

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Dr. Thomas Hannon Interview
February 25, 2009
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
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SM: Today is February 25, 2009, and I'm Sarah Meleski. As part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project, we have Dr. Thomas Hannon with us. How are you today?

TH: I'm fine, thank you.

SM: Okay, well we were just speaking a little bit about your background, and we found out you grew up in Scranton: born and raised in Scranton. Tell us a little bit about growing up in Scranton.

TH: I grew up in an Italian neighborhood, and we were the only Irish people there. Next door to us were the Rodhams, and everybody knows Hillary Rodham Clinton, although she didn't live there. Her aunt and uncle lived there, and so as a child I can remember her when she came. Not too many of us—we were a little bit older than she—not too many of us cared very much for her when she came [SM laughs]. But the Rodham family, George Rodham lived right next door to us. And her dad is buried in the Washburn Street Cemetery. And in fact, right at the time he died—Hillary's father, this is Hugh Rodham, I knew who he was but I didn't know him well. I had done research in that cemetery and it was in atrocious shape. So I called the Scranton newspaper, *The Scranton Times*, and I told who I was and what I had done [research], what I thought of the cemetery, and they did a crash clean-up job for that funeral. But I knew exactly where he's buried, right by the fence [laughs].

SM: What schools did you attend?

TH: Well as a youth or . . . ?

SM: As a youth and then growing up.

TH: I grew up in Scranton and I went to William Penn #40 school, I went to Ulysses S. Grant #21, I went to George Bancroft #34. I went to North Scranton Junior High School, and then I went to Scranton Central High School, from which I oddly enough graduated.

SM: And so after you graduated from high school, what university did you go to first?

TH: I was very much involved in music and I majored in music, in fact, at Mansfield. Then it was Mansfield State Teachers College, now it's a sister institution, Mansfield University. But after one year my second love, geography, sort of bit me, and I switched from music. I still belong to a musician's union, but I don't play very much anymore except for self-entertainment. I got my bachelors degree in Secondary Education: Geography and Social Studies, with a minor in English.

SM: Okay, so then after Mansfield where . . . you said that you went to Pitt for your PhD in Geography; how was going to Pitt and getting that?

TH: Well, let's back up and put things in order. After I graduated from Mansfield, I taught for one year in Harpersville, New York. [I] taught ninth and tenth grade social studies and I never intended to stay there because I wanted to move on and do graduate work. I stayed there to get some money to go on and do graduate work. Interestingly I saved fifty-three cents, and that's what I had when my wife and I got married in '59, a year later. I had fifty-three cents in my bank account.

So then I went to Penn State and I was there two full years while my wife taught in public schools in Bellwood, Pennsylvania near Altoona. [Pause] So I did go to Penn State for two years, and I left there because we had a child and we went back to New York state to Endicott, and gradually finished up my degree away from the university. Then I taught at Endicott until 1969, and then took a sabbatical to go work on my PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. When I got that I went back to Endicott for one year, and then came here in 1970.

SM: What is your affiliation with Slippery Rock University?

TH: I was hired in 1970 as an assistant professor, then became an associate professor and a full professor in the middle '80s.

SM: What department did you work for when you were here?

TH: Geography.

SM: How was that?

TH: Very good. Because of the trends in academia of course, and the interest in the environmental movement, that grew very heavily in 1970. We soon became the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies. And more recently, four or five years back, we became the Department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment because we and geology merged.

SM: What Slippery Rock era were you here for?

TH: When I came here it was Slippery Rock State College, and then it became University in the—I forget the exact year—middle '80s.

SM: In 1983. We have it written here.

TH: Yeah I was close, middle '80s.

SM: Did the department that you were hired into change at all while you were here? Were they for the good or for the bad if they did change?

TH: I never really appreciated the marriage of geology and geography. While I have great respect for and love of geology, geography and geology are not the same, and therefore being in the same department I don't view as all that good. But I'm sure the budgetary concerns had to be considered when that was done.

There were trends within the discipline, within my own discipline, that I really kind of resisted. The technological trends, away from what I consider to be the human trends of geography. I'm a cultural geographer and so the things like historical geography and cultural geography, which is very close to anthropology, were much more my interest area.

SM: What buildings did you work in while you were here?

TH: I worked primarily in Spotts [World Culture Building] except when the front fell off the Spotts building

SM: When did that happen?

TH: Oh gosh.

SM: And what happened?

TH: It was, well, I know roughly when it was. It was in the very early '90s that the whole section of Spotts, which you see from the library as you go out the front door, began to pull away from the building. So then I—while they repaired that and it took, I would say a year—I taught in Eisenberg Classroom Building, just across the way. But I have been visiting, you know, I had been asked to teach courses in other buildings. I taught in the Ed building [McKay Education Building] a couple of times, and Strain [Behavioral Science Building]. Interestingly, Strain was a geographer: Al Warren Strain. And you have what used to be the Behavioral Science Building; I don't know whether that's still Behavioral Science up there or not.

SM: Everyone just calls it "BSB." That's how we know it.

TH: Yeah, but mainly in Spotts.

SM: And I was doing a little bit of research and I saw that you taught at Trinity College in Dublin?

TH: Yes.

SM: How was that?

TH: I took students from here to Dublin five or six times, and we used the facilities at Trinity. I wasn't on the staff at Trinity, but I did that with IUP: I taught in Salzburg, Austria. I taught for Slippery Rock also in Scotland at the Queen Margaret in Edinburgh. I taught on exchange in Korea ten years ago: 1999.

So I've been abroad, in Europe. Europe was my main area of interest when I was teaching, and so I've been to Europe many times. Got two Fulbright Grants to Europe and research travel grants.

SM: And I also saw that you were part of the summer programs overseas. What part did you have in that?

TH: I organized the courses I taught and I wasn't the overall organizer: International Studies did that. But I taught the courses, or I designed the courses I taught. I taught The Geography of Scotland in Scotland, and I taught Geography of Religion in Ireland and also in Salzburg, Austria, and some other courses. But that's all: I didn't organize, you know, I told the bus drivers there where we wanted to go, but I'm not to be credited at all with organizing the whole thing.

SM: What were your first impressions when you came here? You've been so many places . . .

TH: When I first came here, quite honestly, I did not like Slippery Rock. Now I'm not talking about what became the university, I'm talking about the town and the town's ambiance. I thought it was too small. But in a year or two it grew on me because I forced myself to travel about locally and learn some of the ethnic backgrounds and that kind of thing, which I needed for my doctoral research anyway. I absolutely love the speech patterns around here: "yinz" and that kind of thing. So I do like it but I did not like the town immediately. I did like the college or the university.

SM: What changes have you seen in Slippery Rock?

TH: Oh my God; in the university or the town?

SM: In both.

TH: Well at the university: phenomenal growth. I think when I came here in '70 we had maybe in the high threes or the low four thousand students, maybe four thousand. Now what do we have, 8,500? And so all of the trappings that came with that growth, such as new buildings. I've seen buildings built that are now torn down: Founders Hall for example, was one. And moving

away from the traditional kind of dormitory to what apparently students want today, these more modern, homey buildings. Those were a big change.

The Happy Bus was a big change. Actually, I thought that should've been in existence long before it came into existence. In the town the renovation of the downtown has made some very nice changes. The lifting of the ban on alcohol is in my opinion—though I'm not a drinker in excess—I think it's a good idea. And the tavern, the North [Country Brewing Company] downtown, that was a good addition to the restaurant scene, as well as Ginger Hill. And even the hot dog shop out on the highway.

SM: What were some of your campus activities?

TH: I advised Gamma Theta Upsilon, which was the geography honorary, for nineteen years; and I turned that over to a colleague. I was also the advisor for Sigma Sigma Sigma sorority for nine years.

SM: I just joined it!

TH: Those were more recent in my history here. I think I took that over probably in the middle '90s or early '90s and then, you know, I left here and that was the end of that. But as far as committees and that kind of thing, I served [on] many departmental committees, college committees and even university committees. The most important one, I think, was the university-wide promotions committee which I served from '83 to '85, and in fact I was the chairperson of that committee in the '84-'85 year.

SM: What were some of your accomplishments while you were here?

TH: Completing my PhD was an accomplishment certainly. The reason I came here was to be close to Pitt because I had everything done except writing, and so I could run back and forth easily to Pitt and get advice and whatever. I think I was recognized as a very good teacher. I don't mean to brag but many students took multiple courses with me, even though they were not in my major. I always had very good student evaluations and good peer evaluations, and I think that's the major reason why we're here; so *that* I view as a major accomplishment.

I became pretty well-known around the country in what I do: cemetery research, cemetery landscapes. Wrote several major papers, and I think those are significant accomplishments. But the most important one is of course teaching and I think that's what the whole staff is here for, to teach.

SM: On a lighter note, what are some of your best and worst teaching moments?

TH: The best teaching moments [were] when I was teaching, because I loved it and I still do. And when I felt that the students were grasping what I was doing and they participated, those were the best moments.

Worst moments were—well I can remember two vividly. I had in the late ‘70s, a young lady try to take her own life in my office with a razor blade. And I had, when I was advising tri-Sig, a young lady hang herself in one of the apartments, and those are certainly worst moments. The gal who tried to take her own life went on and graduated quite successfully and is now a success in what she does. But those were terrible moments. And students having seizures in class; I don’t know how many times that’s happened. Those kinds of things are never pleasant, but you have to deal with them you know. I’m sure others have had as bad if not worse [moments].

SM: Who were some of the leaders when you were on campus?

TH: When I came here Dr. Watrel was the president, and he left in the middle ‘70s—‘76 or thereabouts. I view every president thereafter as a leader; I didn’t always agree with what they may have done but then again I wasn’t president. And the faculty union organized in the early ‘70s, and I view those people as leaders. Dr. Macoskey sticks in my mind most, obviously, and Bill Taylor and some others.

SM: Who were some people that have influenced you or were very significant to you while you were teaching here?

TH: My colleagues were certainly significant to me, and I’m not talking only about my immediate colleagues in my department, but colleagues I met in other departments. I just mentioned Dr. Bill Taylor who was in Sociology. He and I became very close and still maintain ties; of course he only lives in Grove City. My immediate colleagues with whom I worked day in and day out were great influences in my career.

SM: What were some major events or activities that occurred while you were here? And they can include academic, cultural, building projects, anything like that.

TH: Well you know building projects have been ongoing

SM: That’s the number one answer that we get from everybody.

TH: Yeah. [Pause] I think the impact that 9/11 had was most significant, not only here but throughout the country and indeed the world. The renovation of the downtown, I think locally, was a significant thing, and changes in the [pause] town-gown relationship: I think it improved.

The most tragic thing was the tearing down of Burger King. No [laughs], I’m only kidding about that. But when Burger King came here, when Dr. Reinhart was president, he was all excited about that, that we were getting a Burger King. Now it’s torn down. But developments out there along the road to Grove City are significant locally, certainly not nationally. But I think the university’s gaining recognition in a number of fields, [which] is a very significant thing.

SM: Do you miss anything about teaching here at SRU?

TH: Oh my God, I miss it very much! Yeah, but I don't dwell on it. I thought I would, but I'm so busy with a number of other things, with writing. I live in a house that was built well before the turn of 1900, so there's always something that has to be upgraded or repaired there and I'm doing that.

I'm the curriculum director for the Institute for Learning in Retirement, which is affiliated with the university and uses the university facilities. That keeps me very, very busy. And I teach there. Now the only difference is I'm teaching older people. [Pause] But the plus side of that is you've got people who are maybe more attentive than the nineteen and twenty-year-olds, but they don't have the vibrancy of course, and I miss some of that.

So I'm very busy, but I do miss teaching. And I have thought of—now I'm retired since '04, that'll be five years going on six—so I'm thinking of trying to get one course here or there at other institutions. La Roche, for example or Westminster. I'd like to do that, but not on a steady basis.

SM: Do you have any words of wisdom for us? Anything that you want any current or future Rock community [members] and students to know?

TH: I think as far as faculty are concerned, and administrators, they should do the best work they can possibly do in good conscience. And I think the students should devote most of their time to being students and do some serious studying because it's important in terms of shaping your career.

Those would be words of wisdom to this institution, but everybody knows those anyways. I think we have an outstanding faculty; I think the administration is very good and I think they keep the goal of success in higher education alive, or the spark alive as it were. [Pause] that's essentially what I have by the way of words of wisdom: not very prolific, but I think sincere.

SM: How do you want to be remembered?

TH: I want to be remembered by my former students, who are now all over the world, as a good teacher and one who cared—cared about some personal problems as well as academic problems. And I want to be remembered in that way by colleagues as well. I want to be remembered as one who did a reasonable amount of scholarly work. Then I'll be okay. And I want my epitaph on my tombstone to say, "He's not here yet" [laughs].

SM: Well I don't have any other questions for you. Do you have anything else you want to say?

TH: No. It's been a great thirty-four years here for me, and I enjoy my continued association with the university. I stop in to see my old colleagues once every few weeks and keep in touch, keep on top of things, and that's essentially it.