

Marcus Robyn

10.9.03

NMU Archives in Marquette, Michigan

Start of Interview

(I) First off what is your full name?

(M) Marcus Robyn.

(I) And your date of birth?

(M) January 15, 1961.

(I) And the place?

(M) Eugene, Oregon.

(I) And your family members you currently have?

(M) I have a wife named Susan, a daughter named Jessica and son named Devin.

(I) Ok and your currently position in as?

(M) I am the University archivist records manager and associate professor.

(I) And you're getting your ten year in this position when?

(M) March 1st 1997.

(I) And how did you come upon this position?

(M) I was the city archivist for the city of Portland prior to coming here I was in that position for five years and prior to that I was the archivist for the Tyrrell Historical Library in Belmont, Texas where I was for two years. While at the city of Portland I realized that I didn't want to work in government archives any longer and I really wanted to get back into academia. My wife is from downstate Michigan and I noticed this job posting in a professional journal, applied for it and here I am.

(I) What originally I guess drew you to the Marquette area what about Marquette really silicified you taking this position?

(M) Well initially it was a lark, more than anything else the position I had in Portland was a solid job and it paid very well. It paid better than this job did. And when I was asked to come for an interview I decided to do it initially just because it was free, it would pay for everything for me to come out here and everything. When you are in the profession you don't, you occasionally apply for jobs just to keep yourself sort of in the pool and keep your skills up as far as interviewing. You rarely should ever turn down an interview opportunity because it's a good chance to practice. I was in a job so I just came here on a longshot more than anything. It was

fun because I was pretty relaxed and I didn't feel any pressure and I really enjoyed myself. I liked that area. It was in the middle of winter.

(I) [Laughs]

(M) It was December so it was pretty cold and snowy but I liked that western Oregon rainy and I much have the winters here than the rain there. So I came and liked what I saw, liked the people and when they offered me the job I decided to take it.

(I) Like culturally similar? As far as the people, how you were treated?

(M) No its small, Portland is a large metro area with about one and half million people. And western Oregon is a highly densely populated area probably 95% of the state of Oregon's population is in Willamette Valley. So I grew up in fairly urbanized environment very cosmopolitan. That's my experience, coming here is very different because it's isolated rural its almost much more frontier like than it is in the west, well western Oregon anyway. In the end thought I love it. I love the small town culture I love the fact that I know people on the street in the grocery store the common thing. As far as culture goes, the offerings here in Marquette are just as good than what I could have gotten in Portland. I mean there are certainly differences but they are good enough. I love the ethnic cultural background of the people in the area, the immigrate background the Finnish Scandinavian background. The culture. On another level it's very similar in that the development of both regions is very much the same. Both the current base of extractive industries, the development of extractive industries, both lumber and mining. And in that sense it has a very colonial aspect to it so the region itself historically is very similar in fact the lumber industry left here at the end of the early 19th century and when to Oregon and Washington state to start pick up there after they cut over all the Great Lakes region. So in a lot of ways it's very similar very rugged wilderness. In western Oregon you leave the valley and you are in the mountains in that sense. And I like the isolation. I love the fact that I am three hours away from the close interstate. And I love telling people that, the only drawback for me is I am a big baseball fan so I'm not very close to any major league or minor league teams.

(I) Right right. What influenced you to become an archivist?

(M) I was a history major at the University of Oregon and in my second year my best friend and I formed an undergraduate history club. Both of us were planning to go on to secondary education and we were both teachers in the teachers college program secondary ED program there. But I hated it. I really hated it. But I was in it and kept going at it because I felt I had to have a job. At the time I didn't have a lot of self-confidence I didn't think I could go on to graduate school. But my friend and I once we formed the history club we got a lot of people involved and we all started thinking about activities and our faculty advisor at the time suggested that we visit the university archives and of course no one at that point and been in the archives or spent any time it was sort of a big notion and I remember calling up the university archivist there University of Oregon and making arrangements to visit and get a tour and sure enough we did it and I was just fascinated I was floored I couldn't believe that there was a profession you could go into that you worked every day with the nuts and bolts of history and worked with it, developed it, researched from it. Did everything except having to teach from it which is ironic

because I also teach here quite a bit. But I remember feeling really ecstatic after the tour and I can even remember saying so people get jobs in this?! And I was fortunate at the time the University of Oregon offered a certificate a graduate certificate program in archive management that went along with the MA program in history there. So I imminently dropped out of the secondary ED program and got involved in the archives, working and interning and later on I became a graduate student and I worked and got my certificate in archive graduate.

(I) You just mentioned that while you were there you never really realized that the achieves that you had never been to it. Do you think that the archives is a forgotten resource on campuses with advent of the internet and the interconnectedness of all information available?

(M) Well no I don't. I think that the archives has many many communities, many audiences, many patrons it's not limited for students, or students of history or social sciences our patrons are both community, the administration here on campus, faculty, research scholars along with students. As long as our society continues to produce information at least to be kept permanently to document our existence we are always going to have archives and we are always going to have a need for them. This archives I think I feel is far more visible on this campus than the archives on the University of Oregon was. It's certainly a much more integral part of the history department's instructional program than it was at the University of Oregon.

(I) For the freshman student or the sophomore student coming in here do though you feel that not enough is stressed by instructors to use this as a resource for understanding and learning about history of the area, history of NMU things of that nature.

(M) Yea I suppose so. And they certainly don't have no excuse for it because I'm fairly well known on campus fairly well known in faculty, the resources are more more known to other components. Its slowly changing we have environmental studies majors coming in here often, we have facilities and planning people coming in here, landscape students come in here over time, we have biology students come in here. We do have a diversity of students right now we have a student out in the reading room right now he is from a program in consumer studies and she's looking at the history of daycares on campus. We have a variety of students who come in here certainly needs to continue to change and diversify there's no question about that. I'll tell you the history within the last two years have done a tremendous job in integrating the archives more into its program and having its students use the archives regularly and often as part of its methodologically training course and I credit that largely to influx of new faculty members.

(I) As far as your positon as the archivist what is the most rewarding part of this position?

(M) That's a tough question. Well first and foremost I think developing the historical regional collections. The position have two broad goals one is to manger the university records and the university official archives and the other is to develop a regional historical collection which is made up of manuscript material from individuals, organizations, businesses, intuitions that have had a significant role in the historical role of in the Upper Peninsula. And for me that's for the most exciting part is to develop and document the history of different groups and individuals. For example we have done a great job documenting the labor movement, political activist, political action, the development of government. We have also done a great job of developing in

documentation of the iron mine industry in central U.P. CCI archive records. So that to me is the most rewarding to see that collection grow and become more and more relevant and become more important to not just the university and the students and staff and community that brought it to me. And I enjoy working with people. People have this mistaken notion that archivists tend to be very introverted people and I'm not like that at all. I'm active politically, I'm active in my union but I'm also really enjoy going out in the community working with historical groups, working with others I wish I could do more of that unfortunately because I am the title includes records managers I have to spend a lot of time doing record management activities on campus and that's my least favorite activity and I wish I could put it all together the other but I can't.

(I) You just answered my next question which was what's the worst part about being the NMU archivist?

(M) Yeah the worst part is doing records management I can't imagine why anyone would want. Record management is a separate profession from archival management. I'm an archivist I was a trained archivist unfortunately records management has been sort of a development of an offshoot of archival management historically and there are people who are just records managers. What that means these are people that manage the active day to day use of records and their ultimate disposition, they manage the life cycles is what we call them. For me it's just terribly boring. That's one reason I got out of the city of Portland because that's predominantly what I did there. It's terribly boring, tedious work very uninspiring I don't know why anyone would want to do it entirely for their soul activity probably about 50% of what I do is records management so I survive largely because I am able to do the historical collection, I get to teach. I do workshops on archival methodology and research and I am very active in my union here and other activities as a faculty member so all of those things challenge me and are fun and engaging helps me not think of record management stuff that much.

(I) Well since you have been in the central Upper Peninsula, Marquette area what would you say professionally the most significant event that has occurred since you have been here?

(M) Professionally?

(I) Professionally.

(M) For me the most significant event was the acquisition of the CCI records.

(I) And when did that occur?

(M) About two years ago. When I first came here to Northern. That summer that first summer that I was here I went down to Lansing to visit with the state archives and visit the state archivist and the staff and get a tour, I think I might have been going down there also for a conference I don't know. Spent a day there at the state archives I think and while I was on the tour they took me back in the storage area stacks, at one point they showed me about 500 cubic feet or 1200 volumes including 1200 volumes of archival records which include the iron mining company. By this time I had a pretty good idea of what the cleave of this was and its historical role in the development in the region up here in the Marquette iron range. So I was stunned to see this fabulous collection down in the state archive and what the hell was it doing in the state archives

in Lansing almost 600 miles away from the region that the material documented. I was told what happened was the state archives had purchased FEED which was a small community on the Garden Peninsula across the bay **aechland** from Escanaba and in 1955 the state has purchased the land department of parks and recreation had converted to a living history museum which it is today. Well they had purchased the property from CCI and CCI had acquired it years before when they acquired the Jackson Iron Mine Company the Jackson Iron Mine Company had operated a smelter there and CCI once they purchased whatever they stored, they ended up storing their archival records in several buildings on the grounds and when they sold it to the state they just abandoned the records along with these buildings so the state acquired all of these old great CCI records. Not knowing what to do with it they transferred it to the state archives and then a few years later they acquired another section of CCI records through a direct donation from the company, you have to remember this is back in the early late 50s there is no, Northern is not even an university yet it's a still struggling college, MTU has no archival program there is no repositories up here capable of handling that collection the state archives were really the only repository who could have done that. But the long and short of it is the collection then stayed with the state archives and nobody was using it was just sitting under the steps. And I remember saying to the archives in charge of the processing of the stacks there what are you doing with this can I have it?! And she said take it now if I would have had a truck with me they probably would have given it to me right away because it was taking up a lot of space that they needed and it wasn't getting used. So that began my four year quest, three year quest I guess, three or four year quest to get that material back up here, now the staff of the archives were willing to give me the stuff but the state archivist wasn't. He was reluctant and took three years or more to negotiate a deal with him in which he finally agreed to transfer the material up here to Northern as a deposit and that means we have that collection in our possession and it's in our stacks now and its made available to the public but the state still owns it. It's a formality really. For all intensive purposes the stuff is here and the it's never going to go anywhere the state paid for the shipment the transfer of the material up here and as long as they continue to own the material they are also responsible for any kind of processing work that needs to be done. We now have it however and since then students have made extensive use of it by having an entire class right now basically using the material. A scholar has used the material to write a book on the history of iron mining in Michigan and we had another scholar using the material as part of her research on immigrant mining so it's be a fabulous time. I think as far as my most professional significant activity for the archives is concerned that would be it. The second thing would be the establishment development of the university records center into a comprehensive records center for records management on campus. That would be the second thing I guess.

(I) Kind of getting back to some of the people that you kind of brought up. At the state who was the state archivist that?

(M) Dave Johnson he is still the state archivist.

(I) Still the state archivist. And you also mentioned two individuals that really used the CCI records...

(M) Professional scholars. That was Dr. Terry s. Reynolds whose professor of history at Michigan Tech University and Christian Mingini [spelled phonetically] who is a graduate student in the industrial archeology program Michigan Tech.

(I) So its defiantly been worthwhile to bring these...

(M) Oh absolutely! If you walk in the reading room right now you'll see stacks of CCI records around being used by students for a class right now. It's been tremendous.

(I) And these records date from about when?

(M) Well the earliest I've seen is about 1852 but my understanding is there is material in there as far about as 1846 up to about 1955.

(I) Kind in the same band of significant effects how about personally? What has been the most significant event in your life personally since you've been at NMU?

(M) The birth of my son. Well my daughter was born six months before I can't, the birth of my son my most significant personal event. Other than that it's my, general statement my involvement in political action, political activism and political activism on campus I mean in the community. One of the nice things about being a smaller community is you can be a much greater impact on the development on the way things happen on your community. If you go to a large metro area of a hundred something million people there is a growing group of left wing political activist in this town, progressives. And we have formed, last year I formed, well first I was involved with Green Party here and that was great. And then we formed a citizens group to oppose the war with Iraq and that has developed into a major progressive political organization in the community and it's been exciting to be a part of that and watch it grow and develop. And also forming a softball team.

[M and I Laughs]

(I) Concerning your political affiliations and that what do you feel are the biggest current political issues that have been swept under the table by the major parties?

(M) Are you talking out of relevant to...?

(I) Relativity to the Upper Peninsula.

(M) Probably the biggest thing corporate globalization of the world economy. It has a serve impact on the region and the way capitalist leaving the country and the region to exploit cheap labor overseas. You see that happening in particular in the lumber and timber industry and in other industries around the region and that has a huge impact. The imperialist force of the United States which drains enormous resources away from the country, that has direct impact on our roads our infrastructure, our education those things. If you are looking at those national issues that's part of what this group I belong to is trying to raise showing the direct impact of those decisions on our local community. Here locally I think what is being ignored by the media and local politicians is corporate welfare. The effect of corporate welfare and how that has an effect on our local community and infrastructure particular in the development of KI Sawyer and in the

way CCI operates and the way some of large land owners in the area in particular I'm thinking on Ode Vera Land Company, the power of the individuals such as them have on the way wealth is distributed and used is something that is completely ignored and it needs to be address more directly and go publically.

(I) Let me ask you about a current issue that is taking place in Marquette county the development of the former airport site. What's your take on that? Is that good for the area? Bad for the area?

(M) Well it just depends. The problem that I see and it's a problem epidemic around the country is the communities are strapped and being held hostage to major corporations it's called economic blackmail. A company will come in and demand major concessions from local government in the form of taxes and infrastructure development and they will demand these concessions in return for supposedly for a certain amount of jobs being brought in. The problem is the job that are being brought in what comes to mind is the call center at KI Sawyer the company out there is benefiting from enormous tax breaks, infrastructure development given to them for free all of that is welfare, corporate welfare. In return they are claiming they are providing a certain number of jobs as far as I understand they have failed to meet those levels and the jobs they are providing are low paid job, low paying jobs with little benefits that do not add to the tax base to the area so on one hand they are reaping enormous profits and taking them out of the area doing very little in return. Another example is the saw mill that's out there the former Sawyer Lumber Company that owned that saw mill out there benefited again from free infrastructure support, major taxes breaks and then turned around and refused to negotiate and tried to break up the union that was out there and then sold out to a major multinational corporation which I now believe is--- so there is no accountably. I think it's interesting that conservative republicans are always talking about accountability and they forces on personal accountability and they have spend very little time in rhetoric in demanding people accountability for major corporations which loop the public treasury and destroy the environment and basically exploit workers.

(I) Along with that you mentioned that you were a member of the Green party, are you still currently a member?

(M) Yes I'm still a member and the Green Party is now called the North Country Greens I'm not as active as I used to be because I am spending more of my time with this new group called Citizens for Peace and Justice.

(I) Did you have a chance to see Ralph Nader while he was on campus?

(M) No I couldn't it was really ironic I couldn't because my daughter was just starting baseball and I had to take her to a two hour baseball clinic that was being held at the Dome at the exact time that Ralph Nader was speaking on campus, when it comes down to it you don't tell you daughter that I'm not going to take you to baseball clinic. I ended up missing it.

(I) As far as Ralph Nader goes what's your impression of him is he a strong enough leader for the Green Party currently or is there a need for a shift?

(M) The problem with Ralph is has never been a member of the Green Party he has never he is a great man he probably has done more for the people of the United States than any elected official has ever done not just in his consumer activism but in the issues that he raises and using his notoriety to raise important issues and spark debate. The problem with him is he has never committed to, he just isn't committed to the Green Party he wants to the Greens and rightfully so to organize themselves, what the Greens have to do to succeed is to organize at the grass roots start their way from the bottom up, elect officials at the local government level and they are trying to do that and they are working hard to do that. With the goal with either establishing a viable third party alternative which is going to be very difficult because the constitutional structure in the United States is designed not to allow for a third party or as my hope is to force the Democrats to jettison the democratic leadership conference and clines themselves of corporate corruption and become again a progression collection political party like it used to be but isn't. So I myself am possibly run for a government position next year if my son is old enough my family demands are not too great I might do that.

(I) And what position would you run for?

(M) Probably city council first initially.

(I) Aspirations from there to?

(M) Probably county commissioners but nothing further than that. My role would be to run as an alternative voice, alternative progressive political voice.

(I) What other organizations are you affiliated with?

(M) Well I am vice president of the NMU chapter of the American Association of University Professors, I am also a member of the Midwest Archive Conference, the Michigan Archival Association, and I'm a member of the Academy of Certified Archivist, fairly active in all three more so in the Michigan Archival Association I'm a board member there on that executive board member and I'm a team leader of petition with Uneen for the Academy Certified Archivist which is a national positon.

(I) As your role with the union here on campus what do you view as your biggest challenge in that position?

(M)[Laughs]

(I) It's a very loaded question I realize.

(M) I guess the biggest challenge is to try to get the faculty to except the fact that they belong to a union [laughs] the problem with academic, higher education faculty is they for the most part, this isn't an entirely case of course almost everywhere, but in many places and this runs counter to what ADD will tell you they are fairly conservative people they are fairly conservative and they are reluctant to engage in fairly radical activities to press or promote an issue or a position they tend to see themselves as professionals similar to the way doctors and a lawyers might see themselves and they AUP not in traditional labor sense like an industrial union does, they see it as more of a association of professional and there is a distinction in that sense. So they are

reluctant to engage in active that a normal union might, such as picketing, demonstration strike, which are powerful tools or even forcing their power and influence in changing, directly changing events. So my biggest challenge as a leader in the union is to try to have a positive progressive voice that motives and influence policy so the union is more of a watch dog on campus than it is. It takes more proactive action in its role of shared government on campus and it actively enforces the contract and actively, as a watch dog as I mentioned, as a watch dog counter weight the actions of the administration to ensure decisions are being made first and foremost support the quality of education, the education mission as the primary objective.

(I) At this time I'm going to end side one. Since politically your views are I would say left wing, progressive left wing and being in an area that is I don't know the easiest way to put it we do a lot of things up here that are counter to that political view such as deer hunting, the deer hunting issue, the mining that goes on, the select cutting of certain areas in the forest, the infringement on some of the state forest lands as well. Do you have a hard time, when we, when this culture up in the Upper Peninsula is really geared to that?

(M) Do I have a hard time? I don't have a problem with hunting because we created an ecological imbalance in the region while wiping out most of the predator species we got to be the predator to maintain the balance deer population. I have no problem with hunting I might have a problem with the culture of hunters, you know the yahoo drinking and sitting in their blind. I can't stand people who sit in a blind and put food out in a bay pile and spray female estrogen round to lure the deer, where the hunting in that I can't understand. I have no problem with shooting deer, I don't have a problem with gun ownership either I'm a strong supporter of the 2nd amendment. As far as selective cutting I'd probably be a proponent for selective cutting as a way to maintain forest ecology and at the same time maintain the forest industry which I recognize as a major industry which provides good paying jobs. The problem I have is when that industry clear cuts for short term profit to benefit stock owners who live regions away and don't give a shit about the local community. The problem I have when that industry picks up and leaves and goes to Mexico or somewhere else to take the cut wood that they cut from the region to process it down there to exploit cheap labor. Those are the problems I have and those are the problems most progressives would have. As far as iron mining I don't have a problem with iron mining, mining ores is a needed component of our industrial society I mean most progressives acknowledge that we live in an industrial capital society there are fringe groups within the progressive movement that would like to evolve or get rid of that capitalist industrial base but most of us recognize that that isn't a practical goal and we have to try and work ameliorate the worst dysfunctions that they have. Iron mining needs to be there but it needs to operate smart and be aware of its role in the community and that means environmentally friendly which there are way for it to do and still being profitable and still be providing good paying jobs which it has done. But that is not because the iron mining what to do that. It's because of the unions and the labor movement forced the iron mining companies to do that and it's also because of the way the iron mining industry has evolved, it has evolved in such a way that technology has allowed it to produce an enormous amount of wealth and distribute that through value product to its work force. It's interesting to note that in 1946 or 1950 there were 30,000 iron miners on the Marquette iron rang, today there is probably about 16,000. So you know the companies are still

producing an enormous amount of wealth and profit because their work force is so much smaller through the technological change they are able to distribute a little bit more money to them. So I think progressives in the region can work with the culture here and reach out and try to help bridge, I think your question is a good one we need its indicative what progressive have to do to overcome misconceptions that a lot of people have what progressive political is all about. I think progressive politics is about proactive government that operates not for the benefit of major multinational corporations but for the benefit for the people and communities and to allow those operations to exist profitably but to do so in a way to make sure the needs of the communities and the individuals are taken care of and there are models very successful models of that sort of system and in other parts of the world. There's no reason we can't have it.

(I) I really very much thank you for being how open you are a lot people are not. Kind of getting back to your role here at the University since you have in this archive at your disposal a vast history of NMU and the U.P. what document, manuscript or book is the most important piece in this archive?

(M) The most important as far as what most important what university document is the most important here? Single document that's a tough one. That's a tough one I don't know there is so many documents records. I guess I would have to say not a single document but there are a number of collections of course that are extremely valuable, some of the early faculty meeting minutes and administrative materials that we have early establishment or founded of the university is extremely important. Other record series, I guess I don't have an answer they are all very valuable I think the reason I'm struggling with that is you need understand the way the profession works. Of all the records that created on campus all the campus department offices and so forth only about 2% of those are ever kept permanently probably less than that actually here I probably only select about 1.5% of all the all the records created as permanent archive records. The reason for that is that most records are created for immediate use they document immediate functions that the office is involved in and those functions themselves the majority of those functions don't have a long term historical value from a documentation stand point. Things like travel vouchers or canceled checks or simple administrative material only about 1 or 2 percent actually become archival so that suff is extremely valuable. So my job is to select the most valuable and historically relevant material for its eventual deposition in the archives, the rest are eventually destroyed. So I would have to say pretty much everything that I have in the archives has a large historic value there is not a single one that stands out. And as far as the historic manuscript collection what's the most important valuable document in the collection? That really depends on collection and what it documents what institution, individual does it documents, I would say going back to the CCI records just from the top of my head there is some early corresponds of mine agent CCI records that point to some very early labor actions on Marquette iron rang in the 1870s that we weren't aware of having a current before. To me that's just a tremendously valuable record. I mean that's just intangible there are probably many others in that collection.

(I) The next two questions that I have are kind of to finish my interview with you. They are probably gratuitous at best. My one is if you could do one thing to make the NMU archives complete or have one collection added what would it be?

(M) [Laughs] One collection? There will never be one collection to make it complete.

(I) Is there a piece of the history that if you could get your hands on it and have it in the collection.

(M) Yea I suppose one of the area that we don't have a whole lot on is the period of the depression and the war. For whatever reason a lot of those administration materials were lost, we have materials from that but it's not really complete documentation of the administration of university or the college at that time. It be nice to get more or find those records or at least fill that gap of documentation. As far as the regional historical collection for just one there are so many areas I guess the CCI collection went a huge long way in helping us do what we should done years ago and document the history of the iron mine industry I guess right now to make that collection complete that documentation complete would be to get... CCI currently maintains archival material that probably picks up where the current collection we have leaves off. And they also have from my understanding a great collection of glass plate negatives of material. That document photograph of iron mining activities in the early 19th century I would love to get a hold of that collection but at this point CCI have shown no interest in. I tried a few years ago made real strong inroads with them got President Baily involved in negotiating with them but they have not shown any interest in donating that material to us citing a bunch of confidentiality concerns because most of that documents from what I'm talking of getting documents of the development of the union and its relationship with CCI in the last 40 years so they're concerned about confidentiality issues and what the records have them insightful material. If we could get that some day that be great.

(I) I guess for my last one and this is sort of something that kind of popped into my head, if you had to have a memorial dedicated to yourself...

(M) [laughs]

(I) On campus what would it be and what would it say?

(M) Who put you up to that?

(I) Nobody actually nobody it's just...

(M) If I died tomorrow is that what you mean?

(I) If you wanted to be memorialized on this campus if there was something on this campus you know we now have the heart of NMU back which had disappeared, it's now back is there something...

(M) What an ego trip what an ego question!

(I) It is a vanity question.

(M) I guess I would like to be remembered if I was to be remembered I'd like to be remembered as someone who was very dedicated in the identification and preservation of material documents history of the university and central Upper Peninsula that I made my best effort I did everything I could given my resource limited to do that. To do that objectively and professionally and to not only collect that material but then to do everything I could to make it relevant to the education portion of the university whether that's through making preparing the material to make it available and useful or whether it's through instructable programs and outreach that teaches people how to use them I just would like to be remember that way.

(I) Well I thank you very much for your time and I end the interview at this point.

(M) Thank you. [Laughs]

End of Interview