

Interview with Dr. Russel Magnaghi  
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Concerning the Origination of the Phi Alpha Theta Chapter and its History as well as the History Club

START OF INTERVIEW

(Interviewer): Okay. How did you become involved with Phi Alpha Theta?

(Dr. Russel Magnaghi): Well I had always been interested in student history organizations going back to the Lambda graduate days. As an undergraduate I was the, what, for 2 years the president of the University of San Francisco history club. We did a lot of things there with the group. Then when I went to graduate school at St. Louis University I continued my interest and at that time I was there when they established the chapter of Phi Alpha Theta and then I stayed on for 2 years as well as president of the chapter. They wanted me to stay longer and I said, "We have to get more people involved." So I continued working with them and all but I just wasn't president and it worked out quite well. Other people got involved and the thing is, I guess, continuing into the present day. But that was my involvement prior to coming to Northern so when I got here in the fall of 1969 the Omicron Mu chapter had been established in the spring by Marty Doland and so I became, well, I guess Doland would talk to me about what we had done, my involvement in the other chapter and we would talk about things and possibilities and so I was kind of a person who could be immediately tapped for information or involvement with Phi Alpha Theta and/or the History Club as time progresses.

(I): Okay. You mentioned the History Club, do you recall when that started up, who was involved, things like that?

(RM): I'm sort of, a lot of this now, my memory is very hazy on that. What I'm giving you here is stuff you're already going to have but you'll get it down on tape maybe for the first time. From our conversations the other day with Marty Doland and from my memory, and that tended to jog my memory, there was this problem with Phi Alpha Theta that it was kind of an elitist group, and as a result, as Doland said, Greising kind of pushed the idea that there should be a history club to take care of the history majors that didn't make the requirements for Phi Alpha Theta and possibly students on campus who might have an interest in history but didn't have the courses or the grades to enter Phi Alpha Theta. That seems to be how it kind of emerged and it emerged after Greising got here because he tended to be, and you can check this out, but it seems that he was the catalyst that talked about it and then if I'm not wrong he was the early adviser to the history club. If you're talking about, and we had that logo that we ran across, was that 1971?

(I): The logo says '70.

(RM): 1970. Well 1970 would have been, well the Fall of 1970 would have been when Jack Greising came to campus and he wasn't that new to campus because he had been here for a semester earlier, and that could be very accurate that it was sometime in the fall of 1970 that he saw this need that Phi Alpha Theta wasn't filling. I remember there was a constant discussion and a constant debate. I had my doubts about it because, and I always had my doubts about it though I did understand the reason for it and I went along with the reason of having these two organizations because there would be people that probably couldn't get into Phi Alpha Theta and so on. But I never liked it because what you're doing was

then making Phi Alpha Theta a dormant organization that was just kind of sitting there except for, and at that time we only had one initiation a year and you sort of activated Phi Alpha Theta for the initiation and then it went dormant and you'd elect some officers and half of them, possibly all of them, would graduate and that would be the end of it. So we had officers for about 2 weeks in the Spring and then they went. I understood the problem, but I didn't like the solution but we didn't seem to have any other solution of having that history club because I felt that it drained whatever Phi Alpha Theta would be doing or any potential Phi Alpha Theta had. Phi Alpha Theta was something students joined to put on their resume and that was it. Nothing really followed up with Phi Alpha Theta beyond that.

(I): Were you involved in any way with the History Club as far as advising?

(RM): I have vague recollections – I was kind of in and out. We even ran across something that I was the adviser to Phi Alpha Theta for 1970...

(I): 1970 to '71.

(RM): '70 to '71, and once again didn't do that much so I don't really remember too much about that or why Doland dropped out because then other records show Doland did stay on, and he doesn't remember, and I can't really put my finger on it and say, "Yes, we did this and this." Because part of it was we didn't do anything! So all I would have done as adviser – wait a minute, wait a minute. Now that you mention that my memory is jogged and yes, I remember getting a letter, one of these form letters from Don Hoffman, thanking me for working with Phi Alpha Theta and that would have been, yes it was 1970, because what I remember getting was a letter from president Jamrich and it was one of these little formal, just notes, "Great job! Keep it up! Glad to see you're working with the students!" So I did work with Phi Alpha Theta and I think what might have happened there, why I got involved was, that Doland felt since I had been working with Phi Alpha Theta in the past that I would like to do this. That I would kind of bring some added energy onto the scene. Then I think what happened, I think I just kind of, other things came about and I kind of lost interest. It wasn't doing anything, that was the big thing, and I think I just gave it back to him. I think one day I went down the hall to his office and said, "Hey Marty, do you want to take the thing back?" and he said, "Okay." And that was it. I think there was some hope that I was going to, not revitalize it, but vitalize the thing, get the thing going, which didn't come about.

(I): Mhm. So, the 1970, that would have been the initiation you had at your house, or that you hosted?

(RM): Yes, yes. I remember we did something before that and then we had the kids, everybody came over to my place, I think for a party. I think we had the initiation beforehand. I just remember that Bob Archibald was there and maybe about a half dozen other people were there. I don't think we did the initiation. Now, but also point out that you'd have remembered that because when we did the early initiations, we did the full formal Phi Alpha Theta initiation, probably old-style circa 1970. If we did it, it would have been quite elaborate. I know later on after Cliff Maier built his home, which I think they moved in there in 1974, he had, maybe in '75, '76, sometime around there, Cliff Maier had an initiation in his home and he has a very, very large home. We were able to use the entire room and the sentry at the door and the whole works, the candles and the whole thing. But then we saw that the faculty didn't like that and so over the years we used the shorter version and then at one point we created a new formula.

(I): Okay. Getting back to the History Club, was there any visible conflicts between the club and Phi Alpha Theta other than just a drain on membership pools?

(RM): No, but there weren't any conflicts and there wasn't even a membership drain, because as I said Phi Alpha Theta just kind of went dormant except for the initiation. So what happened was that Phi Alpha Theta was the thing you put on your resume, the national organization. The History Club was sort of the troops in the trenches, the workers. [When] they would put on a talk or something, it was kind of co-sponsored, but most of the people of the history club that were active were also members of Phi Alpha Theta so it kind of went hand-in-hand. So there was never really a conflict. Later on, when I, and some of this we might be able to get the dates worked out, but when I sort of oversaw the pushing aside of the History Club in 1985, '86, at that point I felt that Phi Alpha Theta was the national group and the one we should be working with and at that point I had seen so very little come out of the History Club, and the History Club as you'll see had really gone into a very serious tail-spin and demise, that I thought it best to go with a group on campus that had national recognition and come hell or high water we would go with that and not have our energies – see I felt we should go with an active Phi Alpha Theta and Cliff Maier at the time was the adviser to the History Club and I guess, and I don't know how that worked out he, I don't know if he was adviser at one point but he was very interested in it and I think the president worked for him in the archives and he wanted to continue the History Club. There wasn't, I mean we just discussed it and the whole thing dropped, but I felt it best to kind of rid ourselves of the History Club which, I felt, was taking away from Phi Alpha Theta – or at least taking away from Phi Alpha Theta's potential.

(I): Okay. I ran across, in the minutes from the History department meetings in 1985 – that April of '85 – it was decided that they would let the History Club take its own course depending on student interest. So I gather that it was, sort of, the entire department's feelings that we should go with the nationally recognized organization?

(RM): When brought to their attention, yeah. I think I might have brought that to their attention, and that was in the April of...

(I): April of '85, mhm.

(RM): ...'85. I think at that time I was on sabbatical but I was in town and I did attend the department meetings. Yeah I think I brought it to their attention to kind of get official recognition of the fact that the History Club should kind of just go... See what basically happened, without bringing up any names, the officers of the History Club, the History Club did not go out and reach the students. One embarrassing time was that they invited Dr. Allen Donovan, who just arrived as the new academic vice president. He was an intellectual historian – he was into kind of intellectual history. They invited him to give a lecture, and I go out and look at the posters and low and behold they're poorly made, an embarrassment, poorly made, hand written, and no title of his talk! He would bring this academic vice president, he was going to talk on history, and that kind of gives you a sense of what happened. There was no out-reach, they never got to the students. Okay, night of the talk there were three students and five faculty members. There had been no advertising. Nothing in the local Mining Journal to possibly get people from town, nothing in The North Wind, no posters except this little junky poster that had gone up, and if you looked at it there was nothing to attract you and say, "Hey, this is going to be a lecture." I don't even think they put academic vice president. I think they just put, "Allen Donovan of Northern going to talk on history. Come and hear this." At that point I would say that that was probably the bottom that the History Club had gone to. One of the problems was that the president really didn't interact with the students. I don't

know if she was afraid to or what the deal was, but I don't think there were officers, it was just kind of her and she was it. She was the History Club, so it makes sense that when you have something under those circumstances, nobody showed up. So at that point, and I don't know if you have some notes there maybe later on or something of who the president was of the History Club, I'm a little caught on the dates, when some of this stuff went on. I guess my question is when we had the Phi Alpha Theta initiation at the Northwoods Supper Club?

(I): That was April of '86.

(RM): That was the only one that we've had out there?

(I): That I've been able to find record of. Three people joined according to what I found.

(RM): [recollecting names] Okay, I'm pretty sure that's the one. Okay, in April of '86 I was on sabbatical and what had happened was that in April of 1985... Okay, now let me set the record straight, in early 1985 the situation had reached the point where Ruth Roebke-Berens was adviser to the History Club, and I think you have some of the records, I don't have all the dates now but I think you have them, she was adviser and then Cliff was adviser to – she was adviser to Phi Alpha Theta, he was adviser to the History Club – by that time Phi Alpha Theta was still a once-a-year come out of the woodwork organization. Then we got into this very horrible, it was probably sometime in 1984 possibly, that we had this horrible lecture with, I mean the lecture was alright, but horrible advertising. And you could see that the History Club was on the skids. What had happened was I saw that in the Spring in that April meeting of 1985 I saw that something had to be done to save the organization. The other thing I was concerned about was to create an active organization that would involve and could get the students to interact through the organization with the faculty and vice versa. I had looked at other organizations across campus and talked to people and this is what I wanted to do with Phi Alpha Theta – was to activate it as an active organization. So in the spring of 1985 I made the commitment that even though I was going to be on sabbatical, I was still going to be around town, that we had to take action at that point. So I volunteered to be adviser and play as active a role as I could. I don't know, who was president in '85, '86...?

(I): That would have been Greg Buchilum and Jim Latern I believe.

(RM): Okay, in the Spring 1985 then we had an initiation at Steve Barnwell's and Greg Buchilum became president. That year the organization didn't do anything. That right?

(I): From what I've found, that sounds about right.

(RM): Okay, that year nothing happened. Then I wanted to stay with the organization to get it going, so even though I was on sabbatical I was the advisor. I didn't go anyplace – I was here in Marquette – so I could do that. So that was in the beginning of the Fall of '85 then I was the advisor. Well, really beginning in the Winter semester 1985 and probably you could use that April meeting thing as kind of my active involvement as adviser. Then we had, for instance, one of the things I wanted to do was to have a decent initiation so that's when we had the initiation at Northwoods Supper Club and it turned out to be a very nice affair. Just about all the faculty attended, there weren't too many members, the initiates attended and I think they had their wives and so on. It was a very nice affair. But that was to try to put some life into the organization. Then, as I said, okay at that point I thought it best in the Fall of '85, although I wasn't teaching, I guess you could say had the History Club suppressed. Now it was going

to be a problem trying to revive the History Club because it was just down and out. So at that point we revived Phi Alpha Theta and we took, I remember, you might say there was an actual moment when the History Club ended. Cliff Maier had about \$25 that the president Laverne Hantila had from the History Club and it was in a desk drawer. She was no longer working for Cliff but she had left the money in the desk drawer, it had 'History Club' on it, and he came and said, "Well what do you want to do with it?" We had a bit of a treasury and so we put the \$25 into Phi Alpha Theta. So if you want some symbolic time it was when we opened the account, and you can go through the financial records and you'll see when some \$25, very early, went into the Phi Alpha Theta account. That was kind of the official end of the History Club, but it was kind of slow in coming. Then beginning in the Fall of '86 then Jim Latern was – the fall of '85, '86 – Jim Latern was president.

(I): I think it was about this time, maybe I'm wrong, that we became involved with the living history program?

(RM): Okay, wait a minute, before you go onto that, in conjunction with what we're saying about '85, '86, and I know I think you checked or somebody checked the records, the department minutes, and didn't find it, but there should be in there someplace... Well, my idea was to give the adviser to Phi Alpha Theta more than just kind of a passing nod as adviser. So allegedly, I distinctly remember this but we can't find it in the minutes, the History department voted that the adviser to Phi Alpha Theta would have the same status as serving on the committee. So if a person served in Phi Alpha Theta as adviser, then they would not have to serve on a departmental committee – that would be the responsibility – unless they wanted to. I don't know, somehow that's gotten lost but I wanted to include that because I wanted Phi Alpha Theta to have a strong adviser, either be it myself or someone in the future, and this would be a bit of encouragement so that it wouldn't just be a passing activity. Now back to your, sorry, back to your...

(I): The living history. If I remember correctly, you told me at one time that Michigan Tech had the program before we did?

(RM): The living history program at Fort Wilkins.

(I): At Fort Wilkins.

(RM): Yeah Michigan Tech had it and then in about '86 dropped out. The Bureau of History with Tom Friggins worked their way through 1986 without any formal connections with any other institution. Then mean time contacted us in August of '86 and then in the Winter semester of 1987 then Northern got involved with the living history program and Phi Alpha Theta got involved by helping to put up posters and to announce the program and announce it to the students who would be participating.

(I): Okay. So as far as Northern's involvement goes, university teachers of course, do we have some sort of contract with –?

(RM): For the living history program?

(I): Yeah, or is it just, we're working in conjunction with them?

(RM): No, each year they have to, it's a regular bid contract. It's a very strange situation but we have to bid for this fantastic contract and to date the Bureau of History gives us \$7,300 to pay the students,

which comes to about \$140 a week that the students get. Which is now proving not to be very attractive to any students that can get a job at McDonald's and live at home and probably come out ahead without having to train or be constantly with the public and interacting with the public. Then Northern has to come up with the salaries of the faculty that have been teaching the program with advertising costs, with the trip we usually take either to Fort Celing or old Fort William. So what has happened now is Northern is contributing, I think this year 1989, Northern will be contributing close to \$9000 on this so called bid that the Bureau of History is being so fussy about. Northern is contributing much more than the Bureau of History and the Bureau of History is contributing a pittance in terms of student salaries. To date there's been very, very little interest from anyone participating. We've already had an advertisement run in the fall and we got three people and now we're going to try to do it again to see how many people we get to become part of this program. The problem is the cost. It's just so far you can go with experience, experience, experience. Today's students want, you know they have to pay bills, they have to continue their education, and they need money for the coming year and they can't spend it. I mean it's lovely living in Copper Harbor, but not at \$140 a week before taxes. So you end up with, plus if you live there you have to live in the resort community – buy everything at high prices at the resort party store – and you get the idea that you're donating to the state of Michigan.

(I): Okay. There, as I understand it, are four roles that the students play? I'm only familiar with the one that Flo had of the washer woman or whatever?

(RM): Okay the four roles are the officer's wife, there are two female and two male roles, the female roles the officer's wife and the Irish laundress and the male role is the army private and the school teacher lighthouse keeper. Then we came up with a third role in the summer of 1988 which was all researched and that would have been, it was never implemented because we lost a person and that shifted the person doing the Indian teamster, we shifted his role to the army private. That has been a research possible goal, the Indian teamster.

(I): Okay. The chapter sponsored Magna Carta coming to campus.

(RM): Mhm. They're involved with that, I don't know if you'd call it sponsorship involvement, but in April of 1987 – I was the campus and county co-chair of the county organization and chair of the campus organization – to celebrate the sesquicentennial Michigan statehood. In the process I got a phone call from somebody downstate who said that this roads to liberty Magna Carta to the constitution exhibit was on the road. It was sort of an invitation because Marquette wanted, but it was on its way, it was here. It was at least I think down in Minnesota so we couldn't say too much about it. It was the Lincoln cathedral that the so called travelling copy of, I think it was one of five copies of the Magna Carta. This was not the original. The original was destroyed. This was produced two or three years later after the original so it's still very, very old – 1217. So anyway, it was on its way, I was working with the sesquicentennial so I knew what to do, who to call. Phi Alpha Theta then was tapped to run around and put posters up. Also, and it was extremely helpful, and it was to have guides or just people out there kind of policing the area the day of the exhibit. So Phi Alpha Theta then was involved in getting the advertising out and just being there and helping people and it was very critical because we ended up with over two thousand people going through the exhibit and we needed that help and we needed people like every hour. One of the things the Phi Alpha Theta people were able to do was to not have to wait in line and really tour the exhibit. As I said it was very critical – eventually had to turn people away.

(I): Okay, one last thing here if I can find it. As far as Phi Alpha Theta on campus now, I think it's in a way more than something to just put on a resume, although a good number of people that have been joining recently have been doing just that. Do you see us going in any direction, good or bad?

(RM): Well I think what happens is that, and this has been my experience over the years with any organization and Phi Alpha Theta and probably more the History Club than phi Alpha Theta. It's basically in the hands of the officers, or I should say, originally from the members and from the members come the officers. It's really not the work of the adviser is there to offer encouragement but it's basically the interest and the involvement of the officers as to where the organization is going to go. Phi Alpha Theta, right now, even though we can say it's been, if we go from April to April, April 1985 to April 1989 now, since I kind of took it over and sort of activated it as a year-round activity. Actually Phi Alpha Theta is still in a growing stage. I don't think it really has a long track record, because if we had gone back to 1969 and we had been an active organization all that time, we had a long history. Even after 1985 we had a number of early presidents – one didn't do anything, I mean, the organization once again was a Spring initiation organization. The other person that we had wouldn't announce anything to the members. There were a number of exhibits, a number of presentations. I remember there was one on Africa and we discussed it and I said he wanted the director of the library – he happened to work for the library – he wanted the director of the library to give a presentation of her slide trip to Africa. Well, I don't think I have to say too much as to what that would mean. It would be a low level national geographic look at the elephants look at the giraffes and so on. It had nothing to do with history. Zero to do with history. That's what it was and as soon as it came, were appalled, they left with a very bad taste in their mouths and after that we really didn't get a lot of students coming to the affairs because of that one bad experience. They just didn't have anything to do with history. There are a number of things you have to deal with. You have to deal with a certain amount of disinterest on the part of the students on campus and you have to couple that with other activities that are going on. So we have to try to pick the best night of the week or the best afternoon as to when to have the exhibit or to have the activity. There are just a lot of ingredients. You have to get the news out well in advance. You have to let the students know that these things are going to happen. You have to somehow pick the best of all nights to do it. And still, even with all of the advertising and you just saturate the campus, you're still going to probably get a handful of people because of the interest and other schedules and so on. It's a constant struggle and I think a lot of times the students that are involved become disappointed by the results and tend to kind of back off of their involvement. I know that happened in the past with a president who kind of got, he finally saw that something wasn't happening, he never thought it was the lack of advertising but people didn't come, and he had a number programs, and people didn't come to the programs. Part of it was that program wasn't a very interesting program. The other part was that it wasn't advertised so nobody knew it was going on. All of these things kind of have to be juggled and at the same time we have to get interested students involved. You have to sort of somehow find them, get them involved as not only members but officers, and get the thing going on that level. Then you also have to make sure that while you're doing that, that a portion of them are, you might say, undergraduates so that when graduation time comes you don't completely eliminate all your officers and you're starting from zero. That's another thing that you have to work into the whole thing and it becomes very difficult because the individual students are busy with classes and other activities and so here you are with this tremendous juggling act trying to keep the whole thing going. Trying to maintain continuity, trying to maintain interest, trying to maintain a good program and various activities, trying to get your work done for the classroom, and come out with a 3.8 or something in the end – it's extremely difficult. I see Phi Alpha Theta as being there and having potential and I've seen advisers, myself included, you get sort of disheartened. Nothing's happening and so on. But it sort of goes in cycles. You'll get a group of students that'll be very interested as happened with the History Club. I remember the History Club was kind of

just existing and then all of sudden 1973, 74, there was this interest, there was this whole group of people, they had their little clubhouse or meeting room and this became kind of rallying center. Also it became, my office was right next door to it, and they were very loud and eventually I moved my office a bit down the hall because of that. There was a lot of movement of people and talking and that's when we had the old offices without complete partition. But it was very, very active and they did a number of things. I think they got money for bringing in the speaker John Francis Bannon there in April of '74 and then I think the following year they had Martin Marty, the religious historian from University of Chicago, he came up. That shows you when you have the student interest there, but it wasn't only the interest of the officers, it was also the interest of the members. So the officers had a lot of backup so it just wasn't these 3 or 4 people doing all the work, but it was the membership and all the interaction that went on. Part of that, you see there's another ingredient here, part of that was that they had a room. It was in a well visited part of campus – it was in the Learning Resources Center – and people would, the people used it as a lounge. The history students used it as a lounge in lieu of a lounge on campus which we don't have so all of that came together and provided the right ingredients and then they brought up the different speakers and they had the momentum going and they got money – yeah they didn't have the money for it so they got money from, I think the Vice President's office to bring the speakers in or they might have gone through the student government but they did have to bring these people in. They had to fly them in. It's a very, very complex situation in terms of putting together a student organization and making it successful. When you see a successful student organization, a lot of people say, "Fine. Great. That's just what's supposed to happen", but it takes a lot of tinkering and fixing and working with the organization to get it to go. Then all you need is a group of those students to leave and something happens – they graduate – and you're back to the start again. So it's a very difficult situation that you have to sort of tinker with and deal with. So that's kind of my philosophical view of the past and the future for the organization. The big thing is that it has the potential, the potential is there, and what I try to do is show the students here it is, it's yours, you can do what you want with it. Any direction you want. You get different responses but the last, since 1986, I'm not saying it's because of my involvement, but because we've reactivated it, now we've gotten students that aren't graduating. It's your kind of organization, they're not graduating, we're kind of building up a little core of people that can be tapped and become involved and so on. And I think it's going to take a while. I'd say it's really been around about 2 years in a very active state. From the records and so on, in the last 2 years, the organization has done quite well. So right now it's kind of meeting its potential.

(I): Okay, thank you.

(RM): Alright.

END OF INTERVIEW