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## Fausto Bocanegra Oral History Interviews, 1988

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Fausto Bocanegra Oral History Interviews
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9561
<b>Date:</b>	1988
<b>Extent:</b>	0.5 cu. ft. (1 document box)
<b>Creator::</b>	Bocanegra, Fausto, 1926- , interviewee
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9561, Fausto Bocanegra Oral History Interviews

### Use Restriction

Restricted. Contact [SIHistory@si.edu](mailto:SIHistory@si.edu) to request permission.

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## Historical Note

Fausto Bocanegra (1926- ), mechanical assistant, carpenter, guide, patrol, general laborer, and animal caretaker, worked on Barro Colorado Island (BCI) from the early 1950s to 1988. Born on November 6, 1926 in Buenaventura, Colombia, Bocanegra arrived on BCI on October 7, 1952 at the age of twenty-six. He first came to the island as a temporary construction worker, building the new laboratory building. Due to his excellent work he was requested back by the foreman, Francisco "Chi Chi" Vitola.

Over the years, Bocanegra's versatility served him well. He became the principal caretaker for director Martin Humphrey Moynihan's large collection of monkeys and other animals. He also served as a very knowledgeable guide to the island, not only for visitors but for scientists who wished to study the flora and fauna of the area. As a member of an unarmed anti-poacher patrol, Bocanegra captured poachers in a number of instances. In addition, he operated the launches carrying messages and transporting materials and visitors between Frijoles Station and the Island, cleared trails for general use, and attended to general maintenance of the Island. Bocanegra retired in 1988 after thirty-seven years on Barro Colorado Island.

The Canal Zone Biological Area (CZBA) was established in 1923 on Barro Colorado Island (BCI) in the Panama Canal as a reserve for scientific study of the tropics. Originally designed as a consortium of universities and government agencies by Thomas Barbour, William Morton Wheeler, James Zetek, and others, CZBA was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution in 1946 and in 1966 was renamed the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI).

## Introduction

The Oral History Project is part of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. The purpose of the project is to conduct and collect interviews with current and retired members of the Smithsonian staff who have made significant contributions, administrative and scholarly, to the Institution. The project's goal is to supplement the published record and manuscript collections in the Archives, focusing on the history of the Institution and contributions to the increase and diffusion of knowledge made by its scholars.

The Bocanegra interviews were added to the Oral History Collection because of their rich documentation of Barro Colorado Island and the people who lived and worked there. Additional information about the Canal Zone Biological Area can be found in the Records relating to the Canal Zone Biological Area, Office of the Secretary, 1912-1965, and the Canal Zone Biological Area, Records, 1918-1964, which are also housed in Smithsonian Archives. The Oral History Collection also contains several other sets of interviews on the history of the research station.

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## Descriptive Entry

The Fausto Bocanegra Interviews were conducted in August of 1988 by Giselle Mora. The original transcript is in Spanish. An English translation was also prepared by Maureen Fern with comments by George Angehr, Jorge Ventocilla, and Georgina De Alba. The interviews discuss Bocanegra's youth, over thirty years work on BCI, and reminiscences of fellow workers and scientists such as Martin Humphrey Moynihan, Oscar Dean Kidd, Carl B. Koford, James Zetek, Adela Gomez, and Francisco Vitola, c. 1952-1988. There are 75 pages of Spanish transcript and 89 pages of English translation.

The interviewer, Giselle Mora provided the following introduction to the interviews: History is made by men and historical events have diverse protagonists. Historic events and circumstances are lived out in different ways by the different groups mentioned, and it's common that the history that is printed and recorded represents only one part of the historical process under consideration. It is also common that the voices of the most humble and their vision of history are those that are ignored or actively silenced. This manuscript attempts to contribute in part to the recognition of the role the workers of "el monte" or "the bush"--to use the words of Bocanegra--have had in the establishment, growth and consolidation of the biological station on Barro Colorado Island, Panama, which today is one of the most important centers of investigation in natural sciences in the tropics.

These transcripts record the words of Fausto Bocanegra one week before his retirement and present, in general, his version of life on the island and changes that occurred on it between 1952 and 1988. All of the interviews were carried out on the balcony of a bedroom at the station, where Bocanegra and I shared many cups of coffee. Fausto Bocanegra--"Boca" like we all call him--dedicated thirty-eight years of work to Barro Colorado Island and carried out every task imaginable: game-keeper, guide, research assistant, electrician, sailor, carpenter, and retired as a trash collector. For those of us who lived on the island, Boca was an institution unto himself. But Boca was, first and foremost, a trustworthy man, a diligent worker, and a generous friend.

The final manuscript is the result of six hours of taped interviews and the reader should always take into account that what he is reading is a transcription of the spoken word. I decided to leave intact colloquial language, incorporating sounds and casual expressions; nevertheless, the text has been edited to eliminate contractions and phonetic errors that make reading difficult. The interviews were very slightly structured, and I am conscious of the fact that they do not clearly record the richness of Boca's knowledge; nevertheless, the reader will find in these pages accounts of island life at the end of the fifties, information about life in the Canal Zone during that era, and perhaps most importantly will be able to know a little about Bocanegra and how he evaluated his thirty-eight years of service on Barro Colorado Island.

The realization of these interviews has been a privilege and a pleasure for me. I want to thank Mr. Fausto Bocanegra for having shared with me these and many other pleasant conversations. My thanks also to Dr. Joseph Wright who has supported and been a driving force behind this project since its beginning. Giselle Mora, Barro Colorado Island, October 24, 1988.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African Americans -- History  
Hispanic Americans -- History  
Monkeys  
Tropical biology  
Zoology

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes  
Transcripts

Names:

Angehr, George  
Bocanegra, Fausto, 1926-  
Fern, Maureen  
Gomez, Adela  
Kidd, Oscar Dean  
Koford, Carl B.  
Mora, Giselle, interviewer  
Moynihan, M.  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Barro Colorado Island  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Canal Zone Biological Area  
United States. Canal Zone Biological Area, Barro Colorado Island  
Ventocilla, Jorge, 1955-  
Vitola, Francisco  
Zetek, James, 1886-

Geographic Names:

Buenavista (Boyacá, Colombia)  
Panama

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## Container Listing

### Interviews

#### Interviews

##### **Interview 1: August 15, 1988**

#### Interviews

Covers his background, and early days at BCI, c. 1956-1966, including: Background; first day at BCI; early relationship with foreman, Francisco "Chi Chi" Vitola; building water tanks with Luis Ruiz and Carmelo Rodriguez; how he came to work on the island; working with the contractors to build houses and the laboratory on BCI; farming after the construction was finished; return to work at BCI at request of Chi Chi; segregation at BCI in the 1950s; changes implemented by Carl B. Koford; reminiscences of James Zetek; reminiscences of the foremen on BCI, especially Chi Chi; description of the gasoline powered cart; reminiscences of Martin Humphrey Moynihan as director; description of the landslide of 1959-1960 and subsequent move of Barbour House to its present location; the small garden; reminiscences of feeding Moynihan's birds and monkeys; guiding the visitors on the island; work demands under Moynihan; description of cages in the forest and his responsibilities feeding and caring for the animals; patrolling for poachers; reminiscences of Moynihan's monkeys; his rehabilitation when bitten by a monkey; other help given to Moynihan; maintaining the generator and the launch; collecting rainwater for use on the island; installation of electricity from Frijoles; Thomas Elliott Snyder, Theodore Christian Schneirla, Roger David Akre, and Carl William Rettenmeyer's research on army ants; John Henry Kaufmann's research on coati mundis; reminiscences of Frijoles; and marriage in 1966.

#### Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-54 (Spanish), and transcript, pp. 1-26 (English), of audiotape recording.

#### Interviews

##### **Interview 2: August 22, 1988**

#### Interviews

Covers his reminiscences of BCI while looking at photographs from the STRI library, c. 1930-1988, including: Changes in the layout of the houses from the 1930s to the time of the interview; the water tanks and how they functioned; maintaining the wharf; the establishment of a women's house for female visitors; farming on Slothia Island; experimentation with termite stakes and houses; Neal Griffith Smith's research on oropendolas; reminiscences of James Zetek; accidental biting by a tapir; the beauty of the island; clearing trails and maintenance of the island; patrolling and shuttling by boat; reminiscences of Moynihan's successor, Ernest Hayden; care and feeding of the forty monkeys; discrimination of past years and how it has changed; reminiscences of Oscar Dean Kidd, his wife, Ken Clifford, and Frijoles; reminiscences of his happiness on BCI; assistance to Alan Paul Smith and Stephen S. Mulkey with botanical collecting; hunting with a scientist to collect blood for research purposes; getting permission to leave the island; reminiscences of difficulties with Chi Chi Vitola; recreation and fishing on the island; discovering poachers on the island; working with Moynihan and Nicholas D. Smythe; maintenance of the boats and

occasional boating accidents; discussion of his retirement; his family, home, and way of life; injuries he sustained on the island; reminiscences of the other workers, Florentino Gomez, Pablo Rodriguez-Martinez, Moises Troya, and Abel Gomez; reminiscences of Adela Gomez; accident with the cart; reminiscences of Frank Michler Chapman's pet monkey, Claudia; reminiscences of John Henry Kaufmann; stories about the coatis and the tapirs; discussing photographs taken by Michael H. Robinson; and stories about other animals.

#### Interviews

Transcript, pp. 54-75 (Spanish), and transcript, pp. 27-88 (English), of audiotape recording.