

Buoy info file: Isaacs, John

John Dove Isaacs

Dedication of the John Dove Isaacs Building
September 10 1998
Scripps Institution of Oceanography

Today belongs to John Isaacs, our greatly respected and sorely missed colleague. In honoring John we also are honoring that small band of scientists who have been described as "pioneers". It was this group and their students who, in the immediate post WWII years transformed this institution into the world leader that it is today. Claude Zobell, Russell Raitt, Francis Shepard, Per Scholander, Carl Hubbs, Victor Vacquier, Martin Johnson all under the leadership of Sverdrup and Revelle. I mention Johnson because we were fortunate in being able to save the cottage he lived in for many years. It was T-29 but it is now the Martin Johnson House and it, plus three other cottages, are all that remain to remind us of the aspect of the institution where they worked.

John Isaacs was one of this assemblage that both fashioned and maintained the special character of the institution. I insert "maintained" for it was not easy to maintain its special character and its central role in the world of global environmental research while coping with the enveloping growth of a new campus of the University of California. I would love to take your time and mine to talk about these wonderful scientists and what they accomplished but today is John Isaacs'. John was different. His work cannot be disciplinarily categorized. It was genuinely global. He made important and original contributions to all the disciplines involved in the study of the oceans and that included productivity, fisheries and ocean engineering as well. His interests and applications literally spanned the entire universe of human presence.

His perceptions were global. This has become a very popular word but one could say that John had invented it. While his primary interest was the ocean, he never separated his thinking from the global connections with the land and the atmosphere. For John it probably started with his almost absolute absorption in fishing and fisheries. The quantum stimulus for both John and the institution was the failure of the California sardine fishery in the fifties. John understood almost immediately that it was more than just over-fishing and in that a climate change was a contributing cause. There is no time here to detail the clever series of researches he undertook to support this hypothesis rather we note that this lead him to look at the El Nino and other periodic climate phenomena more closely. John began to fix his attention on the sea surface anomalies in the Pacific. (The SST's) These are patches of ocean several hundred kilometers in extent that have markedly higher or lower temperatures for the average for that month. They seemed to maintain their identity for months, sometimes for as long as a year.

John, and others, saw in this a basis for climate prediction. John initiated a buoy program to begin to exploit this concept. This is probably the first experimental program that recognized the fundamental role of the oceans in climate. This was at a time when ONR was looking to develop important new initiatives and when we brought John's program to them, they enthusiastically bought in and it was on its way. Eventually the descendants of the initial buoy program became so large and effective that a formula was used to pay for a building that would house much of the activity. This was the second time that this formula that converted part of the overhead money was used for a building. The first time was for the Deep Sea Drilling Project.

I first met John on about 1952 when we both served on the Mine Advisory Committee. That was also when we met his wonderful family who visited us in Dobbs Ferry. They did not meet all my family because my son was not yet born. However, over the years I had myriad opportunities to learn to appreciate the depth of John's thinking. Most often it was informal, in his office, over sherry at our home in La Jolla Farms while he was on his way home to Rancho Santa Fe. Else, it would be over a campfire in Baja when the others had retired. I must say that my belief that John was typical in SIO helped convince me to come to Scripps.

The idea of naming this particular building for John came to me about two years ago as I was passing the point below the building. It was not just the name NORPAX but the beautiful vista of the Pacific at that point. I imagined John standing there musing about some idea that I and others would hear about the next

day. I do not know why we did not take today's action earlier. Of course, John's passing was so sudden that there was not the opportunity to focus on such matters. Still, it turned out well that we waited these fifteen years. The explosion in the activity surrounding climate and the aspects that John was concerned about such as the El Ninos, the SST's, and the possibilities of short range climate prediction have underscored the acuity of John's pioneer visions. So much of the activities in this and other institutions have their roots in John's work that we see it as most natural that this building on this spot that is devoted to global observations dedicated to John Dove Isaacs.

William A. Nierenberg