Grant Shoffstall

I am a historical sociologist of postwar science and technological innovation, with research and teaching interests situated at the crossroads of sociological theory, the sociology of science, knowledge, and technology, and the sociology of culture and morality. My long-term research agenda critically examines instances of Euro-American technological utopianism during and subsequent to WWII, through the height of the cold war space race to the present. My dissertation, Failed Futures, Broken Promises, and the 'Prospect' of Cybernetic Immortality: Towards a Historical Sociology of Cryonic Suspension, 1958-1979 (henceforth Failed Futures), analyzes cryonic suspension (“cryonics”), the strange practice of freezing human corpses in the hope that scientists will at some future point achieve the necessary kinds and levels of technology to facilitate “reanimation.” I have spoken to the sociological significance of cryonic suspension in my article “Freeze, Wait, Reanimate,” which was published in The Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society in 2010. Failed Futures builds upon this article while moving beyond it in significant ways. I approach cryonics as a practice that in the early 1960s carried meaning and utopian orientation for a small group of lay-scientific social actors, whose historically situated imaginings and activities I analyze through the methodological strategy of employment: who, when, what, where, how, and why? Facilitating this analysis is a host of historical materials ranging in date from the early 1960s to the present, most all of which are quite obscure and difficult to access, and have never before been utilized for historical sociological inquiry. Recounting the episodes of catastrophic failure and controversy that punctuate the practice’s history, I use cryonic suspension as an empirical conduit through which to achieve analytical entrée into those aspects of the broader sociocultural contexts of the American postwar period that conspired in producing the utopian desire to overcome death and aging by way of ultra-high technological means (e.g. NASA’s cyborg spaceflight program, cybernetics and the cyborg sciences).