



**Frank A. von Hippel.** *Science History Podcast*. Flagstaff: 2017-2020. Podcast

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**Published on** H-Podcast (October, 2020)

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## **Broadcasting Expertise: A Review of Frank A. von Hippel's Science History Podcast**

From nuclear proliferation to animal communication, subscribers to Frank A. von Hippel's *Science History Podcast* dive into a sea of themes as vast as the study of nature itself. Since December 2017, the professor of ecotoxicology at Northern Arizona University has conducted monthly interviews with scientists, Nobel laureates, and other experts to probe significant topics and events in science history. In each episode, specialists with diverse backgrounds guide listeners through complex subjects, grounding abstract details in their own experiences. With a knowledgeable host at its helm, *Science History Podcast* embraces tough questions at a time when professionals and laypeople alike crave straightforward, informed answers.

*Science History Podcast* boasts an impressive lineup of learned guests.[1] Most of its thirty-four episodes feature conversations with pioneers in physics, chemistry, biology, space flight, and more. Familiar names like Noam Chomsky, Pam Melroy, Peter Agre, and the host's uncle, Frank N. von Hippel, populate its feed, beckoning prospective listeners with high-profile perspectives. The podcast also digs into prescient topics, soliciting commentary from knowledgeable sources on today's most pressing—and divisive—issues. For example, von Hippel interviews several experts on environmen-

tal activism, conservation efforts, and climate change. In episode 33, his conversation with environmental attorney-turned-author Barbara Freese explores the long-intertwined histories of corporations, pollution, and public policy in the global energy sector. While largely informed by Freese's book *Coal: A Human History* (2003), von Hippel's questions also delve into her tenure as Minnesota's assistant attorney general. Freese litigated environmental law long before she studied its sprawling past—an inspiring trajectory that demonstrates the value of investigating science history, professional backgrounds aside.

The impressive pedigree of von Hippel's guests is no accident. With each episode, the host supplies a platform for rigorous and trustworthy information. In interviews, opinion pieces, and posts on the podcast's Twitter feed, he rejects the subordination of scientific facts to partisanship, especially in recent years. Unlike today's splintered political landscape, science-informed policies once enjoyed bipartisan support. While promoting his new book *The Chemical Age* (2020) on an episode of the *Joe Rogan Experience*, von Hippel explained how environmental laws enacted between 1968 and 1976 “were all passed by a Democratically controlled Congress and they were signed by a Republican president.”[2] Now, party rhetoric and alternative

facts pollute discourse. *Science History Podcast* clears the airwaves by broadcasting reliable and honest expertise.

Episodes typically follow a routine format, with some notable exceptions. Listeners first hear the podcast's theme music followed by a minute-or-less introduction of the featured guest(s). Von Hippel then launches into a series of questions that carry the interview to its conclusion. Episodes vary in length from twenty-eight minutes to two-and-a-half hours, most clocking in around the sixty-minute mark. Interviews are usually conducted remotely, though some feature chats in unique environments. A two-part installment on British explorers (episodes 8 and 9) transports listeners to the Natural History Museum in London. Three of the museum's employees describe artifacts and priceless collections from its grand, terra-cotta-encased halls. Whether recorded on-site or via Skype, the podcast offers subscribers a quality feed of diverse options.

Despite its towering strengths, the podcast's accessibility could be improved by including longer, more dynamic introductions to the interviewees' topics of choice. The host largely relies on guests to outline the historical context of their scientific expertise, producing mixed results. *Science History Podcast* showcases several excellent communicators, but some are better at explaining the technical aspects of their field than its history. The fourth episode, "Finding Pluto," exemplifies an ideal balance between the two. Kevin Schindler, a historian, and Will Grundy, a planetary scientist, share insights from their book, *Pluto and Lowell Observatory: A History of Discovery at Flagstaff* (2018). The interdisciplinary colleagues break down the origins of Lowell Observatory and its famous find into an easily digestible narrative. Their diverging perspectives illuminate the messy human drama behind scientific progress—an important lesson for listeners outside academia. Beginning each episode with an extended preface or even bantering with a regular, humanities-based

co-host may better marry the podcast's superb exploration of the hard sciences with history's penchant for instructive, human connections.

*You can stream Science History Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and other podcast platforms or via <https://sciencehistory.libsyn.com/>.*

#### Notes

[1]. Frank A. von Hippel, *Science History Podcast*, 2017-2020, produced by Frank A. von Hippel, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://sciencehistory.libsyn.com/>.

[2]. Joe Rogan and Frank A. von Hippel, "#1540: Frank von Hippel," September 24, 2020, in *The Joe Rogan Experience*, produced by Jamie Vernon, podcast, MP3 audio, <http://podcasts.joerogan.net/podcasts/frank-von-hippel>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast>

**Citation:** Kasey Sease. Review of Frank A. von Hippel. *Science History Podcast*. H-Podcast, H-Net Reviews. October, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55755>



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