

Interview with Don Potvin 3/14/96

NMU Bookstore

Interviewer: Didn't say

INT: If I could ask you the date of your birth?

DP: 8/23/30. Why

INT: Where are you from originally? Dr. Magnaghi said it would be a good thing to ask.

DP: Berglund Michigan, West end of the peninsula.

INT: Did you move here for the job?

DP: No No I came down here to go to college in 1954. and stayed

INT: Just enjoyed it or liked it here?

DP: I like the U.P. I wasn't interested in going to the city.

INT: What is your academic background like?

DP: Well I have a bachelors of Science degree from Northern. In 1958. Three of 1958 and Economics was the major. Psychology and Business I guess, accounting was the minor. In later years I went back and got additional education, I have a teaching certificate that I have never used.

INT: Okay

DP: I ? a masters, but I never bothered.

INT: Okay, why did you chose to manage Northern's bookstore?

DP: Well, I think that it is quite simple, there are not too many jobs around here to raise a family with and I working as an insurance adjuster downtown, I got a call from Dewey ? who was running the self liquidating program at that time. Asking me to come up and talk to him, I knew him while I was a student here. I had I was president of council for student problems at that time. I don't know what they called it, for student problems at that time. He called me and wanted me to come up and talk to him. I said ya, I could come out. I ? with him, he said that would I consider coming to Northern to run the bookstore? He said they have a problem and Dr. Harden had suggested to call me and ask and to tell me that if I wanted the job it is mine. So I took the job. It isn't because I knew anything about books, other than buying them and reading a few.

INT: Okay, so you just got the management position ?? and you just took it.

planned the bookstore would be here prior to the one they have now. Although even the one they had during Hardwick 7 year they

DP: right. ? and ? he tells me that Harden suggested, see I was a pretty good friend of Dr. Hardens, I met him early on in his career here, and I know he liked me. Dr. ? and he knew I was around town he would call and ask if I ? ?. Again that was in, probably August or July of '61, '60 or '61.

INT: Then when did you begin?

DP: It was then it was either July or August of '60 or '61. Maybe '61, I can't remember.

INT: And what did your job consist of?

DP: Well the first job of course was getting ready for a fall semester opening. It is the only bookstore, or the only source for books for students and supplies at that time. And there were cases and cases of books in the basement of Lee Hall waiting to be opened and priced and received and all those sorts of things that you have to do place in proper order for students to be able to pick them up for their classes which was coming up very soon. I think that was the problem Dr. Harden referred to were a whole ton of books down there but no one to sort them, price them and get them ready to go. Because they already should of been a parting of the ways between the previous manager and Northern at that time, already it happened they had to have someone on board to do it.

INT: Okay. What was the bookstores location and appearance?

DP: The bookstore when I started was in the area of, the north half probably of the Public Safety office right now. Later it became, after we moved out of there, it became the telephone exchange. Quite small storage room we had was down in the basement. Under Lee Hall that is. Two of us worked full time, myself and a lady by the name of Lora Coombe, worked full time for me and then we had some student help on occasion not a great deal. We had help with pricing and with buy back books. Generally speaking the two of us with one part time person, I would say one or two part time persons ran the store.

INT: Is Lora still around?

DP: No, Lora died a few years ago.

INT: They said she was a good person to contact.

DP: I can't tell you when, but fairly soon after I came there was a decision made that we needed bigger larger quarters. And we did a fairly simple renovation of the cafeteria which was then Lee Hall cafeteria which is now the art gallery, on the ground floor there I don't know if there is an art gallery up too at least the ground floor there between that hallway and the amain entrance was the bookstore. We lived there until we built the first phase of this building over here. And I planned basically

planned the bookstore would be here prior to the one they have now. Although even the one they had during Hardwick ? year they rejuvenated that a couple times. Probably rejuvenated once or twice and then this new one was built here. So I moved over to a book store here in this building.

INT: Okay. What changes are you responsible for?

DP: That I am responsible for? Well I think no great changes. I think the changes responsible for would be going from original quarters to intermediate quarters of the cafeteria then first to what you might call the legitimate book store built as a book store in this building when they first built it. As far as changes I think there were no innovated changes then. We did small way everything you do now, we sell textbooks, we bought paper backs and we tried to have additional paperbacks for non required reading, but there was not enough space for a great deal of that. We sold some trinkets class rings, while I was here we designed the class ring I think, the logo is still being used right now, the designs that are on the sweatshirts, that was part of it, if that is any great shakes. We sold some cleaning supplies that people needed and a few sundrie items in the store nothing like you have now. You have a department store now. We had some art supplies and some drafting supplies. Some nursing supplies, I in fact did not like the trend to what is happening in the book store here. In fact part of the reason I left was I got a little tired of the place and the politics of it. There were certain pressures to go the way it has gone here with selling every kind of sweatshirt and color and combination and trinket, jewelry well you know, you know what is in there so I don't have to tell you, I don't know because I haven't been in there. But I am not so sure if that is what a bookstore is suppose to be on campus.

INT: It is like a little mini-mart, it has everything you need.

DP: I think, there are people down town paying taxes that should sell those things.

INT: Are there any changes that you would of liked to of accomplished that weren't accomplished?

DP: Oh I think there was some communication between bookstores and booksellers that I think could of been improved that have been improved with electronics over the years. Speeded up the ordering, and return process and things like that, those things that come about everything was very slow and the telephone was the only thing that was kind of modern in terms of getting together with those folks, but the whole system was pretty slow acting and reacting.

INT: What do you think were the bookstores best qualities?

DP: Then? well I don't know. I would say generally speaking

INT: You left, you said you were just tired of it?

textbooks were here on time and in quite good quantities. But as of the same situation is now I am sure there is misjudgments as to what is needed and you end up with short. That was one of the big problems as to how to handle that in some quick way. Get the book publishers to get you what you needed in a hurry. People were without books after 6 weeks after classes started. I think we did a good job of doing that, basic book selling, and supply selling for students, I think we did a good job. We were on time we ordered certain things and we did ? a day I suppose we did decent job on selling sweatshirts and some logo type articles. But I think the spirit of trying to see how much money you could make from that sort of thing wasn't the way at that time. I really think it wasn't.

INT: Then you think one of the worst qualities is not having enough books?

DP: yes I think there was a shortage of space and maybe then a desire to get better in paperback books, occasional reading and choice type reading. But certainly space was a problem for that. Space was a problem for art supplies, we had so few art students, how much can you put in for a few students. Art supplies have always been expensive, always hard to handle, they get damaged easily, all that paper, cardboard and all that good stuff. But I think basically not enough room for books, other than required books was probably a short coming at that time.

INT: And now you think that it's got too much stuff, that people should be selling down town.

DP: For my personal feeling. I think so. I don't begrudge them doing it, if that is what they want to do it is alright, but ah I think that there is, I could probably go in there and find a hundred things that I just as soon have someone downtown sell for you. Then I think you could too.

INT: What do you think the better things that are now?

DP: The better things, it is beautiful, spacious, its beautiful and all encompassing, which its better that is what you want. So it is better in many ways in that fashion. It is certainly keeping with the times I think if you take pride in those kinds of things that Northern bookstore appears to be every bit as good as the bookstores on many other campuses, many other campuses. And ah Northern has put a lot of money into making things nice here for us, I will tell you that. I should say they probably deserted a lot of your money for that.

INT: And you left in what year?

DP: I think, I would say 5-1/2 years, say '66.

INT: You left, you said you were just tired of it?

DP: I decided to open my own bookstore on 3rd street. I probably got to that point, because I was somewhat tired of the situation around here. I am a little bit of an independent person I think and I probably didn't quite fit in here in a good way, total way.

INT: Did you just like that kind of a business, sell books?

DP: I liked it, I enjoyed it a lot. I enjoyed working with the kids, I enjoyed visiting with the kids, I enjoyed the professors, a lot and speaking with them and talking over problems and concerns. It was a kind of like I was going to school continuously here, because I had real opportunity to spend a lot of time with different professors and different topics and so forth, for their book needs and all that sort of thing. I liked that sort of thing a lot, I miss that. I miss that a lot.

INT: Can you tell me anything like the cost for the materials?

DP: All I can tell you that I am very aware that they have gone up huge amount. I think that at that time there were a lot of paper back books that were 75 - 95 cents, 1.50 from the University press that are high cost short run, small amount of printing they were only about 2.50 or 2.75 something like that. Text books oh I think Chemistry books or physics books things like that were probably, I am going to guess, 12 or 14 dollars were a high at that time. I think there were an awful lot of textbooks that ran from 7 to 9 dollars somewhere around there, in that range. Pens were 45 cents, or 39 cents then bic pens ?? , I think many spiral folders we sold for notes they were stuck with 39 cents or 69 somewhere around there.

INT: This morning I talked with Mr. Magnaghi, he was saying something about President Jamrich, that when the people at the bookstore would make a lot of money he would throw a party. for the employees. Do you know anything of that?

DP: I know nothing of that.

INT: okay, you might want to ask

DP: Jamrich, ask Hardwick about that.

INT: He might know something about that.

DP: he may and he may not know something about that.

INT: he told me to ask Mr. Potvin, he

DP: The dollars that were left over, we didn't say what to do with them. They were just in the pot down there and someone higher than we, just decided perhaps Mr. Vantassel, just decided what to do with those excess dollars. I didn't choose, that is for sure, I paid the bills for the things that I got in the store

and deposited the money that came in and what was left over they decided if they were going to do anything with it. I think if I recall they bought a few pianos with the music department with it, but I couldn't tell you anything else other than that. I certainly don't know anything about any party's I guarantee you that, I would probably deny anything.

INT: You were invited?

DP: I was never.

INT: HE had told me, Mr. Hardwick, that Ella Christianson

DP: Ella Christianson is the lady I replaced. She lives in town yet by the way. When, Dick and I are old friends we have known each other for years in fact recommended Dick as my replacement, when I left, when, I came in '54 and Dick came in '53, he might of been here a year earlier, there was a little bookstore oh probably underneath the stairwell of Kaye Hall at that time and a fellow by the name of Mr. Mattson sold the books I think, they didn't like being open all day everyday and stuff I think there were certain times they were there and they were closed. So Mr. Mattson was replaced by Ella Christianson, she started the book store like I tell ya, in the area over there where public safety is, and I replaced her in '61. Ella still lives in town, I think she is out of town this week, I chum around a lot with her nephew, I see her real often. But she lives in the Tourville apartments, you can get her out of the phone, Russell is her husbands name, Russell and Ella. I would think she would talk to you a little bit. I think she probably not real happy with having left, but I think she would talk to you.

INT: Okay that would be good.

DP: Dr. Harden made that change.

INT: Do you know why?

DP: I would say he certainly approved it. I am not so sure he actually said she is gone by him. Mr. Plough might of made that decision. I don't really know. Harden knew it was obviously ?? and I am quite confident that he did say he wanted me because I like ? he offered help me to get into any training program around and across the manufactures. I am quite sure he could of got me into Ford or GM or any of those training programs. ??? . so I would give Ella a call.

INT: I tried yesterday I think

DP: I think they are gone for the rest of the week, I think next week you could get a hold of her.

INT: And you do not know why she left then?

DP: Dewey Plough, I am quite confident that Dr. Harden assisted to. I think the salary when I started, lets see I think the

DP: I do not.

INT: Okay

DP: I never asked her and I was never told. It was suggested to me one time that some people didn't want her running the store.

INT: OH

DP: That is the only thing I have ever heard. Just about in that fashion off the cuff. I don't have any kind of authority, I have never made an inquiry she never, I have seen her many times over the years we have been at doings together, because I hang around with her nephew a lot and she has never mentioned a word about it, never been angry with me or never mentioned why or not. I think she would tell you.

INT: Do you know anything about Mr. Mattson?

DP: No I do not, I have bought books down there when I first came in '54 and it wasn't long after I think that the change was made, I really can't recall, she could tell you something about it I think.

INT: Okay

DP: There may be other people around town that could tell you something, I can't think of who the old timers are.

INT: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me.

DP: about the bookstore? I think not, it was a good experience for me and was very interesting that at some point it got tiring, I didn't particularly like the politics of the University, some ways its disappointing, the direction they go, the decision that are made, it is hard to work out here and just have a job and just do your job without thinking about a lot of things that ready aren't your business you see and that was one of my problems, I have always been that way, I wish more people would be that way. It is so easy to go through life and focus only on one thing. I think that is about it, that I would have to, I believe Dick, what the hell is his name, Dick Hardwick would know his name, Dick someone was the immediate boss between Vantassel and the bookstore at that time. He ran himself ?? after Dewey ? died, Pleaugh is his name, anyway Dick, can't think of his name now is the guy we hired Hardwick. I told him I was leaving and I know a guy that would like to come back here, Dick had been working for Montgomery Ward at that time, Hardwick, I knew he had always wanted to come back here, he was here shortly.

INT: could you say who hired you?

DP: Dewey Pleugh, I am quite confidant that Dr. Harden assisted to. I think the salary when I started, lets see I think the

salary I was hired for at that time was I think I want to say about 7600 dollars a year. Might ask the manager here what he will get this year.

INT: How much.

DP: And when I left I recommended to Dick that he ask for 18,000 dollars when he comes, I think I was only at about 10 at that time. Salary's don't jump very fast.

INT: That is a big job

DP: I thought it was quite demanding, a lot of room for error and a lot of room to do right. A lot of personality problems and a lot of personnel problems, when you are dealing with bunches there are a lot of strange cats in there.

INT: yes

DP: there anything be strange in a student someplace. So it would be interesting to tell you, I don't know if Dick would tell you, it is public records you can get it either way, what the salary started with and what he ended up with. It is a lot bigger job now because there is a whole lot of help you are doing everything in the world. We still got the books out and that is what they are suppose to do.

INT: The book sales

DP: that is the main deal.

INT: Okay. If I could have you sign this.