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Oral Interview  
Northern Michigan University Archives

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At Northern Michigan University in Marquette Michigan. I am interviewing Professor Neil Carlson. He is a professor of Economics at Northern Michigan University and the date is September 6, 1994.

ML: Professor Carlson what year were you born?

NC: I was born in Negaunee in the year 1936. And I'm a product of the Negaunee High School graduating from Negaunee in 1954. And that fall, I came to Northern as a student planning on majoring in history, but by the time I finished at Northern, I changed my major to economics, with only a minor in history. And I graduated receiving a bachelors of arts from Northern in the spring of 1958. After attending Northern, I went to Oklahoma State University at Stillwater Oklahoma and worked on my graduate program for three years at that University. I came back to Northern as an assistant professor in the fall of 1961 and I've been here every since. So I'm in my 34th year of classes.

ML: What was the campus structure when you were in school here?

NC: When I was a student here, virtually all of the University was located where the administration building is now. It was an old, beautiful building called Kaye hall. And you had Peter White Science building was just directly north of the Kaye hall and there was a library, Olson Library, and the Longyear building, and John D. Pierce and that basically constituted the University. In my graduating class in 1954 there was somewhere around 100 students, I think a few less than 100 were in my graduating class.

ML: What were the student-faculty relationships like at that time?

NC: Basically I think much closer, the university was much smaller, many of the classes that I had even at the beginning level were usually maybe 30 at the absolute most but many of them were below 20 and I knew my college professors better than I know most of my students at this point. This year my student load is down but typically I would service 300-400 students per semester.

ML: Do you have any idea what the faculty-administrator relationship was like at the time?

NC: Well, as a student I can't really say but when I came back as a faculty member it was reasonably close too because in the beginning the university was relatively small, I think when I came back in 1961 it must have been maybe had grown, the student body, maybe to 1,000 or somewhere in that range and all of the faculty knew one another we were all located in the same general area and we had a coffee shop in the basement of Kaye Hall where faculty and administrators came for coffee and we would sit and talk to one

another. I often sat as just a beginning professor with the president of the university, Dr. Harden, or the vice-president, a man by the name of Harold Spawnburg, or the deans and the department heads and say simply because of the size and the nature of the university being so compact, everyone virtually knew everyone else. So in that sense you had a closer relationship, there was no faculty union and so the administrators tended to make most of the administrative decisions and set salaries at whatever level they deemed appropriate, but it was the time because of the smaller university the more compact nature of the buildings, we were all located so close together that we all knew each other. I would have know over 90% maybe even 95% of the people, and not just the faculty but secretaries, janitors, all the people that worked here and that's simply the way it was in those days. Now we are spread out so much the people in the natural sciences, I hardly ever see those faculty members, and the ones I know are the ones who have been around as long as I have or who I served on a committee with. Many new faculty members I never get to know, meet anymore.

*mk* Do you know when that started changing, when the new building came up?

NC: we had a tremendous growth in the student body in the 1960's, and the university student body grew so fast that it was necessary to construct new buildings. I remember during that period teaching some classes in the old Kaye auditorium with 500 students, we even had to offer some of our course work by television to accommodate the rapidly growing student body. And so it was in the 1960's, as the student body grew we needed more faculty and more buildings, that we got into a period of very rapid growth, all aspects of the university.

What do peruse <sup>? perceive</sup> for the reason for the growth?

Well I feel that back in the 1950s you had an opportunity for high school graduates to move into the labor force and have very good, high paying jobs, blue collar labor force that was well paid, there was not the competition for jobs and so when I graduated from high school in *M*54 alot of my class mates went straight into the work force at the mines, in Negaunee, with in a year or so they were earning as much money as their dads had been earning and they could easily afford cars, and marriage, and houses, and therefore in the 50s there wasn't the huge percentage of college, I mean of high school graduates going on to college. And then that started to change in the late *M*50s and early *M*60s as we started to get more women in the labor force, more competition beginning to develop from foreign nations in terms of exporting goods into this country and so in the 1960s we, more and more students felt they had to go onto college. And the growth of Northern at this time was phenomenal. Plus we had the Vietnam War and some historians will say that some students wanted to go onto college to avoid the

draft, because if you were a college student you were exempt from the draft at that time and so there were many forces at work but I think it was mainly economic factors and also the growing competition for jobs in the United States and the World has simply meant if you want to compete you better get as much education as you possibly can. It wasn't necessary when I was a high school graduate, there were not only jobs here but down in Detroit, automobile factories were hiring people, and those kinds of blue collar jobs had disappeared and today emphasizing more professional type occupations and they require a college degree.

*mi* Do you recall what the attitudes were of the students during the Vietnam era?

NC: It was the first time, when I was a college student and a high school student I think we were much more self centered, now I was too young to remember the impact of World War II had on students, but in the 1950s most of us were basically career oriented, thinking in terms of the immediate future in terms of jobs and whether or not we wanted to go onto college and then when we were in college, thinking of what courses we ought to take in order to make our futures more secure. And I think with the coming of the Vietnam War for the first time that I was a student, or involved with students, students started to become concerned about national issues in a big way and so you saw a quickening of the pace of activity on campus, organizations attracted more people. When departments would hold seminars, faculty would talk about the issues often related to the Vietnam War, students would come, students were disagreeing with faculty and deans and administrators in a way that had never been done before and I do think the Vietnam War created that kind of descent and an opportunity for people to express their own views where prior to this time when I was a student or beginning as college teacher we more or less went along with the general attitude, philosophy of the country and society as a whole without giving it much of a second thought or questioning their ability to set the rules and the regulations and the Vietnam War changed that and so the Vietnam War has had the impact of creating a much more open society with universities: the faculty, the students, the administration, now all having input in for positions of power within that structure. Back in the 50s and the very early 60s most all the power was with the administration, with the faculty having some input but the students having very little, there was student council, student government but it had no real power or significance.

*mi* Was Harden still the president?

NC: Yes, he was the first president I served under and we had, when he left Northern in 1966 I believe we had a one year president, an intern president a man who has been president I think of Cleveland Cliffs, a man by the name of Johnson and then Dr. Jamrich was appointed to the presidency and he was here for over a decade

and then him came president Appleberry and then Vandament our current president.

ML: OK, during the time when Jamrich was president, was there any changes from when Harden was president?

NC: I think the activity I have described created a desire on the part of the faculty to have more shared role in determining university policies and having more input into working conditions, and with the faculty it eventually led to a faculty union, the American Association of University Professors, and that has formalized the sharing of power between the administration and the faculty. Now with the students you've had the students become much more active in attempting to have an influence in campus governments, students are now represented on the faculty, university senate, an opportunity to discuss other proposals to come before the senate. I do think that the peak of student interest in involvement of the university started to come about several years ago. I think there has been much more of an impact again toward the student becoming much more concerned with their own future and well being and little less concerned about the university and the nation as a whole.

ML: Now you had mentioned earlier about that there was a coffee shop that you could go to

NC: it was right at the basement of Kaye Hall, and Kaye Hall was the focal point for the university in those days. And Kaye Hall was a huge forier, an open space where on each floor, as you start with the second floor, it's like some of the motels you see that are built around a swimming pool or there would be all four walls where you have the rooms and then people can come and overlook this wide open space that is in the middle, and Kaye Hall had this feature and it attracted every class as it ended, you would find all the students and many of the faculty gathered in the area and talking for five or ten minutes before they would go back to their classes and virtually all the classes were either directly in Kaye Hall or in the Peter White Science building or in Longyear Hall which were all connected and obviously close together and so the faculty when it was time for a break would just go to this coffee shop which was in the basement of Kaye Hall and there were two rooms. And in this shop you simply got to know everybody, the faculty and the administrators and that is what I recall of those early years, how close everyone was. If somebody became ill or a family member died everyone was aware of that and now some faculty member I never get to know or obviously their families or if they are ill or retired. Someone will say so and so retired three years ago didn't you know that? And that is the kindof circumstances that arise now, so it was a much closer community at one time as a result of that. And I think the name at that time was college and as we expanded in terms of new size, buildings we became a university and with that labeling, it wasn't just a mere labeling

change of our name but it represented a circumstance where departments, similar departments were established in separate buildings and the science people, the natural science people with the construction of the west science hall, moved into that building. Social Science people went to the Edgar R. Harding Resource Center and were location in the library there and so we started that separation that creates a circumstance where you know very well the people in your department and many of the people in your school but alot of the other schools your not familiar with them people at all.

UNIVERSITY CENTER

ME: Do you think that the new U.C. will help at all in that, uniting the people?

NC: well it certainly will be an improvement over what we have had over the last years, I don't think it is possible to ever go back to the same kindof circumstances we had 30 years ago as long as the university is of the size that it is but I think your going to see several things that work: one probably will be a diminishing of student body in terms of size just because there aren't as many high school graduates out there and there is a greater competition for students with all universities doing a lot more recruiting. So I think the Northern student body will gradually be decreasing in size in time, but I don't see anything like going back to the enrollment like it was when I first started. So I think that you will see some improvement, more opportunities for student, faculty, and administrators contact but I would suspect that it won't be as great as some people think because what really creates that is total compactness of the university and as long as we have a circumstance where my office is over here in Magers, the administrators are a mile, maybe not a mile away but a half a mile away over in Cohodas Hall and students classrooms are in Jamrich we are not going to get that kindof feeling of cohesion we had 30 years ago.

ME: Do you have any ideas about why they did spread it out as much as they did?

NC: Well part of it is because of the cheapness of land in places like Ann Arbor land is not cheap plus it is a much bigger university you had a lot housing, intermingle with the campus itself. Here to great extent we were able to expand in an area that didn't have houses, the university had acquired property long before it was needed. A few of the lots of property that they have acquired have had houses built one of them on the north side, but basically here we were built north of town where there wasn't many people living, residential sections were a few miles a way basically and therefore we had this beautiful natural setting and as the student enrollment grew we wanted to take advantage of that instead of building the university structures vertically we spread them out horizontally to take advantage of the area and the needs of the growing student body. Plus another thing, Kaye Hall and

Peter White, and Longyear were old buildings. Kaye Hall despite its beauty was a tremendous fire trap with that kind of arrangement that I told you before. Peter White was an absolutely miserable facility, I remember giving final exams in December in that building, students had to wear their coats, and earmuffs, and gloves at times, because the heating systems were very poorly designed and so if Northern were to continue as a university it absolutely had to have new physical facilities and then with the growing enrollment and the beautiful landscape that we had and the fact that we didn't have to with most of the property buy out existing property owners it was just natural that the university would grow in the fashion that it did.

ML: Were there dorms when you came to school here?

NC: When I first came I believe there were two dorms, Carey Hall for the girls and I think, but I was a commuter and I didn't live in the dorms, I think Spaulding Hall the one that was directly north those there the only ones that, those were the only two dorms at that time. And they were not always filled, when you have the total university enrollment in the hundreds, obviously you have a different situation that 6,7,8,,9,10,000.

ML: The Peter White Building, was that a factory type building?

NC: The Peter White Building was a very small building, it had been built to accommodate the natural science classes, so you had chemistry labs, physics labs. But it was a very, very small building because Northern, I'm not sure when Peter White was built but I would imagine in the 30s would be my guess, and the classes were very small, it would be like a class D high school in the U.P. today therefore they didn't need to have very large rooms and it was mainly called the Peter White Science building and so there were a few displays in the halls of some of the type of things you would find in the classroom, like the biology department had some stuffed animals and various types of displays in their display cases in the hall. Chemistry might have a table of all the elements or something and then you would have basically a couple of rooms for chemistry classes, and couple for biology, and a couple for physics, and so I think it had about maybe 2 floors to it, maybe 3 counting the basement and so it was a very small facility it was mainly designed for about 30 students or less and it was that type of building not nothing at all like our modern building in Jamrich where we have those very large auditorium size rooms on the first floor. I might just add that a couple of the changes that I have seen over these 40 years is that in one way you get change but things always have a tendency to come back to a very similar circumstance. I have mentioned that I think students are much more career oriented and self oriented in the 50s and I think we are back in that approach to education at this time where we went through growth and changes and the idea of being more concerned about the country as a whole more than social issues at

that one period and I would suspect that we would see that again. One change I have noticed in the students at Northern is that they are a much quieter group, you don't find students participating in class discussion as actively as you did 20-30 years ago. I think as a student class participation is encouraged by the very small class size but even when I had classes of 3 or 400 it was not uncommon for the students to participate and ask questions. I still get that in some classes but I have many classes especially the early morning classes where students are very, very quiet. In fact 20-30 years ago I just simply never would have had that type of

*ML:* Do you have any feelings on why that would be, why the change?

NC: I think part of it was in the first years of teaching college was a different kind of experience. College was not something that everyone felt they had to have. So you have a very small percentage of the high school graduates going on to college.

*ML:* Not an extension of high school

NC: It was not an extension of high school. And the kinds of students that were attracted to colleges were the kind that actively participated. Now college has become in many ways an extension of high school. And because the job opportunities simply are not out there, you find that more and more people are attending college who are not sure that that's what they want, and some of them I think are even resentful of their parents for having them come to school. It creates a different atmosphere under those circumstances compared to what was the case. A couple of interesting things just personally, a couple years ago when Dr. Appleberry, our President, was aware of the coming centennial and wanted to develop some information about Northern, he and I had several talks. Someone had told him that I probably had taught more students than anybody at the University, and we never had a way of systematically checking this out because the records from way in the past are not computerized. Their there, somebody would have the time and willingness to go through all of the old class records, and you could put in the faculty in the computer in their class loads all these years, but it would take to much work to make it actually worth while to do it completely accurately. But based upon the fact that the people who were here before me, basically had very small classes, and I was here during that period of tremendous growth. And as I said, I had some classes of 450 students at one time. And until very recent years, I almost always had 300 to 400 students a year that I taught. And looking at the faculty people who've been here over the years, we determined, and I think fairly accurately, that I have far and away more students that I taught over the years that any other professor in the history of this place. We couldn't swear to it in a way that we could document but just based upon talking with other faculty who've been around along time.

ML: Do you think that's partial the area where you're teaching into, the economics?

NC: Well certainly economics is one of the social sciences, it's been one of the areas that can meet the general studies requirement, and the social sciences can have larger classes beginning course in English or Comp and Rec as it was called when I was a student, you needed to think in terms of the instructors ability or time to grade papers, and try to teach students to write so the were offer limited to 20, 25 or 30 students. Where in the social sciences it was felt that we could give multiple choice exams and it wasn't absolutely necessary for essay questions and so generally the social sciences classes had no limits on the number of students that could be assigned to a particular section of a class. So I would say it wouldn't be pure economics but mainly just being a teacher in the social science area. History would be the same way, and sociology, it's just I've been here longer and I was here during that period of rapid growth, where a lot of our new young instructors will never face this situation where they have to teach 300 to 400 people at one time.

ML: And you said you had thought about going into history when you first came?

NC: As an undergraduate, history was the field I was most interested in. I loved to read in the field, but I changed to economics because I became more interested in current events and what's going on, and how we could improve and change our country. And I think that economics is, in my opinion, the field that offers the most in that respect. A person how has a great understanding of economics can participate in the political process, hopefully move on to some elected political office, and have some impact on the way in which our country is governed, and the way in which we move. In fact, I did serve several terms as a county commissioner, I was a member of the road commission in Marquette county for a few of years. I have served as a chief negotiator for a faculty union, and I also served as a chief negotiator for management on the opposite side, when I was with the county road commission and with the county government. And so, I've had some unique experiences in that respect. I also was a \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_ before we had a union, handling faculty complaints, or grievances with the administration. And I've been grievance officer since the union was established. So I've had enough opportunity to be involved in many kinds of activities that are somewhat unique or unusual.

ML: Anything further you would like to add then?

NC: Well this might be a more controversial thing, but in the Upper Peninsula, Northern basically started as a regional education University, and then it expanded to offering degree programs in many areas because of the demand and the part of the high school students wanting to go on to college. And Michigan Tech is a



competing University in the Upper Peninsula. Michigan Tech's philosophy is one of always limiting enrollments and having very high entrance requirements. Northern as the student explosion occurred developed the philosophy as a necessary philosophy at least for some state universities, called the right to try under President Harden. And we've continued in one form or another, a much more open admission policy than say Michigan Tech and many of the other universities. And I think what this is meant over the years is that we get more students beginning in college who don't finish simply because of the philosophy. It's no reflection on the education that the students receive at Northern it's just that the very nature of the reason why we are a University of the type we are, that we have tried to see that everyone gets a chance. Maybe in high school you didn't take advantage of the opportunities you had, but we've tried to allow a student who maybe has not made the best use of his/her time to come to Northern even if their high school academic work has not been at a high level. But also you have to realize that with such a philosophy, in the first year or two of college classes, you're going to get a much higher rate of drop-outs and maybe some students in the class just will never do as well as would be the case of a school who has a very strict and high enrollment standards. And I'd hate to see Northern change in this way. I mean, it could, but when you have state financed education, you need all kinds of universities. And it would be nice if we could have the kind of university Michigan Tech is, but you have to realize that as they developed their mission, it was a different one than that of Northern. And therefore, I think that Northern's mission should remain to attempt to try and serve all people and to give people who haven't taken maximum advantage of their high school experience a change to have a new start. They still have to prove once they're here that they can handle the course work and the college experience, but I would hope that over the next 100 years, that we more or less maintain this tradition and this mission, because I do think that in every state there is a place for that kind of University. Still going, but unless you have some specific questions, I think I'm kind of running out of things.

ML: I guess we can end there. This has been an interview with Professor Neil Carlson at Northern Michigan University. My name is Michelle Lee.