

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown State University

Personal Experience

O.H 1896

THOMAS HANCHETT

Interviewed

by

Gisela Dieter

on

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D· This is an interview with Dr Thomas Hanchett for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Youngstown State University's Thirtieth Anniversary, by Gisela Dieter, on December 2, 1997, at YSU's History Department, at 3.00 p m.

Dr Hanchett, where are you from?

H· I am kind of from all over the place I was born in Chicago, though I do not remember anything about Chicago I grew up partly in Troutville, Virginia, where my dad taught college at a women's school, Hollins College Then when I was in sixth grade, we moved to Cortland, New York. Today it is neat to be living near Cortland, Ohio The one in Ohio is named after the one in New York

D Okay Could you tell us something about your academic background?

H I went to public schools in Virginia and New York, and then I went to Cornell University for my Bachelor's in History I got real interested in urban history and historic preservation, and I went out and worked and went back to school alternately for a while I worked out in Utah for the Utah State Preservation Office Then, I went to the University of Chicago and got a Master's in Urban Studies Then, I worked in Charlotte, North Carolina, for a long time doing historic preservation and then went back to school again at Chapel Hill and got a Ph D.

D So, you say your field of concentration is historic preservation, mainly

H· That is what I get paid for here. I am really interested in how cities have gotten built, how buildings have gotten built, who it is that shapes the landscape that is out there. Preservation in one way to apply that knowledge

D What helped you decide to become a college professor? Who inspired you, or what inspired you?

H My dad, I guess, who has been in that business as long as I can remember He taught Russian History and took me around to see historic cites in America, just going on car trips and pointing out old buildings. That got me interested in history and in looking at buildings as history

Then, I got interested in preservation because I grew up at the time the U S federal government was spending a lot of money for what they called, "urban renewal " Urban renewal meant the federal government would give a city money to tear stuff down Then, the city had to find somebody to build it back up again There is still a lot of vacant lots in American cities today as a result of that program That seemed kind of stupid to me as an idealistic kid So, I got into preservation as a way to seek solutions to the problems of the urban renewal era [I] did not think I was going to become a college professor until I met my

wife, and she said, "You like doing research a lot You like teaching a lot Why not become a professor?" So, I said, "Sure "

D So when was that? When did you start working as a professor?

H I quit being a full-time "in-the-field" historic preservation person when I got married, which was in 1987, and finished my schooling pretty much in 1993 [I] worked as an instructor for a little while and then got a teaching fellowship at Emory University in Atlanta for a year and then came here in 1995

D So again, what was exactly what you did before becoming a teaching professor? You said you were out in the field Where exactly were you working at?

H I worked as an actual practicing historian When you think of historians, you often just think of professors. But actually, there are people who do history out in the real world. Take my work in Charlotte, for example I worked for the city government, which had as part of its planning agency a landmarks commission which designated particular buildings and sites as being worth saving If you owned that building, you had to follow certain rules You also got some pretty nice tax breaks So, folks really liked that They hired me to do an inventory of all of the older neighborhoods in the city to find out what was out there, when stuff had been built, how the city had grown and changed over time The end product was a list of things that might be considered historic landmarks I did that mostly in Charlotte, but I also did it in maybe half a dozen other cities in North Carolina I produced the documentation to put things either on a local landmark list or on the National Register of Historic Places

D What brought you to YSU?

H There was a job here! When I went into the Ph D program at North Carolina, there seemed to be great hope in the history profession that a great number of jobs would be opening up soon In the late 1980's, colleges were really hiring Then, state budgets got real tight in the 1990's, so much of higher education is state funded The tight budgets have meant that in the 1990's twice as many Ph D.s are going out into the world every year as there are jobs for them Youngstown State was one of the places that was looking for somebody with sort of my qualifications, and there was a job here I quickly said, "Yes " I was not about to say, "Youngstown? Where is that?"

D When was that, that you started working here?

H Let us see I interviewed in January I think No, February of 1995 and came here in the summer of 1995

D So when you say about, "Youngstown? Where is Youngstown," what were your

expectations? What did you know about Youngstown and what did you expect of it?

H I did not know much about it. I had heard of the city, which was more than I could say about Charlotte when I went to Charlotte. Youngstown is very well known in American lore as being the steel city. I knew from a friend in college that the steel mills were gone and that Youngstown had fallen on hard times. But, if you had asked me where on a map Youngstown was, I did not know. Turns out, it is in the upper right hand corner of Ohio. That is the way I explain it to people. I had never been here. I expected it to be cold and snowy, and it really was that first year. Since then, it has not been nearly so cold. Having been in the south for about 15 years, cold was way at the top of my thoughts.

D: Could you tell us something about that first year that you were here teaching at YSU? What impressed you the most?

H: It was cold. In North Carolina, winter comes very late. You start thinking about winter in November. I think that year we had here snow in October or something like that. It was just too soon. So, that was a very important thing. It also got very gray and cloudy here for a little while. This year, 1997 to 1998, has been a wonderfully warm year by contrast. These do not seem like important things. But, you asked what was important, and that was

D: What about as far as the university is concerned?

H I enjoyed the university. My dad taught at a state university sort of like this, and this is a more vital place than that. I was really impressed with the fact that a number of the professors in the history department were publishing books and articles, something that did not happen at my father's place because people were just plain too busy. So, that was something that really impressed me. What else? The beauty of the campus is one of the things, also, that I was very pleased by. State universities usually get the short end of the stick when it comes to money for landscaping and buildings and stuff like that. Youngstown State has your basic plain-jane state university buildings, but what is in between the buildings is gorgeous, the curvy pathways and the trees and all of that. As somebody who looks at buildings and landscapes, that is real important to me.

I was also impressed with the fact that professors are usually in this office and eager to talk to students. That is not true at a lot of places. Folks are here most of the time during the day. And everybody likes each other, which is also not true in many big history departments. Quite frequently, you get people who just can not stand each other and make life miserable for everybody. So Youngstown was a very nice place to come to.

D What classes are you currently teaching?

H This quarter I am teaching American Architectural History, which is one of the basic courses in the preservation sequence, and U S. Survey, U S History from 1877 up to the present Those are actually the two courses that I taught the first quarter I came in

D: You were talking about professors here publishing and doing research What kind of research are you currently working on, and why are you interested in that?

H: I started out being real interested in Victorian architecture and in the late nineteenth century That is what I have done a lot of work on My work in Charlotte, which became my dissertation, is about to get published. [It] looked at how the city changed in the 1880's and 1890's up into the 1820's In that book, I had a final chapter that tried to take things up to the present, and I began to realize that cities are really changing really fast in the last 40 years or so, with shopping malls and office parks and expressways

The year before I came here, I started a new research project on the history of shopping centers and office parks and am having a lot of fun following that up and looking at the financing of those "new downtowns" that really killed the old downtowns [They] really changed the way cities existed in the United States In fact, that is something to ask you You came from where?

D. I am from Panama.

H Okay What do you think the of the American shopping centers and the way we organize our cities?

D: It is very different from what we are used to there because we still have that downtown concept People go downtown to shop We have very few malls there. So, that is very different to see how downtown is dead here basically But, then you go to the suburbs, and there is so much activity there Basically on the weekends here, there is nobody downtown So yeah, that is very different I think

H Do you like things this way here? Is this a better way or a worse way or a different way?

D It is just different, I guess I am not sure I could say it is better or worse It is just different The city is just a place to go to work, offices and government offices Then, you go shopping out in the suburbs. It is just different That is America I guess, and the end of the twentieth century

H It did not used to be America, and that change started really in the 1950's and 1960's It is pretty recent So, it has been fun trying to figure that stuff out One of the great shopping mall developers of the United States is Edward DeBartolo,

who gave his name to this building here where I work and where you and I are talking I have been so busy I have not been out to do research on DeBartolo or his company, but it would be fun to do that

D· You were talking about your research Are you trying to incorporate Youngstown into your own research?

H Oh, very much. My research, in a general way, is looking at how the built environment gets shaped, and that is what I teach students about every day in my classes My class last night in Architectural History was on the International Style architecture, with a focus on office parks and shopping centers which are real good examples of that style So, in that way my research gets integrated in teaching The techniques that I teach for finding out when a building was built and who built it are all tools that I learned as a preservationist Now that I am in Youngstown, I am doing research to find the relevant sources here As I do that, I usually look at a recent building from the post World War II era that will also give me insights concerning the specific kind of questions that I am asking for my own research

D When you say you use these buildings, you are using local buildings here in Youngstown?

H Yes

D. What about your involvement in the community, in the Youngstown community? What could you tell us about that?

H That is the really neat thing about this job That is part of my job, to be involved in the community I joined every historical organization that I could find I go to lots of community meetings, organizations such as the Mahoning Valley Historic Preservation Club and the Mahoning Valley Historical Society. It is fun to become one of the people who gets called on when they are putting together a conference or when they are putting together a tour or something like that.

I led bus tours for something called "Leadership Mahoning Valley," where young executives get together and learn about how the valley works The aim is for them to understand how their business fits into the wider picture, so they can help build a healthy community For two years I have been doing tours and presentations for that That is pretty cool And a lot of sort of informal stuff People know that I am the preservation guy The Unitarian Church had problems with their wooden columns out front that are an important part of their building's architecture One Saturday afternoon, I was there with some new miracle epoxy that I have read about in the preservation magazines We were trying to see if we could fix the columns That is neat because that is part of the historic district that is right next to the university It feels great to make a contribution that way

In our neighborhood on Youngstown's North side, there was an old house that is in the Crandall Park Historic District. It burned about two years ago. The owners abandoned it, which is a big problem we have in Youngstown. Neighbors have been trying to find somebody to rehab it, and I think we have got somebody. Those kind of informal efforts are very rewarding to be part of.

D: What about your participation in university committees? What could you tell us about that? What kind of committees are you involved with in the university?

H: I mostly have been working within the department. My job is to get this sequence of historic preservation courses up and running and to do all of the administrative work. In many ways, it is the same kind of administrative work as if I was running a small department. I am doing student recruiting. I am devising the courses. I am writing regulations. I am doing a lot of advertising out in the community and doing a lot of advising with students, and lots and lots of paperwork.

So far, I have not participated on university wide committees. But again, I am known as the preservation guy. Recently I got a call from the folks in Tod Hall, the administrators who are trying to revitalize the area around YSU, and I wrote a component for a grant to the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington. That may still get funded. It has been through a couple of cycles and has not quite made it. It is part of this big grant that is still being considered to do some renovations in the surrounding community. That would be great if that could happen.

D: So, tell them a little bit more about this effort to create this preservation program. What could you tell us about that?

H: Historic preservation is one of the ways that you can get paid to do real history out in the world. Traditionally, history departments have trained people to be school teachers or trained them to be professors, which is something we still do. But, there is just not much market for professors these days. What history departments have begun to realize is that there is this whole public history sector: museums, historical societies, archives, historic preservation. We need to train people to do that because that is where much of history is done, and that is where many ordinary Americans get contact with history on a one to one basis.

About 1993 when President Cochran came to the university, one of the things that is part of his background, he was at Southeast Missouri University which has a very strong historic preservation program. That is one of the things their history department is known for. Here at YSU, the history department had been wanting to do something like that for a long time. Professor Hugh Earnhart had started the oral history program back in the 1970's, and he had long had this vision for a Community History Center. Cochran came into the department and said, "So tell me about your historic preservation program." The department

said, "We do not have one, but we would love to " Earnhart put together the proposal to buy a building, start a Center for Historic Preservation, hire a couple of professors, and make this thing real

That was in 1993 They hired one person who was not able to stay They hired another person on a one year basis, and then I got hired Very quickly what we put in place was a sequence of six courses that train you in the basics of preservation You can do it either as an undergraduate as part of a history major or as a part of some other major Or you can do the sequence as a graduate student. Either way you earn a Certificate in Historic Preservation.

- D What about the recruiting? What impression do you have of YSU students?
- H. Real wide range of backgrounds and abilities Really wide range YSU is an open admission school which means that virtually anybody can come My stereotype of open admission schools was poor hardworking folks who wanted to get an education and came, and we turned them on to neat stuff. And it made miracles happened. That is true actually, but not for everybody unfortunately
- At YSU, I have met some of the very smartest, most hard working, most creative, smart students I ever had. Chapel Hill, Cornell, University of Chicago, there are students here who could excel at any of those places, and it is really exciting to work with those folks At the other end, there are an agonizing number of people who are here simply because it is cheap and they are not sure what else to do They got C's and D's in high school They are just not into it, and they are not ready It is very challenging to create classes that will serve people at both ends of that spectrum So, that has been a real hard thing to conquer, that kind of diversity of ability and motivation
- D. I know What could you tell us about your teaching philosophy?
- H Spend a lot of time One of the things that I really have always wanted to do is help students to write To do that, I have lots of small writing assignments in my classes, lots of opportunities for students to work one on one with me They can do a draft ahead of time and come sit down with me and go over it They can do rewrites I give lots of typed comments on all of the papers and on all of the written examinations I do all essay examinations Some people respond very well to that Other folks say, "Why should I have to write?" I tell them America today is an information society Managing information is [what] most of you get paid for, that or being a good basketball player There is very little you can do today without writing, which boils down to the ability to organize information
- D. How do you encourage them? You say there are two extremes here, the very bright and the not so bright How do you encourage them, keep them?
- H Always be upbeat I always say this, "There is no one who yet writes perfectly " Everyone, on the other hand, has some good points about what they are doing



already. When I give feedback, I try to talk first about what the person has managed to achieve. It is hardest doing good comments for people at the absolute ends of the spectrum. "A" students, it is easy to point out the things they have done well, but they really want to know how to make it even better. So I have to be very creative that way. Students at the other end of the spectrum, it is hard sometimes to find the good things they have done. But when you do, it is really rewarding.

I have had a number of YSU students who come here out of the military. One guy in particular, I remember, was very poorly prepared and I was pretty sure not college material. He turned in a paper, the first one of the quarter, and it was a mess. There was very little you could say about it. I do not remember exactly what I said, but, I managed to say something like, "It is clear here that you have done some of the reading and that you spent time trying to get your thoughts on paper." I felt [it] was the least I could say, and it was the most I could say. I was just stumped. It turned out it was the right thing to say, and the guy is still in school. He gradually figured out how to get hold of the material, and he is now doing pretty well, actually. By stating what seemed to me to be pitifully obvious or obviously pitiful, I had actually said the right thing. I had given him credit for doing what had been pretty hard work. By taking that first step, he was able to take the next ones. He is really a lesson for me. This was my first quarter here, and we see each other on campus. He says, "Hi, freshman. How are you doing?" I say, "Hi, freshman. How are you doing?" We kind of watch out for each other as we go through this.

So YSU has been a real learning experience. That is maybe another thing that I knew coming in, but it keeps getting hit into you. You have to listen, and you have to keep learning. You have to listen to what the students are doing and try to find out where they are coming from.

D: Dr. Hanchett, is there anything else you think appropriate that we should add here to the interview?

H: Nothing I can think of. Thank you for spending time doing this.

D: Thank you.

End of Interview