

DR. RUSSELL MAGNAGHI  
NO LOCATION GIVEN  
OCTOBER 3, 1998

SUBJECT: Becoming a historian

START OF INTERVIEW

DEBBIE WILLIAMSON (DW): What is your birthdate?

RUSSELL MAGNAGHI (RM): Okay, October 12, 1943.

DW: The purpose of this interview is to record some information about your profession as a historian. I've already showed you my list of questions. Okay, I'd like to ask you before we get started if you would sign this release form?

RM: Okay.

DW: Okay, I was wondering, how long have you been the historian at Northern Michigan University?

RM: Okay, I was officially appointed historian on April 20, 1994. And prior to that time I had come to Northern in 1960-, the fall of 1969 as a history instructor. And then you see now here I could go and I'll, I'll just do this on the tape for everybody. I could go, so now we're in brackets. I could go and then talk about how I got here, you know, how I arrived in the middle of January in the middle of a storm in 1968. And so on, and go into all the detail about that. Then I could go into, you know, where I got my degree, where I originally was from, how I went to St. Louis, how I came up to Northern, and did all of that. That would all be part of the interview. Okay, now,

DW: How did you become interested in being a historian?

RM: Okay, just briefly, I was kind of always fascinated by history, as I think I mentioned earlier when I was lecturing in the morning. We did go on vacations, my parents sort of nurtured an interest in history totally probably unknown to them, as an unconscious thing. But going on trips all around the west coast and into the west, I was just kind of caught up in history. From the time, I was sort of fortunate because from the time I started college I wanted to be a history instructor, get a master's degree, didn't really think about the PhD, and then it just kind of fell into place and I eventually got a PhD. But it was just kind of a long interest history. Interest in local history or regional history, be it the west coast, be it St. Louis, be it Upper Michigan, interest in local history.

DW: Okay, what characteristics do you possess that contribute to your work?

RM: Kind of an, I guess the important thing would be an awareness that history is more than just the books that you find, the big heavy tomes that you find in the library that are sitting on shelves, but that history is something to be enjoyed by the public, to be shared by the public and as a result I've been interested in local regional history for that reason and for instance doing a workshop like this is to get people interested in a form of history that you can go out and do yourselves. In any hamlet, village

around the Upper Peninsula there is history that can be gathered and people can do it. So I enjoy sharing the ability, the professionalism, and then the ability for anyone to go out and do this type of work. And I enjoy for instance, you'll notice around campus that I've been involved in putting up historical markers. Which again take Northern's history from an interview from a history book from whatever reports and you actually put a marker up so that when you enter the public, you people here enter the Learning Resources building from the upper level there, you walk in and you see who Edgar L. Harden is, and that type of thing I find extremely important. Part of it was probably created by my working for the National Park Service one, the summer before I came up here. And when you work for the National Park Service they are a taxed, I mean an agency that is funded by taxes and so I saw this, I just got caught up in that philosophy, and I've always had that philosophy of doing things to be shared with the public. So if it's a sign, it's a marker, it's a doing, sharing, this type of history, people that go on and you know, that go on with this type of thing I'm glad, you know, because I've shared this and it's caught. It's sort of, the seeds were planted, the people had the ideas, and now they're developing.

DW: That's great. What advice would you give to an up and coming historian about how to be successful?

RM: How to be successful as an up and coming historian. I guess you have to be, I would say, you have to be a nontraditional historian and you have to be flexible in terms of a particular situation of a job. I can say that I was flexible. When I first came here I was hired to teach, now, I actually had gotten my degree in American history and Latin American history and I had this interest in local history, regional history and when they hired me at Northern at that time, and I see that there are certain forces at work now to return to this system, but we had a thing called liberal studies. A very, very highly defined program. You had four courses that you had to take. Everyone had to take. Like them or not. So this was wonderful, go into a class with thirty-five people that did not want to be there. And I came here, they didn't really tell me the details, they said 'you're going to teach Latin American history.' And I came here and I had three sections of medieval modern world. And the reason why they had hired me I then learned was that I had had philosophy courses and I had one or two courses on medieval history when I first started graduate school I thought I was going to go into medieval history, and I took these courses. Well that, well I was lucky, that sold them on hiring me, because I had that and I could teach this stuff. And so for about three years that's all I taught. Which I'm not complaining because I was able to finish my dissertation because I had one course that I prepared the first semester and then after that I was teaching the same stuff. Did it get boring? Yes. Did I have free time to get my own work done? Yes. So in the long run it worked out. But I had to be very facile in terms of realizing these things. I had to learn how to get out of those things. And so I think people have to be, you can't be real doctrinaire if you're going to go into history you have to, I feel you have to be able to move, to do things, to fit in. And you know, you learn rather quickly when every fall semester at the fall convocation the president, and it was President Jamrich, who got up and said 'welcome glad to have you back and by the way folks, we're going to have some budget cuts this year and maybe a third of you won't be here next year.' And when you're coming in as a new faculty member, no tenure, no nothing, you're blowing in the breeze, those aren't real encouraging words. So what you, what I had to do was to find ways that are going to save my position. And it wasn't going to be the medieval renaissance world it was going to be regional, local history, which I then got in to. So that was, I think it was probably a good example of being flexible in terms of a position.

DW: Thank you.

RM: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW