Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Anthony Pagano Interview
April 22, 2009
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Morgan Bonekovic
Proofread and edited by Rebecca Cunningham and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Anthony & Jean Pagano

SM: Today is April 22nd, 2009 and I'm Sarah Meleski. As part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project, we have Dr. Anthony Pagano with us, along with his wife, Jean. How are you today?

JP: Fine. Cold.

AP: Cold, yes.

SM: [Laughs] It's a little chilly outside today. Well why don't we start off with a little biographical information, if you can tell us your name, where you grew up, where you went to school?

AP: My full name is Anthony Vincent Pagano. My date of birth is 6/15/22. I was born in Homewood, Pennsylvania which is outside of Pittsburgh—it's now in Pittsburgh really. I grew up outside of Pittsburgh in Swissvale, Pennsylvania. I did my elementary and high school there; I graduated in 1940. [SM coughs] Then I went to Arizona State for my B.A. and my M.A. Then I went to Penn State for my doctorate.

The next one here . . . what would that be . . . [referring to questionnaire]?

SM: You can just go right on if you want, yes.

AP: Affiliation with Slippery Rock: I was hired in 1959, the school year. The department was Mathematics.

SM: Were there any other positions you held on campus?

AP: No, no other positions but I was the president of the . . . .

JP: APSCUF?

AP: No, it was not APSCUF at the time . . . it was the [pause] faculty senate. Yes, that's what it was called. But that's not a position. The only position I had was a mathematics teacher and I was the chairman. I think it was from '62 to '67.

SM: What Slippery Rock era were you here for?

JP: Look at your three there [referring to notes].

AP: I was here when it was called [pause] Slippery Rock State Teachers College. That was ’59 and ’60. Then in ’60 it was changed to Slippery Rock College. And then in ’83 I believe it was, it was changed to Slippery Rock University. So I was in all three of those.

SM: The department you were hired into, the Mathematics Department, did it change at all from when you started until you . . . .

AP: Well, I cannot give you the exact year that we took in the Computer Science [Department]. It used to be Mathematics and Computer Science for a few years. I don’t know when we separated, because Computer Science has a separate department now. The Mathematics Department was by itself except for those years they were with Computer Science.

SM: What courses did you teach?

AP: I taught practically every course that they had here, except the statistics course. Mostly I taught calculus—

SM: That’s my favorite math.

AP: —pre-calculus too. Pre-calculus, calculus, elementary algebra here, Algebra 101 I think, and abstract algebra, linear algebra . . . that’s about the extent of my teaching. Most of all was the abstract algebra.

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

AP: We started off in West Hall. I don’t know whether you know, that’s the one they redid and then we went down to the [pause] [Spotts] World Cultures Building and then we went to the Science Building, Vincent Science Building. And that’s basically where I was, in all three of those.

SM: I know you said—woops, sorry.

AP: I was going to go on about my first impressions of the college.

SM: Yes, I know you said you found a lot of information about that so . . . do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

JP: Want to look at this to give you a review?

AP: Yes. We did some talking about that. [Paper shuffling] Which one are we on now?

SM: Your first impressions.

AP: Yes, when I first came here it was a small campus in comparison to what it is today. There was West Hall, there was Old Main and there was the library, which is now the computer center. There was the elementary school. The elementary school had out to sixth grade in there. And then, I don't know what year it was they changed it over to McKay Education [Building] and they didn't have students there anymore—they didn't have elementary students. Then there was North Hall, and there was South Hall and there was the Chapel.

SM: I've heard about the Chapel.

AP: Yes, the Chapel. In fact when we were moving from Yuma, Arizona to here, we had our furniture there. We had [it] hauled up and it was stored in the Chapel until I found a home so I could move it out of there . . . .

The Strain [Behavioral] Science Building, that was the only science building, and we had the East and West Gym when I came here, and the old football field was—it's a practice field now for the marching band. The East and West Gyms, they were for all kinds of things going on. The dances were in there—they had the dances there. I don't know what they do now, where they have the dances, but they probably have them over at the Student [Union].

I guess that's about all that was there when I first came in. And you know what the change has been . . . with all the dormitories they put in. Miller Auditorium was just about finished about the time I came, and I guess that was the big thing.

Yeah, the school dances were held in East Gym. My wife tells me the following—that West Hall used to be for elementary school.

JP: High school.

AP: Well it was a high school too, but it was an elementary school. It was a high school, and the black boards were pretty low. And she says, "That's why they hired you," because I was short [SM laughs] and I could reach the board. That's what she said.

There was—for the students they had a Grille and a Hut there. They had a bowling alley in there, a couple bowling alleys. That was for the students, but the faculty went in there too.

You got to keep in mind that there were a lot of veterans that went back to school. In fact that's what I did: I went back to school. But we had a lot of them coming out of the Korean War. They were coming in and we had a veterans club which was very active at that time.

What they did then also was on Wednesday there was a time that they would give the students to go to different clubs they belonged to, or churches. Now there was the Newman Center and the Lutherans had a group. So they did have a time that was specifically for that. The various churches held them too, and that was good for them.

One of the things [pause] that was very nice, that they don't have now, was that when you would go down to your dinner, you had to be dressed up. The boys had to have a dress jacket on, and the women had to have a dress. I don't think they allowed shorts or anything like that. But that was very strict, and that was in the "old days," I guess you call it now.

SM: Most times now it's sweat pants and sweat shirts for just about everybody [laughs].

AP: Yes [laughs], that's true. The elementary school was a lab school too, so that's where a lot of the student teachers would go and teach. So that was one of the things we had.

We had a small faculty. We actually had [pause] meetings— the faculty would meet in West Hall, and we could all get in there. [SM laughs] And the post office—our mail boxes were in Old Main and you would see, when you went down to get your mail, you would see all the people, all the other faculty members and you would get to know all of them. That was the nice thing about it—that you would see them there, you would have a few words or a "howdy" to various people. You would know practically everyone on campus. And as the college grew, the particular mailboxes were separated into departments and then we never would get to see anybody. One of the things that was very nice about that, is that we practically knew everybody in the faculty. And by the time I left the school, well it was impossible to know everyone.

You know our sororities and fraternities: they started in the late '60s, early '70s. They really grew at that time. And by the way, they dropped off that Wednesday thing, when after classes you would have your sorority meetings and things like that, and the clubs that they had.

The changes that improved the science and math curriculum . . . the mathematics curriculum was changed quite a bit. When I first came here the courses that they were giving were Trig[onometry] and they had Calculus I and II and that was the extent of it. [Pause] They had other courses, Spherical Trig I think was one.

Cornish was [pause] a chairman of the Mathematics Department. Around 1962, we made some changes. We being—there were only three people in the Mathematics Department at that time.

And so we had to hire two or three people, and by that time we had to make some changes in the curriculum. One of the big changes was we introduced abstract algebra. We did that in 1962. We also decided to have what was called Calculus III which expanded [pause] the calculus because you could not do the whole thing in just two semesters, so we had a third calculus. I believe they still have that, I'm not too sure.

We did introduce statistics, a class in statistics. We also brought in some courses that would be [pause] basically geometry. We had a change in our pre-calculus class where we would have some geometry, algebra in it, mixed up. So that was a big change there, and since then they've done a lot more changes that you would have to talk to the other people [about] now.

We actually used Miller Auditorium to teach the Basic Algebra class, we called it. It wasn't college algebra, but it was more or less a minimum type of mathematics for somebody to meet the mathematics [requirement]. They needed to have one mathematics class, that's what they had for that class. And we used to use Miller Auditorium because some of the times we would have about fifty students in it. That was such a big class. We did that in the mid '60s.

SM: What were some of your campus activities? Any committees you were on or anything?

AP: Yes, I was on the Faculty Council. I was on one year for president of that. We did have a Math Club. I had quite a few years; I don't know how long I did that. We started the Math Club somewhere around '63, and I believe it's still alive today.

I was on the grievance committee for APSCUF. APSCUF came in around 1972, something like that, '71 or '72. And I was on the grievance committee for some eight years.

SM: What were some of your accomplishments while you were here? I was doing a little research and I saw that you received top honors from the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics.

AP: Yes, I did get an award. I forgot all about that! [SM laughs] I did get an award for mathematics . . . I can't remember the year of that. It had to be in the '70s. [Pause] the plaque that I had there came out of the '70s I think.

It [referring to the questionnaire] asked something about what I liked . . . . The course that I really enjoyed was Abstract Algebra. I believe it is the basis of algebra and every student should have it. We made that a must for graduation in the Mathematics Department, [the] math degree.

The most important part about the abstract algebra is that it makes the person taking the course, the student, look at the structure of certain mathematical concepts. If you were to just look at one side: most everyone has had a course in geometry when they were in high school and that is

probably the closest that abstract algebra tried to get to. By that we mean that you have to have undefined words in mathematics. It's something you just have to accept. Like in geometry, you have to accept a straight line, but there's no definition of a straight line. You might write one on a board, but that's not really what mathematics is because it doesn't have any thickness, and when you put a chalk mark on a board, saying, "That's a straight line," you say, "Well gee, that has thickness to it." Well, not in mathematics, it doesn't have any thickness. It's abstract.

SM: It's just something that's understood.

AP: Yes, and then you have words you have to have definitions for; you have to define certain words. So you define them from the words . . . like in geometry, you would probably talk about *two straight lines intersected, vertical angles are equal* you know, so we have explained what we mean by vertical angles. So, you can give a definition.

You have to have what is called axioms—that you have in geometry, you always have axioms. The most important one is the fifth one, it says, *two lines are parallel, if when extended do not meet*, unless you go to non-structural geometry there.

The [pause] parts of teaching—I enjoyed the abstract algebra the most. The worst, I guess I have to say worst in here someplace. It was strange: the students have the power, or they had the right, to withdraw from a class, and they would like to withdraw from the class without a failing mark. That is a withdrawal pass. The biggest thing that I was sad about or sad over was when I started with a class of twenty-five, and fifteen people before I finished, boom, they left the class and I only had ten students in a class. That was probably my worst moment. I don't know why you wanted to know that; somebody always has a bad moment I guess.

Okay, the people that influenced me. Every college has a president and the president gives talks, encourages you to try to come up with new ways of teaching, things like that. So we had a president that did that. We had a vice president and at the time he was Harold Wieand. I don't know whether that name ever came up . . . ?

SM: I don't think I've heard that name yet.

AP: Everyone knows Weisenfluh, because we know the—

SM: Because of the dining hall.

AP: Yes, it's Weisenfluh [Dining] Hall. And they left in the '60s sometime. Well, Wieand stayed on for a little while.

SM: Who were some of the leaders when you were first here? And who were some of the presidents that you went through?

AP: The number of presidents: Weisenfluh and then intermittent there they had Edwards, he was president for a little while. We had Lowry who was—he had the presidency for one year. He didn't want to stay there. And then they brought in . . . was it Carter?

JP: Yes.

AP: Carter came in, and he left . . . .

JP: Jim Roberts, was he next?

AP: No, no. [Pause] Who came in after . . . he went to Dickenson College in North Dakota.

JP: Watrel.

AP: Watrel. Watrel was the president, and then . . . who was the next president?

SM: Aebersold.

AP: Aebersold. Aebersold was president and then Smith, and then Smith—two Smiths in a row. I was under both of them because he came in, the first Smith, he was the vice president.

SM: What were some major events or activities that happened on campus while you were here or in town?

AP: Am I glad we did this before [referring to his notes]. [SM laughs] One of the things that happened here while I was here that I felt was extremely important was the musicals that they put on, the programs, the plays. And the individuals that were sort of top in that: Milt Carless put on beautiful plays. Blase Scarnati and Tim Walters did the musicals. They did a lot. I guess Wallace did something in there too. And before, in the early '60s, they had May Day activities here.

SM: I've heard a couple of people that I've interviewed talk about those.

AP: Yes, the May Day activities were . . . well we liked it because in '62 or '61, something like that; our daughter was in it, our little daughter. She's now fifty-seven; she's old. [SM laughs] And anyway that was an activity. Our homecoming parades, they had a lot of floats. You know your sororities and fraternities, they would each put one up; they all put a lot of things up.

Another thing that really happened while I was here was that Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, came in and she gave a speech. And it was due to Miller—Emma Guffey Miller—who lived in Slippery Rock. To know something about Emma Guffey Miller: in 1936 she gave a [pause] what do you say, a nomination?

JP: Second.

AP: She gave the second nomination for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936. Now he was elected in 1932 and then in 1936 he was elected again, if you know your history. And you know she was from Slippery Rock, little Slippery Rock.

JP: But she was the first woman.

AP: Yes, first woman that actually ever made a nomination. I have to tell you what we did. We were in Washington D.C.

JP: Warm Springs.

AP: Warm Springs, Georgia, that's right. I was down in Georgia. I had a summer session down there at the University of Georgia. We did some traveling there and we came across, our little daughter, she found it, it was—Emma Guffey Miller—Women's Club.

JP: Of Slippery Rock.

AP: Of Slippery Rock. Way down in Georgia, they had a statue of her there.

JP: There was only one for each state.

AP: Yes, one for each state and from Pennsylvania was Emma Guffey Miller.

Okay . . . bear with me because I've been retired twenty-three years and I'm trying to remember things that happened over thirty years ago.

SM: Oh it's, take . . . you're fine.

AP: So thank you for just listening to me.

SM: It's all really interesting; so I'm, I'm more than willing to listen.

AP: [Laughs] well, good for you. Now, to get the end of this, I'm really proud of the growth in the Mathematics Department because I just found out that the Mathematics Department says if you want to be a mathematician, first of all you get a B.A. in Mathematics. Strictly mathematics, no education courses. If you want to go into teaching, then you have to go an extra year and take

teaching courses. And I think that's one of the best things that ever happened. To try to get all of that in four years was very difficult. And now they have four years of mathematics and then one year for teaching. I think that is one of the best things that I've seen that they've done in mathematics. Now I don't know whether this is true for all courses; I don't know whether other departments have that in Slippery Rock here. I don't know; do you know?

SM: Mine doesn't. I'm part of the exercise science program, and I don't think we have any teaching courses in any of our things. I think they probably have it in other departments though.

AP: I'd imagine they would because it's a five year thing. Okay now [pause] they said, "What would you like to be remembered for?" [JP laughs] Well when I taught, I taught to give to students the concept of the area we were studying. It's the concept I hoped they would get and not the actual, what's the answer to the problem. That is, if you wanted to know what the answer is . . . if my students would make an error in subtraction or addition, I don't think that's as important as knowing what you're trying to get to with the concept of the problem. So I do believe that if I was to say, "Did I ever get that across?" I hope I did. It's the concept of the mathematics and not the answer that you get. And I hope that my students did understand that. The concept is a general essence of the problems. Have any other questions?

SM: Do you have any words of wisdom for any current or future Rock students? Or anybody that wants to go into the Math Department?

AP: Well, like I said, I hope they understand the concept, and that's probably the thing that I feel the most and I hope they do that. But as I said before, the expanding of the extra year, that is getting a degree in mathematics and then getting a year more for education. Because it is nice to know how to, if you can know the subject, but you need to know how to get it across to people, probably younger than you. If you're going to go into high school teaching, why you can't go in there and start talking about abstract things all at once. You have to know how to bring around the information without making it too difficult for them to understand. So you do need some education behind you: how to teach. But you need to know the subject. [Laughs] That's my end, I guess.

SM: Well I don't have any other questions. Is there anything you wanted to add, Mrs. Pagano?

JP: Well, this one little thing that, in our early years, they used to have picnics—

AP: Oh yeah!

JP: —for the new faculty, so that the old faculty could meet the new faculty. And there were many of us with a lot of little kids at that time. It was great getting acquainted quickly. Again, it

was a smaller school. The one thing that he does not miss about Slippery Rock University is that he really doesn't like the winters here. [Laughter]

SM: No one really does, I don't think. [Laughter]

AP: You know, Slippery Rock really is a nice place to raise children. And to have a college here. I think our children—well, let me tell you about our youngest. [JP laughs] We have four children. And he was a tag along.

JP: A bonus.

AP: Bonus, yeah, she says a bonus. [Pause] All of our children graduated from college. We have two with doctorates and so we're really proud of them. But the youngest boy [JP laughs] somebody said, when he was small—he was only probably ten years old, eleven years old—and they said, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" He says, "Well, I'm going go to college." He says, "Why would you just want to go to college? Maybe you would rather be a plumber or an electrician." And he says, "No. After you finish high school you go to college." That's all he said, and why? Because he grew up in a college town. You know, there was no difference to him. He was the only one who graduated from Slippery Rock College.

JP: And he also said, "I didn't know I had a choice!" [Laughs] "I just assumed I was going to college."

AP: That's a good answer too—that's the one that he would use. Gee, I've really enjoyed being at Slippery Rock and teaching. We had some real good students.

JP: And wonderful friends.

AP: Oh yeah. Well the one member of the Mathematics Department was a student of mine; so she came through Slippery Rock, went on, got a Ph.D., and came back to teach here. And she felt that she had a good foundation when she was at Slippery Rock. I think Joe Gallian also said he had a good—he's another one that graduated. He has a Ph.D. from Notre Dame and he's teaching in Minnesota.

JP: In Duluth.

AP: Yes, Duluth, Minnesota. The University of Minnesota in Duluth, and he comes in here and he gives talks here occasionally. I hope he still does; he did when I was here: came in and gave some talks. So we should be very proud of our students. And they come back—and you being the student, you're one of the proud people, and you do get a good education here, I think. So how do you know? What else do you need to know?

SM: I don't know. I don't really have any other questions for, for either of you, and there's nothing else that you want to add or anything else?

AP: Well, not that I know of right now, but I'll probably think about it tonight and say, "Gee, I should've said this!" but that's—

SM: We can always do a part two.

AP: [Laughter] That's a good answer: part two. Well, I have—we go away in the wintertime. I guess you don't have to have it on now but you can, it doesn't make any difference [referring to the audio recorder]. You know Slippery Rock is a very strange name and everyone thinks it's from Arkansas. And when we go to Arizona, we live in a park. And in that park by me there's a lot of activity and I played a little bit of softball there. And we have a diamond and we would play games, and they would announce when I came up, "And he's from Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania!" And they would laugh [laughs]. [JP laughs] And everyone that knows me now, they say, "Oh, there's the Slippery Rock guy!" [Laughs] So, we spread the name just because of its strange name, but everyone thinks it's from Arkansas.

SM: No, that's the other "Rock."

AP: Yes.

JP: There was a lot from football. Football scores used to always—and I'm sure you've had other people tell you about football scores—they beat Slippery Rock, which spread the name even more.

AP: I don't think I have any more to say. Like I said, somewhere around nine or ten o'clock tonight I'll have it.

SM: [Laughs] Okay, well I'd like to thank you for letting me interview you and for coming in.

AP: You're welcome!

SM: Have a good day.