

Interview with Russ Magnaghi  
Marquette, MI  
SUBJECT: Oral History Project

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012

#### INTERVIEW BEGINS

Interviewer (I): I'd like to begin by asking you to state for the record your birth date?

Russ Magnaghi (RM): October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

I: Thank you. What I would like to do today, what I would like to do is start with you describing your first inclination of how you became interested in doing oral traditions and histories?

RM: Okay, I started when I came to Northern. I guess I was here almost nine years and was interested in history of the U.P. I learned from different people about doing oral history and so on, but nothing formal. At that time when I went to school, undergraduate and graduate school, there was no discussion or courses it was only traditional history. No oral interviewing, museum work, archival work and etc. You only saw it when you went to the library or museum. I don't think at that time I had any indication of oral history, even going to libraries and doing research and etc. Maybe there were little bits of ideas that came out. Its kind of just what I learned from people at the Marquette County Historical Society were talking about it and doing things. Then I could very quickly see where it fit in. You had all of these people where their memories were not being saved; they weren't famous, they didn't have letters, they didn't write and if they were immigrants, didn't have time to write. So people don't care or want to write and as a result I could see that there was this big void out there and that doing oral interviews could fill it. That is what got me started in 1979.

I: Thank you. You said something interesting. You said, "When you came to Marquette." Can you give us a little sense of where you were born and where you went to school prior to coming to teach at Northern?

RM: I was born in San Francisco, CA, grew up there, went to grade school there or in the suburbs and then went to University of San Francisco in 1961. I did my four years there and got my bachelor's degree and then went to St. Louis University. My mentor said, "Get out of California, San Francisco in particular, it's too parochial. Go to the Midwest and see another part of the country and how other people live." I went and did that and part of it was that I did get a fellowship at St. Louis University and there I was also interested in studying the History of the Americas. A Jesuit, Father Bannon, John Francis Bannon, taught that class. I studied under him. Towards the end of my graduate school time, in January of 1968, a friend of mine had gotten a job at Northern. A professor had gone off the deep end with a stainless steel knife and they thought it best that he retire and not do any damage, which created an opening in the middle of the year. Until you become department head and you're facing, "How do I fill that classroom with someone?" you really don't understand the problem. They sent notices to St. Louis

University about filling a position, they wanted anyone that was alive and could teach. This friend of mine was in European History, had just come back from Germany, he was on a Fulbright, his wife wanted to have their baby in the United States, so they came back Christmas 1967. He had no job and a wife and kid. He signed up for a job in Marquette, MI. He had never been here, was originally from Mississippi so it felt like going to the other end of the world. I came up with him in January of 1968 in the middle of a snowstorm. A raging storm, mountainous waves and stayed with a faculty member in his 3<sup>rd</sup> floor Garrett apartment, with Bob McClellan. There was no heat in the room and Bernie Cook and I had a double bed and we were kept warm with an electric blanket, if you can imagine that in the middle of winter, in Marquette. You could hear the waves crashing down on Picnic Rocks. That was my entry into Marquette. It wasn't in the middle of summer with nice weather and everything is green, no I came in the worst possible time.

I: You certainly have wonderful recall for dates and I'm sure that's been very helpful, as you've worked with people with their history having this good recall of your own. Can you tell us a little bit about what those first years were like when you first came to Marquette? Who influenced you and what were some of your projects?

RM: I was teaching a Liberal Studies program and etc. And then I would give that background and then I would say something about, I think it was in 1974; I had interest in local history from the California perspective. I carried that with me back here. The field that I was in was Latin American history, the history of the Spanish Borderlands and the Americas. I had nothing to do with Upper Michigan and wasn't into local history. But then Esther Bystrom at the Marquette County Historical Society asked me if I would do an article on the Scots in Marquette. That was in 1974. Over the years throughout the 1970's I developed the History of the U.P. course. Part of my problem there was that I did not grow up in Michigan. In the first year I made sure that I would go visit places like Sault Ste. Marie and went around Lake Superior. I saw everything that I could, learning history on the hoof. I had to learn things that people who grew up here already knew. That got me interested in local history. I did do oral history workshops but didn't really do any oral interviews; there was no project to do. In 1981, Monsignor Spelgotti and Leonard Altibelow from the Paisano Club came by as part of a round up for getting people interested in local history and offered money for an oral history project of Italians in Marquette County. I thought about it. My counter offer was what if I did Italians in the Upper Peninsula? I thought it over very carefully because they're in Ishpeming, Negaunee, and Gwinn. Then 90 miles, Hancock and Calumet. Then 130 miles, Wakefield, Bessemer, Hurley and Ironwood. Then another 100 and some odd miles to Iron County and then another 90 miles to Iron Mountain, Vulcan, Norway and Hermansville. And then 160 miles to Sault Ste. Marie. When I took on this project, it was over this tremendous distance, all around the Upper Peninsula. And it took at the most two years, kind of amazing, it went relatively fast but I did do about 150 interviews with people all around the U.P. That was "the" project that got things going. Then I did the Italians in Lower Michigan, Oklahoma coal miners, Alabama, Idaho, Montana and California. And that was all a spin off from the Italians in the U.P. When we were celebrating the centennial at Northern, I did a series of interviews dealing with the centennial. There were about 100+ interviews. With that project I had students helping me. I recently found the list of people that were interviewed and I'm amazed, all the presidents from Harden to Wong have been interviewed and their thoughts, ideas and memories.

I: That's an impressive history. I have to ask one question, when you talk about the Italian Americans, were there any in a town called Nadeau where St. Bruno's is, that you recall. That happens to be an Italian patron saint, and I was wondering if there were any immigrants there.

RM: No, none down there.

END OF INTERVIEW