Participants & Date of Interview

Narrator: Amy Paster

Interviewer: Leslie Delserone

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Interview Introduction

Delserone: I, Leslie Delserone, am here on December 11th with Amy Paster, head of Life Sciences Library at the Pennsylvania State University. The U.S. Agricultural Information Network (USAIN) Oral History Special Project launched during USAIN's 30th year to document USAIN's history as experienced through its members and close affiliates. The goal is to document personal memories, experiences, and perspectives of the impact of this professional organization. So Amy, thank you for your interest and consent to participate in this oral history special project for USAIN.

Paster: You're welcome.

Delserone: We previously reviewed the oral history process and the permission agreement form. The interview consists of ten questions, and we've set aside an hour to hear from you. Remember that you don't have to answer every question [laugh] and if you don't like your response to a question, we can record it again.

Paster: All right.

0:01:00

Delserone: You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript before it is shared or archived. Do you have any questions?

Paster: Nope.

Delserone: OK! So let's get started. All right. Our first question is about our annual conferences. Since 1990, USAIN has hosted a bi-annual conference. If you have attended—well, I know you have attended [laugh]—USAIN conferences, which USAIN conference was your favorite, and why?

Paster: See, that's a tricky question, because all of them are memorable for one reason or another. Auburn being my first one. North Carolina, where I was co-chair with Debbie Currie. Wild parties in Ohio—

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: I mean, it's—[sigh]—my favorite one?

0:02:00 I think that would probably be [pause]—and it sounds strange—but when we were in Kansas State.

Delserone: Oh, Manhattan?

Paster: Manhattan. Even though it rained and you landed in another state and had to drive, you just got to see so much of the country from that conference, and a totally different part of the country that I hadn't seen before, and the different environment. I can't remember exact details, but the programming was very good.

Delserone: Oh! Good.

Paster: But yeah, I think that one—and everything was purple. The redbud was in

bloom, so—

Delserone: Oh! [laugh]

Paster: —it was just beautiful. Other than the rain, but—

Delserone: Yeah, well, that's what happens when you have springtime conferences,

right?

0:03:02

Paster: Yeah.

Delserone: If there's another one you want to talk about—don't feel like you have to limit yourself to just one conference, if there's another one that really stands out in your mind as well.

Paster: Probably the—I guess we were calling it the half conference. We were doing the conferences in odd-numbered years, and then we had to switch over to even-numbered—it was decided to switch over to even-numbered years because we were running up against competition from the ACRL conference and a couple of others. So in the mid-nineties, we had three conferences in a row.

Delserone: Oh!

Paster: Three? Two. Even, odd year, even year. Yeah, we had two in a row, so we were up at Cornell.

Delserone: Oh, nice.

Paster: And actually it was in the fall, so it wasn't in the dead of summer, and the conference opened with a wine tour.

0:04:04

Delserone: Oh, of course! [laugh]

Paster: So that was—yeah.

Delserone: Oh, that would be good. [laugh]

Paster: And because we had just met the year before, we were able to dig a little deeper into some of the topics that we had talked about the previous year, which was nice.

Delserone: Oh, that does sound good, actually. OK! Well, thank you. So for our next question, we're going to ask you to describe your involvement with USAIN. [laugh]

Paster: I've got my notes right here.

Delserone: OK. And the first part of the question is, why did you decide to join this organization?

Paster: Penn State has been involved since the beginning. My supervisor was invited to the organizational meeting, and then a couple of people from Penn State went to the first one in Minneapolis.

0:05:02

Delserone: Hmm!

Paster: And when they came back, they were like, "Oh, yeah, this is just fabulous. It's very focused. It's all the land grant people. It's—yeah." So when the call for Auburn came out, it was like, "Well, now it's my turn to go." So that's why I went to the Auburn conference, just because of what everyone said about it. And back then, you have to remember, in the beginning, it was run by administrators, department heads, deans of libraries. It wasn't the run-of-the-mill reference librarian. It was all the supervisor-type people, administrators, who were running it. So it was a slightly different almost scary type of thing, because I was meeting people that I had heard about, or read their articles, and now I had an opportunity to meet them and interact with them, which was a lot of fun.

0:06:05 So that's—yeah, I basically became involved because of the opportunity to just meet and be with all of the land grant people. And this is before the internet really started, so it was, like I said, just an opportunity to be face-to-face with them.

Delserone: Are you currently a member of USAIN?

Paster: I am still a member of USAIN, yes.

Delserone: Thank you. [laugh]

Paster: So it has been like since—I was looking—I was trying to look this up. I know I went to the Auburn conference in '93, so I was a member before that. So I'm thinking I've been a member since like '92, somewhere in there.

Delserone: Wow, wow.

Paster: I have the directories. I could go and look, but—

Delserone: That's OK. I think this is a pretty good estimate. [laugh]

Paster: And then you were looking for how I've participated?

0:07:00

Delserone: Yeah, we'll get to all that in just a second. I'm sorry to—

Paster: Nope, go ahead.

Delserone: So I think you actually addressed this middle question of why do or did you choose to be a member of USAIN when you talked about joining, but is there anything else you would want to elaborate on?

Paster: At that time, there was ALA Science & Technology Section, which is very broad, and ALA is very large. There was the SLA food ag and nutrition people, which was a little more focused, but the majority of the people were corporate. USAIN was the best of both worlds. It was ag people, so it was focused, and it was land grants, so it was university people. It was small. It was independent, so we didn't have messing with ALA administration and all that other stuff. Basically, we made it up as we went along.

0:08:06

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: And we did.

Delserone: You did. And you did a good job, too! [laugh]

Paster: Yep. So far so good. And it was very inexpensive, very reasonable.

Delserone: What leadership roles, if any—

Paster: Ooh!

Delserone: —have you served within USAIN? [laugh]

Paster: All right, let's see. First conference was in '93, and Mathews—Ellie Mathews—Eleanor Mathews—from University of Iowa, invited me to join the cataloguing interest group. There was a cataloguing interest group at the time. And my position was cataloguing and reference, so I thought, "This is perfect." At lunch, we broke up into little groups for the interest groups to meet, and nobody joined me at the cataloguing table.

Delserone: Oh.

Paster: So at the report-back I went, and the first thing I did as a new USAIN member was to kill an interest group.

0:09:08

Delserone: [laugh] Well, they're not supposed to just go on—yeah.

Paster: They're supposed to be fluid, yeah.

Delserone: Right, right.

Paster: So yeah, '98 to '99, or actually '98 to 2000, I was the secretary-treasurer. In 2001, 2002, the president, which includes the president-elect and past president. I was a director for a number of years. I couldn't tell you which years. And I've been the archivist for probably 25 years, probably since I was the secretary, I guess, because that would make sense, that I was holding on to that stuff. Again, before email and everything. So I was keeping all of that.

0:10:00 I believe I started the AgNIC Interest Group. I'm pretty sure I did. I remember looking for how many names we needed.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Creating AgNIC Interest Group. Oh, PDL—chaired the Preservation and Digital Library committee for a while. Was the initial contact person for Project CERES. And right now, I am on the Awards Committee.

Delserone: Hmm! Great.

Paster: That was everything.

Delserone: Well, thank you for your help and service. [laugh] My goodness. I mean, I knew you had done a lot, but yeah. All right, we're going to switch gears just a little bit. How have your professional responsibilities changed during your involvement with USAIN?

0:11:02

Paster: So my professional responsibilities at my current position?

Delserone: Mmhmm. Or, yeah, in your professional life.

Paster: In my professional life, all right. I started at Penn State in '85, and I had an interesting position, like I said before. It was two thirds reference, one third cataloguing. So I was the sole science cataloger for the Penn State system. I was cataloguing our University Park's science materials plus the campuses.

Delserone: Wow.

Paster: We also had, I think, four other individuals in these what we called adjunct positions. So for a while, there was somebody in Earth and Mineral Sciences who did the same thing.

0:12:00 For some reason, they had them in the sciences. But those people didn't last very long. I lasted the longest and did it until I became the head of Life Sciences in '95. And so I did it for about ten years.

Delserone: Wow.

Paster: So I went from reference and cataloging to head of the science library. And just a month or two ago—there has been more administrative changes here, so I am still trying to figure out what my job is. They still call me the head of the Life Sciences Library, and I'm responsible for the day-to-day operations of the floor, but I no longer supervise librarians, or have a direct—my direct supervisor is a department head instead of an associate dean.

Delserone: Huh.

Paster: So we're still trying to kind of figure out what this position really is.

0:13:05 Which is kind of fun, because if anyone has a question, I just tell them, you know, "Go ask the department head." [laugh]

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: So I can finish up on projects and do other stuff and—yeah. So that's—basically I've stayed in the same institution for 34 years, but with technologies and administrative changes, the job is never the same.

Delserone: Right. And I suppose just changes in what our users expect, right? The way they've done things has changed, and so we have to change, too.

Paster: Oh, yeah. That's the whole thing with the death of reference. When we—I don't know, when you started, too—but you had to have two or three people at the reference desk, because there were no computers or databases, and you had to walk them through how to use a paper index.

0:14:00

Delserone: Right, right.

Paster: And then go to the card catalog and find where the journal was. And it was a lot—yeah, a lot of hand-holding, where you don't have that now.

Delserone: Right. Hmm.

Paster: And the same thing with making purchases. We used—it was the U.S. Mail. You would get catalogs and you would be thumbing through them and trying to do that. And now there's a lot more of the, oh, Yankee—what do you call those guys? approval plans

Delserone: Oh, yeah—YBP or—

Paster: Yeah, the stuff just comes automatically depending on a profile, and you're just looking for the oddball stuff, the esoteric titles.

Delserone: OK, well thank you. How has USAIN contributed to your professional development? And if you can, please share a few specific examples.

0:15:00

Paster: I was looking through this yesterday, and it really kind of amazed me, because I thought, "Oh, yeah." Well, I just—in January, Allison Level and I wrote an article—"Thirty years—" Was that the one? Yeah, "Thirty Years of Preserving, Discovering, and Accessing U.S. Ag Information." And that was—no, that was the other one. I wrote an article with Allison back in January.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: But it was, more or less, the history of ag libraries, and that was in collection development. And then it's like—oh yeah, then with Michael Cook and Cristina Caminita out of the PDL committee, we did that—the 30 years of preserving, discovering, and accessing. That was in *Library Trends* back in 2017. And that was the issue that Sarah Williams was the editor for, because it was like a second edition of the "Collaboration in Ag Librarianship and Information Work."

0:16:06 And there were a lot of USAIN people who were authors in there. I think half of USAIN wrote in it!

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Or all of USAIN wrote in it. I'm just looking through the names. I mean, there was—yeah, it was—I would say that this issue, this special issue that came out, is a USAIN publication, because it is all USAIN people, and it's collaboration in ag librarianship, so it's everything that we do. Toni Grieder and Barb Hutchinson kind of

wrote the introductory chapter, which was a history of USAIN, accomplishments through strategic collaboration. And because I'm the archivist, I got a lot of calls from them looking for information. So I even got an acknowledgement, a thank you, in there. So that was nice.

0:17:03 I think a lot of the collaboration and what's come out of it was through the preservation committee. So there was a variety of articles. But if you look at—let me see if I can do—are you still there?

Delserone: I am. I am.

Paster: OK. On the USAIN page, and this really surprised me, if you go to—not conference proceedings—not that one—past conferences, conference, conference, join, leadership, awards—there's one that has links out to various—it's the resource one. Where did that one go? I'm still trying to figure out this new—about us, greetings, our mission—OK, maybe it was under achievements.

0:18:00 Yeah. Under 'About us', achievements, there's the National Preservation Plan, which was the start of the PDL. The AGRICOLA surveys, I was involved in. The National Agricultural Information Infrastructure, I was involved in. Because I was just looking at the—was I in this one, too? [laugh]

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Well, they all add the same words to them. Yep! The collaboration and cooperation among libraries, cooperative extension, and ag experiment stations in land grant universities, the result of a 2004-2005 survey. I think that was the white paper. But I was just looking at that going, "Oh yeah, I remember that paper and what was involved in that." So I would say a lot of my research has been through USAIN, all these years.

0:19:04

Paster: Is that all—yeah, I think that was all of them.

Delserone: It's a lot, Amy. [laugh] And actually, in answering that question, you answered the next one, which was to describe any collaborative research you participated in that grew out of your relationships with colleagues in USAIN. [laugh]

Paster: Yeah. I wrote with more of them than—yeah, I have a couple of joint articles here and things like that. In, yeah, recent years, most of it has been through USAIN colleagues.

Delserone: Well, again, it's one of the advantages of being kind of a smaller organization—

Paster: Yeah, yeah.

Delserone: You can network and meet people a lot easier. OK, is there anything else you want to add or share about that?

Paster: No.

0:20:00

Delserone: So share a funny or silly memory about USAIN. And what theme song would you suggest best embodies our organization? [laugh]

Paster: Oh, gosh.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: There's gotta be more than one. For some reason, I remember in Arizona, at the reception or party, there was dancing on the tables.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: It was—yeah. It's mostly the wild—well, yes, the wild parties that were

held.

Delserone: Remember, you can edit the transcript later [laugh] if you like. [laugh]

Paster: Well, actually, as kind of a learning experience, when I co-chaired the conference with Debbie Curriein North Carolina—and this is what I tell a lot of people who co-chair,

0:21:00 It's like, "Don't worry, you're the only one who's going to notice if anything has gone wrong." Everyone else will just say, "Oh, it was a lovely conference. Everything was just perfect." And that's what people said about North Carolina, at least I hope they did, in the review of it at the end there. But there were just so many quirky little things that happened. Like the hotel was sold a month before the conference.

Delserone: Oh, no!

Paster: And they never told Debbie this.

Delserone: Oh, no.

Paster: We were doing—I think we were having either a panel discussion or something, and they were setting up in the next room for a wedding, and all you could hear was silverware and china being set up. The best part was we were having a breakfast, and the bacon caught fire.

Delserone: Oh, no! [laugh]

Paster: Yeah, something went—with the Sterno there, but—

Delserone: [laugh]

0:22:00

Paster: Oh, there was—there were leaky rooms. I mean, it was—but people don't remember that aspect. They remember that was the first year we did kind of a tech expo. We all went to another building that they had just opened at the campus there, that had more technology, which at the time was—groundbreaking types of technology which is very common nowadays. So we were able to do some different things. And that was the birth of kind of the tech expo type of thing. What song?

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Who came up with these questions?

Delserone: [laugh] Well, I'll let you—

Paster: I'm going to have to think about that one.

Delserone: OK, we can come back to that one, yeah, or not even worry about it.

Paster: Yeah, because there—yeah, like said, each conference and each event would have its own theme music.

0:23:05 I mean, there was the birth of cornhole in Ohio.

Delserone: [laugh] Oh, my. [laugh]

Paster: And because that conference was in a very rural area, it's not like you could run out and do something, so everyone would just kind of hang out in the hotel lobby, or go across the street to a little gas station convenience store that had a hitching post for Amish horses.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: And I think we were asked to leave the lobby at one point. Things were just getting a little too out of control, so—

Delserone: [laugh] Rowdy librarians! [laugh]

Paster: It was very rowdy. Yeah.

Delserone: [laugh] Well, why don't we—we'll set aside the theme song and maybe come back around to it at the tail end. So the practice of information exchange has been revolutionized by the internet and social media since USAIN launched.

0:24:05 How do you think information technology has impacted USAIN's operations and mission?

Paster: It has definitely changed how we've done things, and I think it has allowed us to expand and do greater things. Again, when we first started, it was before the—it was right on the cusp of the internet starting, but it still—a lot of it in the first few years was by telephone and U.S. mail. So when we met, it was a very special occasion, and we would get just about 100% participation. Everyone would come, because it's the opportunity to see everybody, and we all had become best friends by that point.

0:25:01 With the birth of the internet and all that it could do, and all that it brought, and our collaboration with AgNIC—and at that time, AgNIC was doing the whatever centers they called them—Centers of Excellence. It just became very interesting, because like AgNIC was ahead of its time. We have an MOU with AgNIC. And then came things like eXtension. Is that it? eXtension, or—?

Delserone: Yeah.

Paster: So there were growing pains when the internet came out. And then it's just because the life cycle of technology is so quick, things—and at the beginning, you're like, "Oh, this will last 10, 15, forever years."

0:26:06 But it doesn't. It lasts like three years, and then you're onto the next thing. And it was growing pains trying to learn how this new cycle was going to operate. And at the same time, we were having a lot of the administrators dropping out of leadership roles, and moving down the line to the front line people—the reference librarians and other people. So it also took on more of a practical approach instead of how administrators are, with strategic plans and all that type of stuff. We still need that, but not as much. So as USAIN grew, and the numbers grew, and it just became a lot more practical in nature, and how can we work with the technologies. And the meeting every other year is still good—we like to get everybody together—but it's not as—there's interactions in between now.

0:27:07 We can do interactions with—it's webinars. It's meeting at AgNIC or SLA or ALA or ACRL or other places. And it has made the world smaller. So you can talk to people and collaborate with them, like I was lucky enough to do with those articles. It took a year to write the one with Michael Cook and Cristina Caminita. We never met personally. It was all phone calls and sharing documents and things like that, which you wouldn't have been able to do in the early '90s. So it has allowed a lot more to happen and a lot more collaboration. And I think just bringing everyone closer together.

0:28:00

Delserone: Thank you. OK, agricultural practices, food science, veterinary medicine, and natural resource management have all changed significantly since USAIN launched. From your perspective, how have changes in these fields impacted the profession of agricultural information?

Paster: It has allowed USAIN to expand. When it first started, it was fairly well focused on agriculture. And in recent years, we've added like the AgEcon people. That little group dissolved and I now have their archives here, with the USAIN stuff.

Delserone: Good.

Paster: So that is all here. So we've been able to expand our focus.

0:29:01 We have AgEcon. We have the social responsibilities aspect of it. It's going more towards—even the vet people, because they're having a hard time to find a place where they fit in. MLA isn't quite—depending on what their focus is, MLA isn't quite everything that they want, so we have a lot of MLA people in USAIN now. The definition of agriculture has been growing. It's not just farmers or whatever. When we did that Ithaca study, when I was talking to—I forget her name, but the person who was organizing the Ithaca study that a lot of people participated in. And I had to explain that the definition of agriculture—it's everything. And then she goes, "Really? Food science?"

0:30:03 I go, "Uh, yeah. You like to eat, dontcha?"

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: It's not just the farmers and pesticides and things like that. Yes, you have to grow the food. It has to go through production, so there's sanitation laws. There's law. There is processing. There's packaging. There's marketing. There's transportation. It gets into business. It goes everywhere. You name a topic, and you can link it back to agriculture.

Delserone: Mmhmm, yep.

Paster: And that, I think, just really blew her mind. So—

Delserone: [laugh] That's OK. That's good you enlightened her about stuff.

Paster: So it's—and you can blame everything again on technology, but it has allowed us to participate and bring in all sort sorts of other people.

0:31:04 Librarianship isn't what it was even ten years ago. And we've been able to collaborate. We have MOUs with, like I said, AgNIC, and I think there might have been something with AgEcon, so we could get their materials. It's preservation. It's the projects we've been working on with CRL. Project CERES. So it's a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and a lot of everything.

Delserone: Yeah. Much more interdisciplinary.

Paster: Very. Yeah.

Delserone: Even since I joined in 2005, I would say it has really blossomed.

Paster: We had a lecture here on Tuesday night, and I heard one of the speakers as they were leaving, giving some words of encouragement to some of the grad students.

0:32:00 And he was like, "Don't over...don't overfocus." Don't be, you know, "I'm just going to study the growing corn in this one little aspect, or one little part of South Africa or whatever." Go broader. Think about the whole biome, not just your one little piece of it. Because that's I guess what grad students tend to do. They just really super-specialize. And the lecture was actually about biotic—different communities and how they all interact. So it was very interesting.

Delserone: So kind of like USAIN, I guess. [laugh]

Paster: Yeah, well it was—Eva Pell used to be at Penn State.

Delserone: Oh yeah. Mmhmm.

Paster: Yeah. And then she was the head of all sorts of things here, and really proactive in getting women interested in science.

0:33:00 And she left Penn State and was head of the Smithsonian, and she retired from there, and just wrote a children's book.

Delserone: Oh!

Paster: So the seminar on Tuesday night was—they're starting an annual lecture series in her honor. So the first one was on Tuesday.

Delserone: Well, that's very cool. Good. OK, so based on your experiences with USAIN to date, what advice would you share with new members?

Paster: Join.

Delserone: Yeah. [laugh]

Paster: That is I think the—there's so many pluses with joining a smaller group.

0:34:00 It's small, so you'd think it would be very focused, but it's not. It's small enough that you can get to know everybody. We are not—I hope we are not seen as being cliquish. Anytime we see a new person, we—I think we overwhelm them with welcome! And, "What are you interested in? Would you like to write on this?" You know. There's so many things that come out of the conference year that it's amazing. Like Helen down the hall here was working on something with soil surveys, and so were some folks at Utah, so they've gotten together and are working on something now. They're actually—they just submitted a—I'm not sure if it was a paper or a poster for USAIN 2020—

Delserone: Oh, good.

Paster: —on what they've done with the soil surveys. So they've done that. So it's just all of this being able to meet colleagues in a very comfortable setting.

0:35:06 I mean, even the—some of the sales reps, we tell them, "No, you can't just sit at your table all day. You must participate."

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Whether it's playing cornhole, having lunch with someone. Once you—and the problem with that is, though, you make friends with the reps, and then they keep on calling you to ask you to buy stuff.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: It works both ways because we ask them for funding to keep the conference going.

Delserone: That's right.

Paster: Like I said, I would consider it a small group, being 125, but it's 125 of your closest friends. You know people from every state. You can always ask for help with anything. A very open group. Even the retirees, you can't get rid of. They're still there.

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: Yeah, we have to work on that a little bit more.

Delserone: [laugh]

0:36:00

Paster: And it's just—we also help with anyone going through promotion and tenure. Review letters.

Delserone: Right, right.

Paster: Reviewing articles. Keeping *JAFI*, *Journal of Agriculture and Food Information*, more or less going. Not sure how that's going these days, but—

Delserone: Well, that's a separate conversation we can have sometime. [laugh]

Paster: Yeah. But like I said, it's a very welcoming group, a very helpful group, a mentoring group. And it's just—it's the best—if you're in a land grant, it's the best organization that you can belong to. It's very inexpensive, meeting every other year. It's not—it doesn't get that expensive. I think registration has stayed within a couple of dollars the same. The hotels are very reasonable.

0:37:00

Paster: You can't help the price of things going up—food and other things—but they're constantly feeding you, so it's—

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: It works out well. See the country; join USAIN!

Delserone: Yeah. Yep. Good. [laugh] Do you want to come back around to the theme song again? Any thoughts on that?

Paster: I was just thinking—Simon and Garfunkel, *America*.

Delserone: Aww. Yeah. That's good.

Paster: Yeah, the other ones would—you know, the Banana Splits kept on going through my head, but—

Delserone: [laugh]

Paster: We'll go—yeah, we'll go with *America*.

Delserone: [laugh] Is there anything else you would like to share about USAIN?

Paster: White paper, service, changes in the field—I'm just looking through my notes that I had written down.

0:38:05

Paster: That, that. No. It's just, yeah, my favorite—my favorite group. And I'm really—I broke my record when I had to miss the Florida conference, but—

Delserone: Oh, I know. We missed you, too. People were asking about you.

Paster: Yeah, and what conference do you go to that if you don't come, people notice, and I get cards from them? So—

Delserone: Right. [laugh] Yeah. That's a bit of a testament.

Paster: You notice—yeah, you notice when somebody is not there, for whatever—even the—a lot of people have changed jobs and they're not quite in—but they still come.

Delserone: Yep, yep.

Paster: We're going to have fun this year.

0:39:00 Helen and I came up with a trivia contest.

Delserone: Oh!

Paster: Which I think Innocent is going to let us do at the welcome reception, so that will be fun.

Delserone: So USAIN trivia, or—?

Paster: Yeah, USAIN, agriculture trivia.

Delserone: Ah! OK.

Delserone: That sounds great. Good. Well, I'll look forward to that, for sure. Well, I want to thank you again for taking time to share your memories and thoughts with us today.

Paster: You're welcome.

0:39:51 End of Recording