

Interview with Dr. Jack Greising
2/3/1989
Origin of the History Club

START OF INTERVIEW

(Interviewer): This is an interview with Dr. Greising about the origins of the History club, it's February 3, 1989. Okay, you were involved with the creation of the club.

(Dr. Jack Greising): I was president creation, right. [chuckles]

(I): How did that come about?

(JG): Well, it came about as I remember it, sort of this way; we had a group of people who signed up for the reformation course. These people, particularly when we began to get into the part of the course that deals with theology, got very interested in some of the topics that we dealt with. They began to meet over coffee at the coffee shop in the library. Apparently what happened, now I wasn't there, what I was told was that they began to meet there sometimes three or four times a week just to argue and debate some of the issues that came up in class. Because they had made this into a regular thing, they got the idea that maybe there were a lot of areas in history that students would like to pursue, which are difficult to pursue in any one given course. They began to understand, I think, that the possibilities were just infinite and that it was really impossible to deal with all the things they were interested in and concerned with in the context of any given course or any number of given courses. So they decided maybe the thing to do was to organize themselves into a club and invite particularly members of the history department to present topics they were interested in hearing more about. And so they did. I remember the first one that they wanted to deal with was a topic, I don't remember exactly what the title of the topic was supposed to be, but was supposed to be a kind of debate between Dr. Barnwell and me over certain issues of the reformation. That is how things set up, and they met over at my house as a matter of fact, and we got just an awfully large group of people who came that evening. I was really surprised. The debate, such as it was, wound up being more of a generalized discussion of some of the theological problems of the reformation both in Germany and Switzerland and again in England. The debate part of it never really materialized. The issues just weren't sharply drawn enough, I suppose, but everybody got into the act including the students and it wound up being more of a seminar in which we were responding to questions with the students throughout. But all-in-all it was very a successful evening. I can't really tell you exactly how many people were there that day or that evening.

(I): About when was this?

(JG): This was about 1970. It was, matter of fact, shortly after I got here. I arrived here in '69 and I offered a reformation course for the first time in 1970. People who were involved were people like Paul Jans who was the president who is now living in California, George Raffus who is now a weatherman down in Green Bay who was a very active history student at that time, my wife was one of them, the founding mothers of the organization if you will, and a fellow by the name of Ken Hilton who I think is teaching up in the Copper Country someplace now. They were just a bunch of people who loved to find out things, wanted to know things, and because of that, because they got along really well together socially, it worked really very well. Even though we had officers, the general feeling was that they didn't

really want to get all hung up on organization – didn't want to worry about constitutions and dues and business meetings and all that – but what they wanted to do was keep that part of the organization low profile because so many of them had been members of organizations before that spent more time arguing about Robert's rules of order than they did about what the club's goal was. So for the first year, although we did have officers, it was a group of people who simply liked to get together and they liked to bounce intellectual activities off of each other and have the liberty to bring in members of the history department and also other members of the university community. For the first couple of years it was really a tremendous success. I look back at it and think how really great that was, and although Dr. Magnaghi and myself were theoretically the advisers to this club, the students really took the lead. There was very little we had to do in terms of lining up speakers and setting up programs. The students took care of it and it was done in a very low-profile kind of a way and it just took off. What happened to it, of course, was that it had, after the first couple of years, it had a series of ups and downs. I think what you can do is you can attribute that to the fact that we lost some really valuable people through graduation and we were really unable to replace them. More and more as the years went by the burden of programming and the burden of seeing to it that everything was taken care of physically to set up rooms and all that, get permission to use certain equipment, began to fall more and more on the faculty members. It's not that the students coming in were any less than the first group but we just lost something from graduation, we lost somebody who shared the spirit and what we found was that it was very hard to keep that kind of steep bowling pin in the club. But that's how it got started and it was terrific. We would have a couple down years and it came back again when we got another group of people in who were very willing to shoulder the responsibilities and really had quite a wide variety of programs besides just the one on the reformation; we had father Bannon who was the head of this department at St. Lucia University who was very close to Dr. Magnaghi and myself because that's where we both graduated. We had him up as a guest speaker and a very, very nice program that was co-sponsored with the catholic campus ministry, and you know, just a very nice affair. Father Bannon's field of expertise was frontier history and history of the American West which of course was Dr. Magnaghi's interest – he was sort of a protégé of Dr. Bannon. So that was one thing. We also got involved with bringing Martin Marty up here along with the campus ministry. Martin Marty is perhaps one of the leading, if not the leading, interpreters of modern American religion in this country. I happen to know him – his brother was a classmate of mine in college – and we had him up here for a two day stay. He went into various classes and we had a very nice program and we had a seminar, which involves him and the faculty, at least the faculty members at the University of Chicago, and all-in-all it was a very wonderful affair, it really was. I invited people from the community for both of these presentations and we got really a nice turnout – we filled 102 for Martin Marty's lecture and we had a good crowd for father Bannon as well, I don't remember exactly where it was held.

(I): Was Marty's lecture about 1975 or so?

(JG): Gee I don't know, it probably was 1977 but I don't really recall. It may be that there are some records in the campus ministry association. I don't know. I don't know if they keep records. I wish I could put my hand right on the date, but it was in that general area. So by-and-large, once again, both of these affairs were spear-headed by students and they did just a spectacular job. The arrangements were well organized, well taken care of, and it was an awful lot of work but we had a lot of kids at that time who were willing to pay that price to get the good people up here. But, once again, one of the problems that you'll always have on college campus is that you lose your leaders every year or every two years. If you're fortunate you find people to replace them and if you are not fortunate you have problems keeping an organization alive. I do remember that after the first group that graduated we had another group who stepped in but they seemed to be much more concerned about the organization rather, and

the mechanics of the organization, than in the programs themselves. First group, all they cared about was the programs. So we had a lot of very interesting things going on. We had a number of our own faculty members on programs – Dr. McClellan did one, I recall, about sailing and tied it into colonial America and that sort of thing. I think, if I remember right, I think professor Hilton did something on the history of Northern which was well-received. Dr. Odell did one in which he reminisced about his first years at Northern which were in the '30s or early 40's, I believe, when the school was considerably smaller than it is now. All in all in was pretty nice. Dr. Shelaza did something on Egypt and archeology and these were all topics that were selected by the students, they wanted to pursue them because they were supposedly tied to classes, you know, to do some things they really wanted to do. So that's how it got started, and it's had its ups and downs, and at one time it was, I'm sure, one of the most active clubs on campus. The most interesting thing was that the organization itself was always low-key. I think that was part of the secret to its success to tell you the truth – students really don't want to give up time to listen to people argue about money and argue about the day-to-day business of an organization. If they come at all, they come because there's something that lures them there and 99% of the time it's going to be the program.

(I): Okay. How did you get involved in being its adviser? Did they ask you or did they just...?

(JG): Yeah, they did.

(I): Okay, according to some of the records I dug up, you were also, at one time, adviser to Phi Alpha Theta?

(JG): Yeah, but Dr. Magnaghi has done so much with Phi Alpha Theta that the rest of us kind of pale in significance, but that's true.

(I): Okay. Do you recall about what time you were adviser for Phi Alpha Theta?

(JG): No, I tell you, the years are beginning to get mixed up a little for me particularly after open-heart surgery I just wasn't able to keep up my end of it anymore. So I just kind of got out of it and that has had a funny effect on me, it's kind of scrambled my memory a little bit. I really can't put my finger on the exact year I was with them so...

(I): Okay. Were you the sole adviser or was Dr. Knight co-adviser with you?

(JG): Well usually, until recently, there was a shared responsibility here, and I'm not sure, but it seems to me that Dr. Knight was involved at one time but once again I can't put my finger on it, I suppose you probably ought to see him about that.

(I): Do you recall if the history club was involved with a couple lectures by Dr. Paul Vard from Michigan State and...

(JG): Dr. Paul Vard of course was Dr. Knight's adviser when he was a graduate student. That may be the connection through Dr. Knight that brought Dr. Martin up here.

(I): Alright, and then there was Dr. Howard Pakkum from Nouvum that was...

(JG): I'm sorry I didn't catch the name?

(I): Howard Pakkulm I believe is his last name?

(JG): That I don't remember. I may very well have been on leave.

(I): Okay. When the history club was active on campus, did you notice any sort of a conflict between Phi Alpha Theta and the history club as far as...

(JG): No, not really. I don't remember anything. If there was it was between people that I am really not familiar with. The history club at that time was thought more of a popular, and by popular I mean appealing to people who did not have to be history majors, in fact of the people that I handed off to as the first officers I think, I know Paul Johns was not a history major, my wife was not a history major she was an education major, George Raffus was not a history major and I think the only one on floor was Ken Heltmund. So we thought of it more as having a more popular, general appeal and people were invited to join the club whether or not they were history majors, whether or not they had high GPAs. It really wasn't tacked on to people who were studying to become professional historians nor was it tacked on to or any way tied in to someone's GPA. If you're interested in what we're doing come on in and join, was sort of the general approach, and it worked for 2 years. As long as these kind of go-getters were at the head of it, it was fun. I guess what I liked about it more than anything else was that it was all spontaneous. It just happened with a great deal of spontaneity. You know, no one sat down and said, "Well okay, let's see if we can form a club here." The students said, "Here are the things we would like to find out about." And I'm like, "Let's put together something like an organization to make this possible." It came specifically from them, so no one imposed it from the outside.

(I): Mokay. So it was more of just, sort of, something that evolved rather than planned reaction to Phi Alpha Theta or something like that?

(JG): That's right, no connection. Most of the people in there would not have been eligible for Phi Alpha Theta for a variety of reasons. Most of them, as I said, were not people who were majoring and it started with a bunch of people who just happen to be taking reformation in a particular semester.

(I): Alright. And I already asked you before about the \$30.00 that the history department diverted and that was when you were out so whoever took over history club while you were gone will probably maybe know. Do you know who took the history club while you were out?

(JG): I have no idea, nope I don't.

(I): I guess that's about it.

(JG): Okay.

(I): Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW