

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS HOLMSTROM  
PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS

ML: My name is Michelle Lee, I'm interviewing Professor Thomas Holmstrom in Marquette, Michigan. He is a professor of Economics at Northern Michigan University. The date is November 11, 1994. This interview was developed for HS 381: Oral History and the Centennial History celebration.

ML: Professor Holmstrom can you give us some background on your early years and where you were born?

TH: Yes, I was born in the Copper Country in Houghton, Michigan, but I grew up in Calumet/Laurium area. And I graduated from Calumet High School in 1951. I attended Michigan Tech for two years, and I went to West Point briefly, and afterwards I served two years in the US army. In 1957 I started my junior year at Northern. And I graduated in 1959 with a degree in economics in June of 1959. I worked one year for Michigan Employment Security Commission here in Marquette, and the next year I started graduate school in Oklahoma, Oklahoma State. After one year I took a job in Washington DC with the labor department, I worked one year with the labor department. And the summer of I believe it was 1962, that's when Dr. Jean Pearman was department head of economics and sociology at the time, called me and asked me if I'd be interested in teaching. Somebody had left Northern at the last minute and they needed a fill in. So I came up and tried it and I liked it so I decided well I have to have a Ph.D. if I'm going to stay in teaching. So I went back to Oklahoma the next year and spent two years down there to finish out my work. And I've been at Northern teaching since 1966. Next summer I'll have my thirty year pin from Northern. Is there any more information that you ?

ML: So you were actually a student here? You started as a junior, a transfer student?

TH: Yes, I had two years at Michigan Tech. Northern was a much smaller place in those days. It was a kind of school where you knew everybody. Even if you didn't have a student in class, you knew who they were. All of the faculty members knew each other, we had general faculty meetings which were a relatively small groups. And I contrast that today I meet somebody and find out they are a teacher at Northern. I say "Oh, you must be new." "No, I been here for three years." And that was the first time that I met them. It would have never happened like that in the old days. It was a good experience. I enjoyed it. It was in some ways better, in some ways it wasn't as good. But we learned a lot, hard enough to get into graduate school. It was a very much closer knit group. Like I say, we used to come out of the hall ways of Kaye hall between classes, stand there in the forier and watch almost the whole student body meet everybody when school was over. Looking over the railing there. We were very interested in football, just like they

were now. One of my roommates was a football player . . . (phone call interruption)

ML: What are the attitudes between the students and the faculties changed since you were a student here?

TH: Well, I don't know there is always you know you have very close relationships among the faculty members. I don't think they were to much different than we are now. One thing that we have is, when I taught in 1962, we had a much heavier academic load we had 15 hours, three hour courses, five courses and three different preparations. So it was much more demanding than now days. So they had to do a lot of short cuts like. I remember my economics professor would have everybody do all of the reports and so on during some of the times, we had to be working so hard

ML: Because he would be so busy with his other courses.

Th: It was a kind of a low key. Everybody knew everybody else. A very friendly place.

ML: Do you recall the attitudes of students during the Vietnam Era?

TH: Well the Vietnam Era came when I was, it started when I was in Oklahoma. And of course a lot of kids were in school at that time just so they wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. And so you got the people who didn't want to be in college that were there because of the war. We also had a lot of people in the graduate school that entered just to stay out of the war.

ML: But you had been in the military.

TH: Yes, I had already been as a matter of fact I was married and had three children and after that I was in graduate school. Oh I remember one thing about Northern, I didn't mention. I used to live within Vet Ville which was located where the University Center is now.

ML: I heard something about that.

TH: That's where I started. I got married in December of 1958 and I had one more semester at Northern at the time. And we were scheduled to go into the new apartments on Summit Street, but they weren't quite ready, so we lived in those one of those Quonset hut for two weeks.

ML: Now was that like a trailer or what was the structure?

TH: It was just one of these half moon, roof, type buildings, long buildings that were divided into apartments on each side.

ML: And they were specifically for veterans?

TH: Yes that's what they were called, they were installed right after the war for veterans and their families. Some of them weren't married but. And so that was where we started out and then were the very first people in the apartment. They were brand new when we moved in. I had a good friend that lived across the hall named Alger Strong who was an economics major also, and he went to law school and became a lawyer. He was the city attorney in Pontiac in the beginning did the legal work for the Silver Dome. I am reminded of that because I just saw him last weekend. And he's already retired. But that's how you start feeling like you're getting a little older. But anyway, I'm just rambling here, you can ask any questions that you want.

ML: Do you think that the growth of the campus as far as buildings and structures changed how close people were?

TH: Yea, I think that they spread out the campus quite a bit, I remember when they moved the campus up to this end. It was like they moved all of the library books from the old library, which was down by Carey Hall.

ML: Is that still standing?

TH: No, it was torn down years ago. Apparently it was a fairly new building but somebody went through and put air-conditioning in and cut out beams in the roof and ruined the building so it had to be torn down. But to get the books from that old library to the new library was like they just handed the books from person to person. Just a line of people and they passed the books. And I think that's part of it, the spreading out of campus. We have people in sciences in West science and people in social sciences over in Carey Hall and just don't get the interaction. Another thing I think that made the faculty closer was we had all time faculty meetings. Because the faculty was relatively small, the whole group got together. It wasn't just one school.

ML: And was there some kind of a lounge where you could go and sit and interact with faculty?

TH: They had a coffee shop downstairs in Kaye hall that was where a lot of people met. There was a cafeteria where in Lee Hall where we now have the big art exhibition place. I can remember before Hedgcock was built, they used to have basketball games in little gym there, and it was a little cracker box for a gym. And I can remember when Jim Rapport was one of my, our first students at Northern. I remember he gave a play in Kaye Hall auditorium.

ML: What role did Jim Rapport play?

TH: He was the brand new faculty member, assistant professor that

came up here, and now of course he became the department head and what ever, but Now he usually leads the baton around at the graduations, so he's one of the oldest faculty members on campus. But those days he was just a young guy and he, I remember the play was "Our Town", the first play that he put on at Northern. I took a class from him in stage direction and had to put on a play as part of the class. ? actors from the play. What else can I tell you that you might not know? I recently saw two of my old professors, I was at the Garden Room [Marquette restaurant] this summer and I saw Dick O'Dell from the History Department and Forrest Roberts from the Speech Department. They named the building after him. And they both look great. And I talked to Dick and he had been retired for 20 years and he looks ten years younger than that. He must be 80. He doesn't look bad at all. And Forest said that he retired in 66 the year that I came. So he said that he taught at Northern from 1920 (?or28?) to 1966. And he looked good; he is in his nineties. So there are probably some old timers that you could talk to. [Interviews with these individuals have been completed].

ML: Do your college change at all in the faculty administrator relationships, how they got along?

TH: Well we first came, Dr. Edgar Harden was the President and he was a, you know, very dynamic guy, he actively worked to build up the University. The faculty leaders who are here on campus were recruiting people and Dr. Harden. So he kind of ran the whole show more or less. He was very informal at times. I remember one year I came up here looking for, you know, I didn't earn enough money the summer to pay tuition in the fall so I went and saw Dean Bottum. He acted as financial aid officer himself, he just looked up my record and got me a check for a loan.

ML: So actually if you didn't have the money for school you went right to the dean of students?

TH: I went to the Dean [Bottum]. The Dean got the money for me. It was a small school so you didn't, probably too small to have a financial aid office. So the Dean did that himself.

ML: That would be nice.

TH: It was quite an all together different kind of school in those days.

ML: Do you have any feelings about the new additions that they're putting on in the University Center with the Cafeteria and all?

TH: I was very sorry to see Kaye Hall go down, that was a beautiful building. It was just a nice, the students had a nice interaction in order, very social thing, and you don't get that in Jamrich Hall there or in any other of the halls. That was the one

building on campus that I wish they would have preserved. But otherwise things wear out and had to be replaced. Professors wear out, too, you have to replace them. Life goes on. Other than that, Kaye Hall I thought that was a shame when they took that building down.

ML: You're not the only one. I've heard that a lot around.

TH: I think it was President John Jamrich that did that and it was kind of it was very sneaky because it seemed like he planned it so that before you know it the building was down. There was not much time for anybody to react. And that other library was a nice building. That wasn't like I said, it was a very old building, but it was somebody goofed.

ML: Somebody made an error.

TH: That had to go down after that. I lived in Spooner Hall before I got married and that was very new at the time. One of the things that was different was that there was a much more parental type attitude that the University took toward the students. One could not be out after certain hours, they had to check-in and check-out. And there were never any men involved in the women's dorms. If you were ever caught in the dorm, you were booted out of school, that was my freshmen year at least that if you did that you would be out on your ear. They took a very different attitude then. You were aloud to check out on the weekend and go home or something but that would be it. I mean, if you were late coming in, you crawled in like you

ML: And these are adults.

TH: Yes, these were students and they were 18 and 21 years old and they had to follow some strict deadlines. I was engaged to a girl in Detroit so I didn't meet anybody on campus. It was quite a difference between the students.

ML: I there anything else you wanted to add?

TH: I can't think of anything, you might want to talk to my college Professor Neil Carlson who's been here a long time.

ML: I have interviewed him.

TH: Oh, you have interviewed him already.

ML: He went to Oklahoma State?

TH: We went down there because well he went down there first, he was a year before me, and then Dr. Jean Pearman suggested that I apply down there. And I applied kind of late and so they told me in August this [position] would be [available] after I graduated in

1959, that I could come down because somebody who had been offered the position before had turned them down. But it wasn't really convenient for me at the time because my wife was pregnant and I had a baby coming and I didn't want to move. I couldn't go down at the time so I applied the next year and got in the following year. I spent the years of 1961 and 1962 in Oklahoma. And a year in Washington and a year here that in 1963 and back up here in 1966. I'm glad that I made the decision, it's been a good life, for me it's been the perfect job. I can't think of anything that I would enjoy more than this job. I can't think of anything else.

ML: Ok well thank you for your time, that was good.