probably have.

VH: -- but didn't realize it that this was what I was doing.

RW: But anyway he I think felt that MAPB should have a bigger stake or bigger influence --

VH: Involvement?

RW: Involvement in what was going on at NIH and so he met with Storm Molley [spelled phonetically] about developing a logo for NIH and several designs I think were proposed to Storm and I don't think Storm was really interested at that time in doing it and I think he finally said, "Okay," --

VH: To go with the one that looks like a triangle -- an equilateral triangle with rounded sides.

RW: Yeah.

VH: Storm called it the sprung triangle or something that has NIH in the inside.

RW: Yes. Now Dr. Fredrickson liked the triangle very much because to him it said research, treatment and education. That made up the triangle, but that particular rendering was to -- it looked more like an automobile logo than whatever it --

VH: But it stood for really 10 years, not quite 10 years.

RW: Right and that was because really no one had an interest in modernizing it or cleaning it up or whatever, but when Congress told NIH to start publicizing what the heck you're doing out there with all this money then this interest of refining it came up and also the bicentennial was coming and so therefore a new effort was made to fix it.

VH: How did -- you were here and obviously oversaw that part --

[break in audio]

VH: Tell me about how artists think about going about revising a logo.

RW: Doing a logo?

VH: Doing one but in this case it would be revising. You had one and what did you want to do? Did you want to build on what you had or change it?

RW: We were working with Storm Molley. I can't recall ever meeting with Storm on this, maybe once, but certainly there was no drive or interest or force from him to do this, but Hugely [spelled phonetically] didn't like it, didn't like the present one.

VH: Hugely Gray?

RW: Right and said, "What can we do with this? We know what Dr. Fredrickson liked about it. Let's see what we can do." And so we did another -- I'm sorry I don't recall the name of the designer that did this. He was a young fellow, had just broken off from another studio and did really beautiful work and unfortunately he moved back to Miami, Florida and became executive art director for some airline down there. So anyway meeting with Hugely and so forth we got an idea of how the logo was going to be used. It was going to be used in publications, in signage, it was going to be used in slides and you know things like that. So we went back to the drawing board, came up with a new design where the triangles, the two triangles were actually joined and I believe Wyngaarden was director.

VH: No he didn't come in until the '80s, so this was still Fredrickson.

RW: Still Fredrickson? Fredrickson looked at it and said, "You know that's a lot better." This is heresy from Hugely. It's a lot better, but what can we do to show our relationship, our important relationship, to other organizations, other health organizations, like our grantees, like the cancer hospitals, like -- I don't know pharmaceutical houses? And so said there's an important link that we play in this effort. So by taking out a little bit of each triangle we made a link and also we made a flask, or glassware that's used in the labs and so forth.

VH: And it's open-ended so it goes out.

RW: Right. So basically that was it.

VH: And why was it decided, do you know, to put the words around the outside instead of NIH on the inside?

RW: Right.

VH: Does it matter? I mean was there a reason or?

RW: No it just --

VH: Looked better?

RW: Looked better and it also confined the image and it also worked well with H.E.W.'s and DHHS, which were circular. This also, because of the double triangle, allowed us to do it in color, especially for the centennial, bicentennial, where the lettering was done in a medium gray which gave a silver look, the outside triangle was in a blue and the inside triangle was a red. So it gave a very patriotic look.

VH: And you're speaking of the 1976 Bicentennial, of the Declaration of Independence, but there's another anniversary that I want you to talk about too and that's the NIH Centennial and there a special logo was designed for that. Can you tell me about that logo?

RW: There was a contest for the employees of NIH. The MAPB people were excluded, could not participate and so the prize was a \$100 war bond or savings bond and Hugely said, Okay we'll put it out and see what comes out and then we'll bring it back to you and we'll clean it up. So they awarded the prize to this one logo. I guess there wasn't many to choose from --

VH: But it shows the number 100 and a microscope inside.

RW: Right. And he brought it to us to clean up and fix and whatever, and the person that found out about it raised holy heck.

VH: Didn't want you to change it.

RW: Right. So they -- you know basically we just cleaned up the type and --

VH: Left it like it was.

RW: Left it like it was.

VH: And it was only used for a couple of years.

RW: Yeah.

VH: And I'll try to get you --

RW: It had really no long life.

VH: And then went back to the double triangle --

RW: Yeah.

VH: -- inside.

RW: Now another point, back in the '80s or actually it was the later part of the '70s or '80s the scientific directors wanted DRS, Division Research Services, those services, to be evaluated by professionals from the outside. Each branch was to have one or two outside people, people with credentials, people that were very big in their fields to come in and look at everything they were doing and make suggestions on how they could be improved or were they doing everything they could or could they try something else or whatever? MAPB, Medical Arts and Photography, brought in George Nelson who was a well-respected artist,

graphic designer from New York and he has done many things or did many things. One he did was the logo for Abbott, Abbott Pharmaceuticals.

VH: Oh Abbott Pharmaceuticals, okay.

RW: Yeah he you know he did a lot of stuff and that's the only thing I can remember at the moment. He evaluated what we were doing, our publication design, our posters and of course the logo [unintelligible]. You know they were excellent and had no suggestions really. He -- I'm alarmed at -- it seems that every time a new director comes on board they want to make a name for themselves or show that they're doing something and they like to either revise or change the logos that the institutes have and you know for instance neurology and heart, lung and blood, which basically is the logo we did, they have added typed and so forth and it really doesn't go well with the [unintelligible].

VH: Some of the most bitter battles that I have ever witnessed have been over logos.

RW: Oh yeah.

VH: People are extremely opinionated about what they like and don't like and what an artist thinks sometimes is taken into consideration and sometimes it isn't.

RW: Oh I don't think they trust artists, with their lifestyle and things like that. But a lot of things said about logos especially in the '60s. GE, General Electric they were going to clean up theirs which is kind of [unintelligible] and went to something more bolder and then decided, hey no we'd better leave it alone. Coco-Cola was tinkering with theirs, and they ended up keeping theirs with just a slosh at the bottom. But Pepsi, Pepsi-Cola, did redo theirs and I hear that they wish they hadn't. That perpetual, Prudential -- I'm sorry Prudential cleaned up their Gibraltar and you know it followed almost week by week how abstract it got and then it went back to more realist, but logos are logos. Someone once said that every baby should be born with a logo.

VH: [laugh]

RW: But -- and then others have said a good logo is something it's on a sign and you're driving down the highway at 70 miles per hour and it registers.

VH: Yes, the golden arches.

RW: Yeah. It is an organizations identity. It's their face. It's how the public recognizes you and if you keep changing it people wonder what is this? What happened to the old?

VH: It also struck me that people like to give logos nicknames. NASA has had two different ones and the one I remember they called it the meatball, because it was round and the one that we currently use -- well as I said Storm Molley called the first NIH logo the sprung triangle and then he called -- this one has been called the coat hanger and the wool mark, because it looks similar to the Wool Associations trademark.

RW: But if you put them side-by-side they're --

VH: Oh they're very different.

RW: Yeah.

VH: But I mean I think people just generalize when they're giving them nicknames to know and just to kind of round this out if you have seen the T.V. series Medical Investigations which features the NIH doing actually what the CDC does, it's a very bizarre sort of thing, but they've taken this logo and it's like they've bent one of these arms down so that it's clearly not the NIH logo as it is and yet it's the same thing. They've twisted it in order to keep it. So somebody recognizes this and --

RW: Well as I said I saw it recently on the website, thought it looked very good. I saw it on the Natcher building and it looks good in signage and it looks good on publications and I think people identify with it.

VH: It's simple, but it conveys. That's what you really want.

RW: Yeah and it's versatile but --

VH: And here we are. Is there anything else you want to add before I turn this off?

RW: I can't --

VH: And I did forget to do one thing at the beginning of this tape and that is --

RW: Turn it on. [laugh]

VH: No to tell you that we were tapping recording and get your assent on tape if that's okay with you.

RW: Yes.

VH: It's okay. Good. Well thank you very much I appreciate you doing this and this will help document something that people see all the time, but rarely think about.

RW: Well did you know about the -- anything about that?

[end of audio]