

Interview with Lester Foster

Marquette, MI

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Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi

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RM: What I'd like to do is do an interview with you about your days at Northern and your involvement with the start of the AAUP. Before we get started I'd like to ask your birth date for the record.

LF: October 19, 1930. I'm 70 years old.

RM: Could you give us a little background on where you went to graduate school and how you got to Marquette and Northern Michigan University?

LF: I went for 2 degrees at the University of Chicago. The first was a 5-7 Liberal Arts program with no major and the second was a 3 year major in English with a Master's. I wanted to stay on because I worked in Chicago at a maternity hospital. It was a very good job with nice wages and they were fine. I had to work and there were no such things as scholarships for people as poor as I was. The university would lend me money for tuition. I just borrowed and borrowed and borrowed. I wanted to go on to a PhD in Chicago, but I didn't. I wanted to go to a committee on social fraud and the ideas and methods at Chicago. He wouldn't have me because of my debt. I said I see what you mean. I wanted to go to Divinity School because I had credit there, but I couldn't get any more than tuition. Finally I decided to just go out and teach with a master's degree. I did get a job at Belfree University in Indiana. I taught there 3 years with the MA and I was working on getting into a Ph.D. school and I was told I should go some place where I wouldn't have to write somebody's hobby ???. We figured out a few schools like that. One was Notre Dame and another was Stanford. Another one was in northern New York. Buffalo or something like that. I got a full ride, they looked at my IQ and my references from Northwood ??? and Toronto That's where my real love was, was to study archives. I couldn't pass their best of exams, which would have been an imported exam. I had to find somewhere else to go. The best place was Buffalo. They offered me everything. The finest scholarship they had, money, endowments. I was somebody special. They called me up and told me the exam date. I started the car and then called Toronto where they told me a year ago that he left. He was so persistent that he tried to get the director of the studies at Notre Dame to release me from my student aid and he wouldn't do that. We made our decisions too. That's how I went to Notre Dame. I wanted to write about the inter-relation of logic. That's the same thing. We had to decide if it was logic. I was gonna do that for a report and had a good dissertation. I wanted to teach Shakespeare. When I went into the job market in '67 only two places asked for me. One was Northern and one was where a friend of mine had gone, and he told them to get me. At Northern they had a three course load. It looked very attractive after teaching four and five course loads. So I did a dissertation in that. I was drawn to Northern and somebody here knew me. He had been a graduate student at Notre Dame and told the department that I was good. So they offered me an instructor position. I tried to move them up for a little more pay but they held out. I could have gone off to this other school but I didn't. I didn't like the way I would appear there under someone's ???. So I came to Northern and the first time I came up here there was a definite snowstorm in Escanaba. I lived in Northern Michigan University that summer. Some people from Notre Dame came up here because it saved them the allergies from all the weeds. Now it's ???.

RM: What year did you come to Northern?

LF: I came in 1967.

RM: How did you find the situation when you first arrived? Harden was leaving?

LF: No not Harden...

RM: Jamrich came?

LF: No it was in between them.

RM: Oh, Johnson.

LF: Yes. He was president. I never paid attention to faculty politics. I wasn't, even when I heard somebody like that. As far as for the freedom of speech...

RM: Were you here during the McClellan Controversy?

LF: Yes. He had just been fired. Or he hadn't been fired yet. The university was looking desperately for somebody to come in and take over the AAUP. They were doing an investigation. It was the school and it looked like they were going to censor it. That's why they brought cameras. Everybody else was glad to get out. Jamrich knew so much. He also had his loyalties, the ACLU, WMEA. He could have had moral support except that he was throwing it away. People want to have someone like that. He's got a bad mouth and at the same time ????. That's what you get protecting somebody when they don't want it. He censored the AAUP and it would have taken a couple of years. He was advised to stay on campus a while and I knew all that money would be given back to him. He didn't believe in it. He didn't believe in waiving it. Some people resigned and protested. He was a wonderful old man. He was the head of the English Department I guess. His reaction was that I can't work at a school that has this kind of academic freedom violation. That's what I heard about it. I knew that I was ??? but that's what they were talking about. I just paid attention to who he was and listened to him a few times. I was not charmed by him, but there was no doubt that he was dually treated by the administration. He served well. ??? That was very obnoxious because the school had chosen, it wasn't so good after all with the academic freedom. Logic with poetry and Shakespeare, I thought this school's got troubles. I didn't know that I would have a part to play. There was increasing agitation on campus. People were not excitable and most people didn't believe in demonstration. I got married in January of '68. I had been here one semester and got married. I moved up there. I was kind of sick. She left her Ph.D. studies and came up here. During that time, very early on, I found a notice. That was just what I wanted to see. I was ready to contact the AAUP now. I walked into that local chapter and there were 3 MEA guys and nobody else. They filled out cards and joined the AAUP. Now they were trying to get emotion going in the AAUP to make the chapter inactive or make it not interested in collecting a part. I was very angry when I saw that man. It was all building up. We went to the meeting and Charlie Baxter was there. A beloved associate of the university. He had an honorary degree. He was in that meeting too and after a few questions he turned to me. They tried first to vote against the AAUP and second they signed the bargaining card for MEA. ???

RM: Can you mention who the people were that were trying to dismantle the AAUP?

LF: I told you, they were Bob McClellan, Jim Waleye. Every year his family puts his name in for a memorial on the day of his death. He was the president for AAUP. He'd been made the ??? president. And George ????. Those are the only 3 I remember and the only ones I got to know. The others who were in education tried ????. I never saw the MEA members. I never saw that side. What they were talking about is who's going to have the power. ??? McClellan said something to me. Baxter left too. We had coffee and said we have to do something about it because they captured the chapter. So we invented what was called the Ad Hoc Committee on the Principles of the AAUP. That's all we ever said we were until I was made president of the AAUP. I said I didn't know how I would get into that crowd. I asked whether the AAUP should help us. I said I didn't know the rules??? I was very interested in it ??? in the AAUP. ??? said all our problems are solved then. I had a little money to invest and ????. I believe what happened

next was Michigan Counsel for the AAUP that works with the chapters called me up one night and asked what was going on. He asked if I was working with Charles Baxter. So they engaged to give me the number for the National office. They would come up any time to talk to our faculty and any help you could get. They did some tapes for us. We didn't know about audio tapes for radio or collective bargaining. I started to have a real interest in it and Charles wanted more and more out of it. He took off at the end of the semester. He had his grades against the university. I think he was institutionalized. ??? that kind of feeling. I'm not afraid to speak out. I'd like to speak out and am often afraid to speak out. We had meetings and Michigan Conference people came up here. I always attended and got to know people and knew people who were taking subordinate jobs and we had a Treasurer. By the time Charlie dropped out we had a ??? of our own. We had vice presidents and parliamentarian and everything. People came to do something like Mike Green. He's the kind of guy who hears about something going on and you don't know how he heard about it. That's how they do that in here. From the very beginning we had a course in the AAUP and people studied the documents in different ways, studied the academic ??? documents. They were used to interest the faculty. It didn't pay too much. Everybody was worried about money and decisions like who wanted a raise. I did set a limit for myself. It was during my dissertation between '67 and '73 and working with the AAUP. The faculty representative??? Not till a little later, a man was collective bargaining several times. My own idea was to get the AAUP out. We needed mature people. ??? (too quiet) To not be told to shut up by these people. There was no such thing as a university being forced to share ????. All my efforts were aimed at that way.

****SKIP IN TAPE****

LF: We didn't defeat ????. We just got our say. We all have to be trustworthy. We can work out that arrangement and that relationship. It's a good university and will work that out. When I see a man like Glen walking around, all the muscles, a short man ??? (too quiet)

RM: I have a question for you. When you were involved with the AAUP, you weren't tenured. You didn't have your dissertation done. You were taking a chance. How did you feel about that?

LF: Well I didn't think I had a choice. In the end I was given an ultimatum. Finish it by the end of '73 or my 8 years of waiting would be up. I didn't want to aggravate that. I fought for the same reason I'm writing about the poor, the same reason I'm writing about nursing homes, things like that. I asked one girl who had been so good to me. She comes in at 7:00 and the first thing she does is come and check my oxygen and make sure I have all the oxygen I have to use. I never asked her to do it. I didn't know it was possible, but I couldn't live without her. I just do that because that's what should be done. My goals are less ???I saw what needed to be done and I saw I could help. One of the things I didn't like is it sounded like I was the old conservative who was still holding out for collective bargaining. I resisted in such a way that I was on the bargaining team before Christmas. At Christmas I left for ??? I think there's something everybody can do if they think about it. There's no such thing as ??? If you don't see it, you just got to listen to it and see what's right. I could see what's right. I knew what it was to be a ???

RM: Was there any one event or series of events that pushed the faculty into organizing? There's been all sorts of discussion on that. It was this or that.

LF: That's besides this. The one event was Jamrich's trust. I've seen presidents since there that were trustworthy. That's the answer. Trustworthy. If you can't do it right, he never got the connection. The people were generous and trusted him a while. Then when he was untrustworthy to them, they would remember it. This trouble began with tenure and firing Fred ??? as much as it was. The whole thing I thought I would be famous for was the ??? grievance policy. That was marvelous. People were trying to make it work. I never imagined that. I never imagined that people could sit down and do that and have any success at all. I think it was a combination of the question was set up as a way to enforce

governments to ensure trust in them. That they are responsible. With a lot of the conservatives, they wanted collective bargaining, but when they are throwing a guy out, let's get a reason for throwing him out. Let's take and write a grievance policy. So we did. Then trust and see what happens. Fred H??? grievance, I claim that he came as the Dean of Arts and Sciences and he was so bad he had to go in and straighten it up. I don't know what he did. (too quiet) I filed a petition, a grievance, that he's not living up to the contract. I was hired to teach literature. I took it through the preliminary committee which was sort of like an indictment. Like a grand jury. Took it to the grand jury and won. Glen was furious and was going to get all the high priced lawyers he could find. He's got the power. I said thank you very much. I had the indictment, that's what I wanted. I could never use ??? All kinds of things, promises he made. I was supposed to not make lists, sometimes I wish I had made lists better. It was so obvious that we had to go through all of that to find out what he did. He was just doing the ??? he didn't rehire ??? (too quiet) They gave him an honorary degree. When he quit in protest, he saw immediate action. You can't quit and stop it right now. Two other people that left, resigned because of that. He tried ??? to fire a senior professor. An old man like that. This is where morals in education were going on in the department. It should have been ??? his power.

RM: Less, when did you retire?

LF: I taught part time until, they called it June 1, 1997, but it was actually May 1997. I was relieved of duties. They even took my 30 years that I was teaching part time. He went to Notre Dame for 3 years. He got credit for it for tenure. He came to me and I had 29 ½ years at this institution.

RM: Okay good. Thank you.