

# Holleman Business Succession Forum<sup>SM</sup>

## **GILBERT M. GROSVENOR**

Chairman, *National Geographic Education Foundation*  
Member, *National Geographic Society Board of Trustees*

Interviewed by Vernon W. Holleman, III

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THE HOLLEMAN COMPANIES

4602 North Park Avenue

Chevy Chase, MD 20815

Mr. Gilbert M. Grosvenor interviewed by Mr. Vernon W. Holleman, III, year 2010.

INTERVIEW

Mr. Vernon Holleman: Welcome to the Holleman Business Succession Forum, Gil. This is a real treat for me. Under full disclosure, I think I was one of your original test cases for *World Magazine*, as a friend of Hovey's.

Mr. Gilbert Grosvenor: That's right, you were.

Holleman: And that was a welcome Christmas present each year. And it was neat to see my kids' excitement over the kids magazine -- well, a lot to talk about.

Grosvenor: Okay.

Holleman: And I thought maybe the most fun thing would be to say -- I kind of wanted to go back to your roots, curious whether you were given a stuffed globe instead of a stuffed teddy bear as a child. So, start with your childhood, if you will, and sort of your first memories of understanding what your father and grandfather were up to here at the National Geographic.

Grosvenor: Oh, I think my first earliest memories are about various explorers that came through the house. I can remember one, a lady name Laura Bolton, who nobody has ever heard of. But, she had a fur coat on and I can remember -- this would have been back in the thirties, late thirties, and her claim to fame was she shot her coat. Man, I thought that was pretty neat. Of course, today I think it's atrocious.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: So, that was probably my earliest memory. Then I remember vividly the first time I had my picture published. I was, I don't know, probably 10 or 11 years old. I

was sitting in a meteorite that had fallen and it had gone through the atmosphere in such a way that it had carved out like a doughnut. And I was sitting in that meteorite, short pants, coat and tie, and it was published somewhere and I thought that was pretty neat. Well, the end of that story is I am down at the Smithsonian about six months ago, at a reception, and it was a reception in the gems and jewels collection. Damn if that picture isn't framed there right next to that meteorite, now some 75, 70 some years later.

Holleman: And it's been there the whole time?

Grosvenor: I don't know whether it's been there the whole time or not, but it's there now.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: So, I spent a long time in this city.

Holleman: Was your love of the outdoors and geography instant and natural, from your memory?

Grosvenor: No.

Holleman: No?

Grosvenor: No. Outdoors, yes. Geography or journalism, publishing, no. As a matter of fact, when I went to college I was pre-med. I would have made a terrible doctor, but I was pre-med. Then, during my junior year at Yale there was a disastrous flood in the Netherlands in February, 1953. There was one story in the *New York Times* about it and that was it. Then in the spring my roommate and I saw a poster, on a university bulletin board, about an international work camp in the Netherlands. They were looking for kids from Yale, and if you were interested sign up. So, my roommate and I signed up, went to the Netherlands and had an extraordinary experience repairing the dykes for about six or

eight weeks. But, the thing that really was amazing to me was the fact that this flood was a worse, worse flood than when the Dutch intentionally flooded the Netherlands to keep the Nazis out. It was the case of a very abnormal high spring tide, a severe weather front storm, all combined with a high tide that particular day. They all coincided at that time, and it just practically destroyed it. A third of the Netherlands was underwater. Well, we did our work and we helped repair the damage. I took some pictures, and the *Geographic* decided to publish the story.

What I learned from that story was there were hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of people reading about that flood who had never seen or heard anything about it before. And, a light bulb went off. I could envision myself influencing people and disseminating knowledge about the rest of the world that they would not normally get. It was clear, even back in the fifties as we were starting to fly commercial airplanes a lot, that we were going to become an interconnected world. This institution would be absolutely in the prime position to be a leader in disseminating information. That is what really drove me here. I really wanted to be a part of that.

I went in the army after college and came back from the army and started work immediately here. So, I have been here 57 years.

Holleman: Tell me a little bit about after the early childhood, coming to the house and people like that, did you pay much attention to what your dad and grandfather were doing? Would they try to steward you at things, or was there some I am cooler than they are, I am going to do my own thing attitude, or somewhere in between?

Grosvenor: To be honest with you, in the early days I was not that interested from an education point of view. In other words, I did not say man, this is pretty neat what they are doing, I think I would like to prepare myself to work here.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: No, I really didn't. I was single-tracked on being a doctor.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Sure, I was interested in what they were doing because they were bringing interesting people around. I was not interested in pursuing that until I had that light bulb turned on at the university.

Holleman: Had you worked here ever as an intern or any time in the summer?

Grosvenor: No. No.

Holleman: Did you come to the office much?

Grosvenor: No.

Holleman: Where was the office? We are at 17<sup>th</sup>.

Grosvenor: Same place.

Holleman: Okay. So, it was the same location just a different campus?

Grosvenor: Same block.

Holleman: Okay.

Grosvenor: Yes. Just a different building.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Sure, I came down here for lectures and I would come down and I would be able to meet interesting people. But, it was not on my radar screen at all.

Holleman: Did you have siblings?

Grosvenor: I did. I had an older sister and an older brother. Older brother was strictly interested in the United States Navy. He went to the Naval Academy and went into aviation. He was a test pilot. That is all he ever wanted to do, from the time he was a young child. So, I was the only one that was -- and my father and grandfather never ever, ever pushed me.

Holleman: Yes. That was one question I was going to ask.

Grosvenor: Yes. They never, which was smart. Because I think they pushed my brother and -- well, I know they did. They pushed my brother when he was young, and I think he rebelled against it. He carried a name he always rebelled against. It was Alexander Graham Bell Grosvenor, and he hated the name and I think that helped drive him away. So, they kind of left me alone.

Holleman: You were the runt?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Yes. So, you were the youngest of three?

Grosvenor: I was the youngest of three, right.

Holleman: Yes. And everybody grew up here in Washington?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: That was another thing. I moved up to Connecticut. I lived with my mother in Connecticut during my high school years and was there during the college years. So, I never was down in Washington for seven years. Then I went two years -- I came down, started to work, and then was drafted into the army for two years. So, it was a nine year span that I really was not in Washington.

Holleman: Okay. There is a lot of history here, a tremendous amount of history, almost 125 years, if my calculator is working.

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Obviously, most of that is beyond the scope of this interview. But, help us. Do a quick synopsis, maybe, of the overview of the roots of the Geographic and the family's involvement.

Grosvenor: The roots of the organization, going all the way back to the beginning, it was founded by Gardiner Greene Hubbard, he is my great-great-grandfather, and Alexander Graham Bell. Bell took an interest in the place, and was the second president. He pumped money into it when it was really small and insignificant. As a matter of fact, the first magazine we published had a circulation of 165. So, he supported it.

Holleman: The purpose was to promote --

Grosvenor: It was -- yes. The purpose was to diffuse geographic knowledge. It was a scholarly publication. It was founded basically along the lines of the Royal Geographical Society in England. It just would never have survived. We were founded at a time when organizations were institutionalizing in the United States, American Philosophical Society and Chemical Society, were all formed -- both formed about the same time.

Holleman: 1888, if I'm not mistaken?

Grosvenor: Yes. 1888. It was a time for this country to start doing this sort of thing, following the lead in Europe, and this was a scholarly organization for the first five or ten years. It clearly was not going to work. Bell really was the one that said we

should be publishing a popular journal. We should not be aimed at the university committee. We should be aimed at the lay audience. That was huge. Then one day -- well, as a matter of fact, here is one of the pictures. One day my grandfather did not have enough space or did not have enough material to fill space in one of his magazines, and he had a bunch of pictures on his desk. So, he decided to publish them, figuring he would be fired, and point of fact they were so popular the rest is history. We became a photographic driven magazine from that day forward, and that has served us well.

Holleman: That was really almost by accident?

Grosvenor: He says it was, yes.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: And I am sticking to what he says.

Holleman: Yes, right. That's the story and I'm sticking to it. Well, if I have got this right, so, Alexander Graham Bell hires your grandfather because he needed an editor.

Grosvenor: That is correct. Bell's father-in-law was Hubbard.

Holleman: Okay. But then Grosvenor was Bell's friend.

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: And one of his sons --

Grosvenor: One of his daughters married my grandfather, Gilbert Grosvenor.

Holleman: Got you.

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: And, is it true that part of the reason that the first Grosvenor got here was his interest in young Ms. Bell?



Grosvenor: Oh, no doubt about that.

Holleman: Yes?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Yes. Okay.

Grosvenor: Yes, no doubt about that.

Holleman: So, some things do not change.

Grosvenor: Well, let me tell you -- well, hey, Bell is just as bad if not worse himself. I mean, Bell was a teacher of the deaf and Bell moved to Boston from Canada. He actually came from Scotland to Canada to Boston and invented the telephone in Boston, technically. I mean, that is where it ended up. One of his backers was a guy named Hubbard. Hubbard happened to have a daughter who was profoundly deaf, by the name of Mabel, and Bell -- Bell now was, I guess, 18, 19, maybe 20. Mabel was 15. And Bell fell in love with a 15-year-old and wanted to marry her, and Hubbard said whoa, wait a minute, you are a little early. Come back when she is 18. When she was 18, they got married.

Holleman: Wow.

Grosvenor: They had a great marriage.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: A really great marriage. Yes. Bell couldn't complain -- we call him GHG. He could not complain about GHG courting Elsie. He did the same thing.

Holleman: Got it. Got it. So, your grandfather comes here as a very young man and takes over as editor of the *Geographic*.

Grosvenor: Right.

Holleman: Then the story you just told, which is where the picture part -- the photographic part really took off, in the *Geographic*, what year is that roughly?

Grosvenor: Right. Oh, I would say probably in early 1892, 1893, is when we really started publishing pictures.

Holleman: Okay.

Grosvenor: It is in that era.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: It really was not feasible to publish photographs before then because they were made with steel plates.

Holleman: Oh, sure.

Grosvenor: It was very expensive to do that. You could publish maps, straight line lithographs, but you could not publish photographs realistically.

Holleman: Now, let's talk a little bit, to give some context here, the key leadership roles at the *Geographic*, at least in those days and maybe still to this day, was editor of the magazine, is that right?

Grosvenor: In the early days, the editor of the magazine was not really the chief executive officer. So, GHG was not the chief executive officer when he first came in. But within, I guess, five or ten years he became the chief executive officer. Because the magazine started to control the institution. So, from that day forward to 1957 we had one person who had the title of President and Editor.

Holleman: Okay. That was a dual role?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Yes. And he played that role for many years?

Grosvenor: Yes, he played that role for many years. Let me correct that. It was 1967 we split the titles.

Holleman: Okay. Tell me a little bit about what you know about your father and your grandfather's working relationship, and some of his decisions to come here.

Grosvenor: My father went to the Naval Academy and directly after graduation, or I guess about a year or two after graduation, he decided to come to work here. My grandfather welcomed him because we were expanding. Through the Navy and through his own travels he was pretty worldly. It seemed to be a good fit. He was ready to settle down, ready to get married, and this was something he wanted to do. I am sure my grandfather was pleased that he came here. As a matter of fact, knowing my grandfather, he probably urged him much more than my father urged me. Because it was different times.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: In today's world, that is liable to drive you away.

Holleman: That time, was this considered or thought of as a family business or not really?

Grosvenor: I think in the early days it was thought of as an albatross. I mean, obviously Bell had money from the telephone. So, it was not a money issue. It was supported at least a decade or two. So, it was of marginal financial value. But, it started to grow. It started to grow in circulation. It started to grow in image. GHG started a research and exploration effort early on, even when we did not have much money. We were supporting people like Peary, ten years later Hiram Bingham down in Macchu Picchu. Then, we were getting into different types of exploration, which has expanded

dramatically in the last 50 years. So, it was expanding editorially with the magazine but it was also expanding dramatically as a scientific, educational not-for-profit.

Holleman: So, you mentioned that when your father took over from GHG, your grandfather, that there was some notable expansion. Tell me a little bit about that.

Grosvenor: Well, my grandfather really built the place. There is no doubt about that. But he also stayed on too long. That held up people underneath him. He had the same administrative assistant, who became associate editor, a man named John Oliver La Gorce, who worked for 40 years under him. JOL never got a chance to run the place, because GHG did not want to retire. So, you had a backlog of very senior people and very senior ideas, too. For example, after World War II until 1957, when MBG became editor, we did not even publish on the Iron Curtain countries. You know, it was just a very staid organization then, and it changed overnight.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Literally overnight. No longer were we employing people out of Chevy Chase Club. We were going to the journalism schools, and we were able to pick the best photographers, those majoring in photojournalism, and also those majoring in print journalism. We were picking them off other magazines, because we had young leadership at that time. It was an extraordinary time to be here. I mean, you know, if you were on vacation for three weeks and you came back you would not even recognize the place.

Holleman: Now, at this point you are here, right? So, when you start out of Yale in the mid-fifties your grandfather is still at the helm?

Grosvenor: Still at the helm, but I really -- I was only here, probably, two months before I got drafted. He was in Nova Scotia. So, I never really worked for him. I was hired by his assistant, John Oliver La Gorce, but GHG really was not here. Sadly. I would liked to have worked with him. But, the timing was not right.

Holleman: Now, when you got back here was there any dialogues about a path for your role here?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Oh, wow, look at that.

Grosvenor: I came back. When I came back from Vietnam there was a man named Thomas W. McKnew here, who was executive vice president on the business side. He asked that I be assigned to him for two years, which I did. I was in a training program working for him, for two years. Brilliant guy. I learned an awful lot about the business, some things what not to do but mostly what to do. That is when I started writing notebooks, which I have to this day. I have been doing it for 50 years. But, I learned a lot from him, mostly about the business side of running an organization. That was invaluable to me. I hated it at the time because, you know, I wanted to go out in the field. I wanted to be a photographer. I wanted to be a writer. I had to wait two years to do that. But, it was good. It was a good thing to do.

Holleman: Do you think your father put you with him so that there would be some separation between the two of you?

Grosvenor: I think he put me there because he did not have that background, and knew it was really the driving force that he had to rely upon for business decisions. He did not like that. But, he had to accept it because McKnew was a businessman and

came out of the business sector. He had worked for the Charles Tompkins Construction Company here in town. They got along fine. But he was sometimes frustrated that maybe he did not have that background. He was right, it helped me immensely. It gave me, among other things, I was one of the -- when I became editor, I was one of the few editors in the country that had enough business background that I could make decisions on printing paper, postage, promotion, payroll, all those kinds of things that you do not normally do.

Holleman: Sure.

Grosvenor: I think that was invaluable.

Holleman: Tell me a little bit about your working relationship with your dad.

You all overlapped for a pretty good amount of time.

Grosvenor: Only ten years.

Holleman: Ten years?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Okay.

Grosvenor: I learned a lot from him. He was quite different from me in that he basically ran the magazine by the seat of his pants. He could care less about trends. He could care less about how much something cost. All he cared about was editorial quality and making the magazine vibrant. He had a wonderful way with young people. He was a very enthusiastic guy. He retained that right up to the day he died. These young staff members that he hired the first couple of years that he was made editor became the backbone of the magazine for the next three decades. I happened to be one of those

guys. There was probably 15 of us, maybe not that many, 10 or 15. It was an extraordinary time.

Holleman: So, this is really the decade of the sixties, essentially, that you are talking about?

Grosvenor: Yes. Yes. Right, '57 to '67.

Holleman: Yes. And, tell me a little bit about when you went from that sixties period to -- if I'm not mistaken, you took over as the president of the organization in '70? Is that right?

Grosvenor: Took over as editor.

Holleman: Editor, okay.

Grosvenor: Not as president.

Holleman: Not as president.

Grosvenor: I was the first one not to be president and editor at the same time.

We just got too big.

Holleman: Too big, yes.

Grosvenor: Yes. For better or for worse. To this day, I'm not sure getting that big was necessarily that good, but who knows?

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: That is the way it was. That was what we were going to do. But, I had the benefit of Dad's thinking as well as my grandfather. They were entirely different persons. So, my grandfather was more of a Victorian type and my father was a modern gung ho type. I was sort of in the middle. I majored in statistical psychology in college,

so I brought a lot of statistics to the organization, which he hated. He just hated it with a passion.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: My theory was if we are going to spend half a million dollars producing a book, for \$10,000 up front I can find out whether people want to read the book or not. I can remember to this day Dad said I do not care what you are going to tell me about this, I am going to publish the book I want to publish because I know the members will like it. That worked, until we published a book on garden and songbirds and it was very successful. We sold like about 300,000 copies of it. We were so excited about that, that Dad decided we were going to publish a book on water prey and game birds. I thought, this is the time for me to move. So, I said yes, that sounds really great but let's test it. Let's find out if people want a water and game bird book. Oh, he said, we do not need that. We know from the song book they love birds. It will be great. So, we spent all the money upfront. When it was time to go to print, I said let's just test this before we make the print on it. No, we do not have to do that. So, we printed 300,000 copies of the damn book and we sold, I think, 50,000 copies. That was the last book we ever published without statistically finding out whether people wanted the book or not. I believe as recently as 10 or 15 years ago we were using some of the signatures that we had printed in that book for different things. But, that was a painful experience.

Holleman: But an important one for the organization.

Grosvenor: From my view, yes.

Holleman: And for you, and as well for him.



Grosvenor: Then I got him willing to do the same thing on magazine articles. We started asking members what they thought of various topics and how we covered it, and that started back in, let's see -- it was 1960, probably. Today, we cannot live without that. I mean, you look at half the papers on my desk and they will tell you what article was the most read in the book and the magazine and what are the least read, et cetera. We do that for everything now.

Holleman: Yes. Sure.

Grosvenor: But we did not have to then.

Holleman: Yes. Because it was new?

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: What about -- now, your grandfather lived until, I think '66.

Grosvenor: '66. Yes.

Holleman: So, in that sixties time frame, would he guide you or give you advice or did you use him as role --

Grosvenor: Yes. He and I were pretty close.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: And that is -- you know, ask any shrink, grandfathers and grandsons are sometimes very close and their fathers are somewhere in the middle.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Yes. Grandpa and I were really close, and he used to come to me to complain and I used to go to him to complain. And, yes, I worshipped him, no doubt about it.

Holleman: Did he have a role until he died?

Grosvenor: He had a role until, I would say, he was in his mid-eighties. He was chairman of the board. Chairman of the board was not and is not that powerful today.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: The power is with the president and CEO. But, yes, he was chairman.

Holleman: Yes. The working relationship with your dad on responsibilities and interaction, as you took over as editor, did those -- were they daily or --

Grosvenor: Well, no. I think Dad had waited so long to do what he wanted to do that he was determined that he was not going to keep me in the wings until I was 55. The day he retired at 65 he was out of here.

Holleman: Okay.

Grosvenor: We never saw him again. He sailed his boat. He shipped his boat over to Greece. He did a couple of articles on Greece. One of them was particularly interesting to me, because when he was editor I did a story on the Aegean Islands. I spent the summer photographing. I had a wonderful time. I was not married. I had just a great time. I was on this boat for six weeks. I came back. I wrote the story. I took the pictures. Well, he was editor. So, my God, he nibbled away at this thing ad nauseum. So, when he retired he decided he wanted to take his boat to the Aegean Islands. So, he did. He decided he wanted to do a story on the Aegean Islands. I said well, that sounds fun. So, he went over there and his son by his second marriage by this time was old enough to take pictures, and we sent a photographer over to shoot some pictures and it

was a big production. And we did, we published another story on the Aegean Islands. But I can tell you, I did not heavily edit that story.

Holleman: I thought you were going to say the opposite.

Grosvenor: No. I did not heavily edit that story.

Holleman: I thought you were going to say --

Grosvenor: I got a lot of laughs out of it, though.

Holleman: I bet. That is great. Help me understand, and the listeners understand, how you were thinking about, as you were coming up in the organization, catching your father's eye and that of the Board, as the Geographic clearly was not your traditional family business and you had to think more broadly than, I think, your average person might.

Grosvenor: We are a not-for-profit.

Holleman: Right.

Grosvenor: So technically, we have no control whatsoever. You have to earn your control. That is a different ballgame. I mean, I have got to earn it from a group not from one person. Usually lots of times when you go into a family organization you have got to work your butt off to gain confidence in your father. In my case, I have got 24 board members. That is a different thing.

Holleman: At what point did you realize that you were sort of going from what maybe was a family driven business to sort of big business?

Grosvenor: This will surprise you. I do not think it happened until the day I retired, and for a very good reason. It was clear that we were being left behind in the television era. Yes, we had television. My father started some television in the fifties. I

continued that in the sixties and seventies and eighties. But, television big time were channels, and then it became big time cable, the Rupert Murdochs of the world. And we did not get into that. When I retired -- actually, the year before I retired we decided to get into it. When I retired, my successors went into it big time. We established a channel in partnership with Rupert Murdoch, and that is when really the institution changed because television is a very hard-nosed business. There was very little room to be warm and fuzzy, and we changed dramatically, I would say, in the last 15 years. Today, we are a major player in television. It is the tail that wags the dog. It was a good decision to do it, that is for sure. It was a time in journalism where we either had to fish or cut bait. We either had to play with and become one of the big boys in television, or we were going to be doomed to printed media, and 15 years ago it was clear that printed media was really struggling. We were not particularly -- we had a circulation of 10 million then. We were not struggling, but everybody else was. Surely we were going to follow. So, my successors wisely really devoted tremendous effort to building up our electronic communications capabilities. In the process, we became much more of a professional businesslike organization than we were before.

Holleman: Was there anything in that timeframe in the -- I guess you officially retired in '96, is that right?

Grosvenor: Yes. Right.

Holleman: Was a time in that early nineties timeframe where you struggled with having one foot in the new and one foot in the old --

Grosvenor: Oh, yes.

Holleman: -- and that balance?

Grosvenor: You bet there was.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: The magic year was 1990/1991. We basically had been growing, and it was competition within my family who could gain the most circulation, my grandpa, my father or myself. We got up to 10,800,000, and then in 1990/1991 suddenly we started losing circulation. We lost about half a million circulation. So, we went down to about 10.5, and then between '91 and '96 we lost another half million. So, when I retired we had 10 million circulation. At the height of my career, we had 10.8 million. When I came to work here, we had about -- I'm guessing a million, million and a half, something like that. So, we peaked probably about '91, and that becomes huge because anybody can run a magazine if you are going to gain a half million circulation every year, because most of your expenses are already allocated to the first 10 million. So, another half a million, you would have to be an idiot to lose money. And we didn't. But, boy, when we started to lose the circulation it works just the opposite. You do not spread your fixed costs over as big a base, and it gets much harder to do. That continues to this day. Our circulation, if you include the local language editions, is probably 6.5 million, 6 million. That's a lot harder to maintain than -- not harder to maintain, but a lot harder to spread finances over than a larger circulation. It happened to other magazines. *Life* Magazine folded at the peak of its circulation. *Saturday Post* folded at the peak of its circulation. I think *Holiday* did too, but I'm not -- I cannot remember completely about *Holiday*. But, a lot of the big guys folded at the top.

Holleman: Take me through some of the decisions you started making as '92, '93 et cetera unfolded relative to the --

Grosvenor: Well, the most obvious one, it was in 1991 we had 2,850 employees. When I retired we had, I think, about 1,600. That was before television. Today, we probably have 1,600 but several hundred are television. So, really, we dramatically downsized since 1991. We were able to do it pretty reasonably painlessly, because certainly during my tenure we never fired or we never pink-slipped anyone. We had early retirement packages. They could take them or not take them, and they were generous so people generally took them. So, we had no problem downsizing. As I say, we did not have to fire anybody and that was huge.

Holleman: And did you feel any -- were you so focused on growing the business and maintaining the business, et cetera, that any concern about family legacy beyond you was not even in your mind or was there some of that?

Grosvenor: No.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: No. I really basically -- not one of my three kids really was interested in pursuing journalism, and I did not push them. You do not want to come into this place unless you are totally committed to it, particularly if your name is Grosvenor. Because more is expected of you.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: If you do not perform you are going to be in deep trouble.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: But today, unless you are a real specialist, you're not going to be hired. I would not be hired today, that is for sure. Nobody in my family -- my

grandfather would not have been hired, my father would not have been hired. It is just different skills.

Holleman: Sure.

Grosvenor: On the other hand, we did okay.

Holleman: Yes. What did you do with the people that were going to succeed you to nurture, keeping some of the roots of the business with the new opportunities in television?

Grosvenor: Well, that is really interesting. I said to you I worked for this fellow Thomas W. McKnew. And Uncle Tom told me that one of my prime responsibilities, if I was going to get anywhere in this organization or if I did get anywhere in this organization, I should hire not only my successor but my successor's successor. You should be at least two successions down the line. He and I had a lot of discussions about that. We both agreed that it was really risky in this unique organization to pull in somebody from the outside, that if you could get them homegrown it would be all the better. That was not entirely possible in my case. I did hire my successor, but I hired him two or three years before I retired.

Holleman: Was two or three years enough time, or do you wish you had done it earlier?

Grosvenor: I wish I had done it earlier. I wish I had done it at least five years earlier.

Holleman: Did you get help identifying that person, or did you just know here is what skill set he needs and started looking for him?

Grosvenor: I started looking for him maybe three, three and a half, four years before I retired. I started really getting anxious about it, because I believe in retirement at 65, at least retirement from active CEO day to day.

Holleman: Day to day, sure. Did you get help from the Board? You all have a relatively robust board of close to 25.

Grosvenor: I certainly brought the Board into the process every inch of the way. I told them what I wanted to do. I went out and identified John Fahey, and he had tremendous experience at Time-Life Books. I thought if I could talk him into coming here that he would do a great job. I felt he needed some help and some interim help, so we hired a guy named Reg Murphy to come here for a couple of years. Reg Murphy is a very pragmatic publisher with a lot of experience with the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Baltimore Sun*. There were some things that we really had to do, some of it technical, some of it not technical. We really clearly had to get out to get out of the fulfillment business, which is a huge operation. He had a lot of experience in that. He was responsible for us moving out of that.

Holleman: When you say fulfillment, that means printing the thing and finishing?

Grosvenor: No, not so much printing and finishing in our case. It is managing the membership.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Managing the membership, they did all of that. They managed the membership. They managed the publication sales and payments. They did no editorial.

Holleman: I see.



Grosvenor: But, they did total responsibility for sending the magazine out. It evolved eventually into also printing. That was in late, I don't know, '95, '94 -- '95, I guess. So, we were getting so big we were starting to basically spin off operations that in large publishing houses were already spun off. Advertising was not that big a deal with us. Again, in those days it did not control our destiny. We wanted to increase advertising, so we basically became much more aggressive in advertising.

Holleman: The term brand is used nowadays, as you know, with great frequency and importance. There are a number of organizations, I think, that have built one as a result of their focus on their core mission.

Grosvenor: Right.

Holleman: It just so happened all the sudden they woke up one day and they were, in fact, a great brand, as opposed to trying to build a great brand.

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: So when in your tenure, or maybe even before you started, did you sort of conceptualize that you all had a fabulous brand, and how important a role does that play today?

Grosvenor: I believe that we earned our brand back in the twenties and thirties, and we had certain principles, journalistic principles, that we lived by, not all of which are applicable today. But those principles were, in my view, the base of the formation of our extraordinary brand. I think we started thinking seriously about our image back in the thirties, maybe even the early twenties. But I know I have been obsessed with it in my career. Like everything Dad did, he assumed it was going to stay that way and everything he did enhanced the brand. He just had an innate ability to see those things.

So, he increased the value of the brand dramatically, I think, without trying. I had to work at it. I worked hard to maintain and enhance the brand. When you come right down to it, the only we have that is superior are people and the brand. Other than that, anybody else could do what we do. The same in your business, I would think.

Holleman: Yes. So, what are some of the most important lessons you sort of share with other business leaders, whether it is organizations like yours that are geared around journalism or any sort of business, relative to leadership transitions? I mean, I heard you loud and clear about thinking two people ahead, and understanding the context of what skill sets are important at a given moment. How else would you clarify that?

Grosvenor: I would say continuity, committed employees are the most important we have going. I am not talking about the head of the organization. I am talking about the head of research. I am talking about the director of photography. I am talking about issue editors. They hand their skills off to the next generation. I cannot think of more than two or three people who left this place prior to the mid-nineties -- I bet I could count them on one hand. That is huge to me, the continuity of people.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: If a researcher has been here 30 years, he or she knows what our standards are and they pass them on. If those people when they are hired cannot hack it they are gone. But it has to come from within, and I believe we had that. I believe we still have it. I am obviously not as close to it as I was. We certainly had it in the mid-nineties. It was just certain things that we had to do and do well. We had to be accurate. We had to be factual. We had to be non-biased. We had to be objective. These are all things that we built our reputation and our brand on. I used to have people call me up at

night, 3:00 in the morning, because they were having a fight in a bar and they were having an argument over where some place is or something. So, they call me to arbitrate. It wasn't just once, either.

Holleman: Is that right?

Grosvenor: Yes. You know, most people would be irritated. I was pleased.

Holleman: I love it. Well, of course, now you would not get those calls because somebody would just google the answer.

Grosvenor: That's right. Just -- yes, and we had to make that transition.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: You know, have we made it well? Yes, we made it better than most people. I think we could make it even better. I think that our interactive presence is getting better. I mean, everybody is learning that. I think we are all new at it. The whole ball game is so new out there today.

Holleman: Well, let's talk about that as we finish up, because I read a piece in the history of the organization about the big shift that Alexander Graham Bell took the *Geographic* through when he went from scholarship journal to the popular magazine, which you mentioned earlier. I think it is easy today to say how vastly different everything is, because we are living in it and we sort of want things to be more challenging. But, how different, truly, and maybe it is vastly different, is the shift that he did than the shift that had to go from being mostly print focused to having a big chunk of media? I mean, is it fundamentally that different?

Grosvenor: I don't believe it is fundamentally. I still believe that our reputation, our brand, our image depends on how well we present material, how people

perceive we are fair and objective. We still try to do that as much as we can. I would say the only area that we have maybe compromised objectivity, and we have done this since day one, is in the environmental area. We have always been pro-environment, even back to the late 1800s when we published a story on the pollution in the Potomac River. But, we have accentuated that. It has become a major part of our image today, and I think that is a good thing. But basically, it is just an extension of what we were doing. The main fundamental difference today is we are dealing with an electronic image versus a printed page image, and with an electronic image you do not have control of your destiny as much as you do with the printed media.

We are very fortunate in having Rupert Murdoch as a partner because he likes our brand, and he realizes that we are the best ones to maintain that brand. He realizes that that brand helps him. We realize that his expertise in electronic media far exceeds ours, and he has a much, obviously, broader base than we have. So, it has been a wonderful relationship. We have been very fortunate in that respect.

Holleman: But it sounds to me, if I am boiling this down, even after 125 years, what is still at the core of what makes the Geographic unique is what were at the roots of the Geographic, and that is the quality of information --

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: -- and the integrity in which you deliver it.

Grosvenor: Absolutely.

Holleman: So, one of the things you have also mentioned is how people have stayed here, you know, whole careers. So, do you give -- and obviously, you are currently still chairing the Geographic Education Foundation.

Grosvenor: Yes. But that is --

Holleman: But do not throw that off, because there is some value -- I have seen a lot of value in what we would call walking around wisdom. That is what I would think is your current role, to maybe a larger degree than any title.

Grosvenor: Well, I assume it. I am not sure --

Holleman: Well, whether people want it on a day to day basis, they will miss it when it is not there. But, do you all think much about -- because obviously it sounds like your father and grandfather both played some walking around wisdom role. Has that just sort of happened by nature or is that something you all have thought consciously about?

Grosvenor: I do not believe a day passes that I do not think about our brand, our image, and are we living up to it.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: None of us are perfect. But this has been true for the last 50, 100 years, if you want to start a hornets' nest in here, just discover something that we are not doing correctly. I guarantee you, all hell will break loose. That prevails to this day. I do not believe there is any employee with any responsibilities whatsoever that won't agree with the fact that we covet and we will work to any extent possible to maintain that brand. Brand if anything is more important today than it was 100 years ago.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: It takes so long to earn it. We are not so much defenders of our brand outside of the institution as we are inside. But, we defend it pretty fiercely inside,

and I do not think you will find an employee in here that would not agree with that. We make mistakes. Do not get me wrong. But I do not believe we make mistakes of ethics.

Holleman: As you look out, and obviously one of the things that has driven you for a long time is making sure that, in particular, young people are getting the kind of geography and skills and lessons and education that you all have long promoted, how are we doing in that score?

Grosvenor: Poorly.

Holleman: Is that the country or the world or both?

Grosvenor: Both.

Holleman: A lot of times, when people finish their -- you know, hit that 65 you have talked about they -- who have led organizations, whether family businesses or not, they struggle with what to do next. I have known people who have not handled that very well. We oftentimes try to help people think through. Obviously that was a road that was a little easier hoed for you. But is that your next decade, continuing to focus on this?

Grosvenor: I have been lucky, Vernon. I have had a life after work since I was 65. I have been allowed to stay in here from 65 to 80 to push the geography education program, and I am forever grateful for that. I have no desire to go back and tell people what to do on the Society, but I really value the opportunity to have a second career. It has not been easy, and I am not sure it is going to get easier. Every time we make a little progress, somehow it gets squashed. But I believe it is as big a problem facing this country as the economy is, but nobody is starving to death because of education. But it is just as big a problem, and we are just not addressing it. Do we have national will to

address it? I am not so sure. I am not so sure. There are pockets of excellence out there, but they are very few and far between.

Holleman: What is the Geographic's Education Foundation doing specifically to try to help?

Grosvenor: Well, we have started a foundation. We have about \$150 million in the foundation, which is a drop in the pocket in the educational world. We have an incredible cadre of volunteers. Some of them have been working with us for 25 years. We have alliances in almost every state, to impact K through 12 public school. We were successful in establishing and writing the standards for geography, which were accepted by the country. Thanks to Bush 41, geography was declared a core subject as a result of the Charlottesville summit. We have an AP, Advanced Placement, now. It is only five years old, but we have got 85,000 kids taking it, which is just amazing. All that said, our kids are still way down in the pack. I do not see enough improvement to be optimistic.

Holleman: How do you measure it?

Grosvenor: Well, it is easy to measure. I mean, you either know geography or you do not. Geography, to me, is a very broad discipline. Geography is not -- place and location is just a minor part of geography. Geography is about processes. Geography is about GIS. Geographers invented GIS, and suddenly GIS has become the sexy thing, which I find amusing because it has been around for a long time. But, we are interested in processes. We are interested in why you can walk into Wal-Marts and not find one piece of clothing made in the United States anymore. Where is the textile business? What nations are basically economically on the move? We are interested in the fact that China, for example, is relocating 300 million people in the next 20 years. They are about

five years into it. They are now utilizing between 40 to 50 percent of all the aluminum, copper, cement and steel consumed by planet Earth. If you do not -- that just dramatically influences what goes on in this country. That is important. It is important that we understand that, and that we have to compete in that world and we are not doing it. Cultural geography, need I say more than what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan? I mean, our people are just blind to the cultural realities in Iraq. They have not the faintest idea about the Sunnis and the Shiites and the Kurds, the problem with the Kurds. That is pure geography. Environmental issues are pure geography. Those are the kinds of things I am interested in.

Holleman: And the Geography Bee reflects that?

Grosvenor: Oh, absolutely.

Holleman: Because you do not -- it is not --

Grosvenor: As much as you can.

Holleman: -- just point at a map.

Grosvenor: Yes. We try to, but it is hard to do in a bee where you have -- you have got 12 seconds to answer a question.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: And you cannot pontificate.

Holleman: No, you cannot.

Grosvenor: It is hard. It is hard. But, we try as much as we can in the Geography Bee.

Holleman: Yes.



Grosvenor: But in the geography education program, you know, we put \$5, \$6 million a year into this program, where we teach and empower teachers to teach geography. We teach them about dimensional aspects of geography, and that is what is important to us.

Holleman: And isn't the Google connection positive?

Grosvenor: It will be.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: Yes.

Holleman: Well, I cannot thank you enough for sharing the Geographic story and your role in it, and giving us a little insight as to what it was like following any number of legends.

Grosvenor: Oh, yes. Actually, you know, the bottom line is I learned a lot from them but probably more important than anything I was motivated not to let them down.

Holleman: Yes.

Grosvenor: In my own inner motivation, I could not accept the fact that I might screw up.

(Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true and accurate transcription, to the best of my skill and ability, from a digital recording.

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Jane W. Gilliam, Transcriber