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Eastern Michigan University Archives, Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with David Geherin (DG)

Conducted by Historic Preservation Graduate Student Matt Jones (MJ) and Historic Preservation Graduate Student Rachel Burns (RB)

Transcribed by Matt Jones

Recorded 2019 January 15 at Halle Library, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan

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MJ: This is Matt Jones, an Historic Preservation grad student. I'm here with fellow Historic Preservation grad student Rachel Burns. It's Tuesday, January 15, 2019 and we are in the Eastern Michigan University Archives talking with Dr. David Geherin, a member of the EMU faculty from 1969 till his retirement in 2010. Geherin received Emeritus status in 2010 also. He is also the author of nine books on crime and mystery fiction.

MJ: So we want to start way back. Can you tell us a little bit about when you were born, who your parents were?

DG: I was born in 1943 in Auburn, New York, in the Finger Lakes region. My father was a corrections officer at Auburn state prison, the largest employer in town. He later worked with my uncle as a plumber. When I was in college, he started attending the local community college and got accredited as a vocational instructor. He then returned to the prison to teach plumbing and heating to the inmates until he retired. My mother was a homemaker, as mothers usually were in those days. Later she did work as a receptionist for an eye doctor. I have a younger sister and a younger brother.

MJ: What did you say your father got his degree in?

DG: it was an associate's degree.

MJ: Can you tell us a little bit about high school?

DG: I went to Mount Carmel High School in Auburn.

MJ: When you were in secondary school, in high school, junior high, did you have any instructors that got you excited about your future career?

DG: I had a lot of good teachers in high school, which was run by the Carmelite Fathers, a small teaching order. One of them, Father Vincent, taught an advanced history class that was like a college course. He assigned us a lot of work and gave us a lot of feedback on our writing. He certainly stands out as probably the most influential teacher I had in high school.

MJ: Did you stay in touch?

DG: Yes we did, until he eventually moved away.

MJ: Did he ever read one of your books?

DG: I really don't know. I hope I did.

MJ: What did you expect from your early age — did you have any kind of career in mind?

DG: No idea. Clueless. I applied to only one college and fortunately made the right decision for the wrong reason. My high school physics teacher, Jack Gargan, had just joined the faculty at our school. He had graduated from West Point, but received a medical discharge because of stomach ulcers. He attended St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto for one year before receiving his appointment to West Point. St. Michael's College (known to all as St.Mike's) had a unique program in those days for American students. The Canadian system was five years of high school and three years of college. You had to pass a rigorous grade thirteen in high school to be admitted into the university. It was difficult for American students to get into the university without having completed grade thirteen. So St. Mike's created a vigorous grade-thirteen equivalency and accepted a hundred American students a year. If we passed with high enough grades, we were automatically admitted to the University. I happened to bump into Mr. Gargan at a basketball game one night and he suggested I look into St. Mike's, which he highly recommended. The main thing about the school that appealed to me was that it was the cheapest college I could find. Fortunately, going there turned out to be the smartest decision I ever made. High school students today are very sophisticated and often visit several colleges before making a decision. I didn't do any of that. I never even saw the place until the day I arrived for classes. But by sheer luck it turned out to have been the greatest experience of my life, for many reasons including it was where I met my wife.

MJ: Were there any other schools that you were thinking about?

DG: My other choice was one of the New York State teachers' colleges, but I got accepted at St. Mike's early in my senior year, so I never applied anywhere else.

MJ: So you already had the idea that you were interested in teaching

DG: No. I thought at one point I might want to either go into publishing of some sort or go to law school. Law school was everybody's fallback. I had wonderful teachers at Toronto. In my senior year, I had a recitation literature class with a professor named Barry Callaghan, whose father Morley was a Canadian novelist and a friend of Ernest Hemingway when both lived in Paris in the 1920s. His office was located on the third floor in an old house on campus and the twelve students in his class met there every week. He came up with a great idea. He said he thought we'd have better discussions if we had some wine. If we'd throw in a few bucks, he'd buy a couple of bottles of wine and we'd have class between 12 and 1. He didn't have any classes the rest of the afternoon and said if anyone wanted to stay, class would continue informally after 1. We were often there until three or four or even five o'clock. The wine may have been a factor. I loved the class. We talked a lot about contemporary literature, and at some point it occurred to me that I didn't have to stop going to college — I heard you could get a teaching assistantship

that would pay for graduate school. I still I don't think I was necessarily considering a teaching career, but I found out very early on, if you have a teaching assistantship, you are preparing to become a teacher. And I quickly realized that was exactly what I wanted to do.

MJ: That's why we're both here too. We got assistantships. I should say really quickly — I left it out in the introduction — I am also here with Rachel Burns.

DG: Hello Rachel. I had such a wonderful experience as an undergraduate that I wanted to stay in college I would have remained at the University of Toronto which I absolutely loved but three languages were required to become a graduate student in English and I had only two. I happen to mention to one professor that I was interested in modern literature and he told me that Purdue University had just started a journal called *Modern Fiction Studies.* So I applied to Purdue and got an assistantship there.

RB: What was your undergraduate major?

DG: I had a double major in English and Philosophy.

MJ: Do you remember your first real research project or thesis?

DH: II had a number of good high school English classes and I remember one where we were required to write a long term paper on an author. I wrote mine on British novelist Graham Greene. I had to do a lot of research and a lot of writing. At St. Mike's they did not teach any writing classes whatsoever. It was assumed that students who completed grade thirteen knew how to write. In my freshman year literature class — all of the classes at Toronto were a year long — we met twice a week for lecture, and then in a small discussion class every Saturday morning. For that class, we were assigned a 4-5 page literature paper almost every week. That's how I learned to write. Also, I never had a multiple choice exam in all my college years. I had to write papers in almost every class and all our final exams were essay exams that were all three hours long. That was great preparation for graduate school.

MJ: Your path from grad school to EMU — did you have any associations with EMU already?

DG: Yes. I had never been here, but several of my good friends from high school attended Eastern. When I reached the point where I was starting to apply for teaching jobs, I knew a little bit about Eastern so I put that on my list. In those days all of our job interviews were conducted at the annual Modern Language Association Convention over Christmas break. The first interview I had was with EMU and I was very nervous. I was interviewed by Milton Foster, Department Head, and Marty Kornbluth, a faculty member. They were warm, weren't intimidating, and they put me completely at ease.

MJ: Did that interview give you an impression of the place at all?

DG: Yeah it did. Other interviews were very intimidating because the people doing the interview sat behind a desk while grilling you.The Eastern folks were sitting on a couch drinking coffee and simply began a conversation with me. That made a very positive impression on me so when when EMU offered me a position, I thought to myself, "I really liked these people, I think I'd like working there."

MJ: I've seen photos from the mid-60s here at Eastern. One is a photo of you and the faculty, all sitting in the faculty lounge and they are drinking something that looks like coffee. And Sponberg is in the room and it looks like they are laughing at Sponberg about something. What were your impressions of Sponberg?

DG: Eastern was booming when I arrived here in 1969. There were five of us new faculty who came that year to the English department right out of graduate school, so we were already kind of a group. The senior faculty (and Sponberg) went out of their way to be very welcoming to us.

MJ: Do you remember any of those people who came on with you?

DG: Yeah. Paul Bruss, who is still teaching here, Tom Hennings, Bill Hauer, Jerry Wild, and Bob Kraft.

MJ: And one is still here you said?

DG: Yes, Bruss is currently on phased retirement, so he taught the longest. The year before we came, there were two or three new hires. And then over the next two years, there were several more. We ended up with a group of about ten to twelve new teachers all from different universities, all excited about our first job. We had great camaraderie.

MJ: Where were you living when you got here?

DG: My wife Diane and I had two young children at the time. We lived in the apartment complex on Huron River Drive across from the married student apartments on Cornell St. and next to what used to be Fletcher School. We lived there for a year and a half before buying our first house on Whittier St. in Ypsilanti.

MJ: When you got here, what kind of campus did you find in terms of environment, attitudes?

DG: The University of Toronto was a wonderful place in a wonderful city. It's architecturally beautiful, based on Cambridge and Oxford, and located right in the center of the city, which was (and still is) an exciting cosmopolitan city. When we went to Purdue in West Lafayette, Indiana, it was very different. Every building looked the same.There wasn't much culture. In those days, Purdue managed to keep all movie theaters and bars out of West Lafayette. Fortunately, the English Department there was great. Coming to EMU meant returning to a nice college environment. Of course being so close to the University of Michigan, this was quite a place to be in the 60s. Many of us came to EMU thinking about possibly later moving on to another university. Two things happened. University teaching jobs started to dry up in the early 1970s and it wasn't easy to move. One of the group who came when I did wasn't particularly happy here and he did leave for another teaching job. The rest of us all stayed because we liked it here. I kept hearing from many of my graduate school colleagues who intensely disliked where they ended up teaching and I think some even left the profession. So I considered myself very fortunate to have made a good choice.

MJ: We've heard a little bit about how back in the late 60s and 70s, first — we talked to Greg Peoples and Glenna Frank Miller and they spent a long time talking about how, in those days, the campus felt a lot more like there was such a familial vibe. It was less fragmented than it is now.

DG: Absolutely.

MJ: So were other departments that cohesive?

DG: I can't say. I think they probably were. I think we were particularly lucky in the English Department in that we were a large department with a lot of us all about the same age. But there were other reasons. In those days the department was mainly a literature department. We offered some classes in writing, journalism, children's literature, and linguistics, but except for English composition, about 80% of our other classes were in literature. All the people who came in with me were literature professors, so we all taught similar courses. You mentioned you saw a picture in the faculty lounge. There were only a few classes held between 12 and 1, so everybody gathered in the lounge for lunch. If you didn't arrive early enough, you couldn't get a seat. We would swap stories, tell jokes, it was just a fun gathering three times a week. Over time, the literature program shrank and the other programs — writing, linguistics, journalism, children's literature — became bigger and bigger. In essence the English department became five separate departments. While we still had a lot in common, we had different teaching and scholarly interests. However, we still remained a great community whenever we got together for social events or for department meetings, but nothing quite like those first few years.

MJ: Who had the best jokes in the lounge?

DG: Marty Kornbluth. Marty was a jokester from Brooklyn. Then there was Ivan Schreiber. Anybody who was in the English Department with him will tell you that he was one of the most sophisticated, brightest, and wittiest persons they ever met. When Ivan and Marty were in that lunchroom, you didn't want to miss a thing they had to say.

MJ: What kind of pressure, if any, did you feel to do your own research? From your colleagues or from you department heads?

DG: EMU was primarily a teaching university, but we knew we were also expected to publish. In those days, articles and presentations at conferences were pretty much enough. Things became more rigorous as time went on and there was some pressure to put out a book. But if you did a good job teaching and you were starting to become active in scholarly ways, going to conferences and getting some publications, you received tenure and you got promoted. The interesting thing in my case is that I have written nine books, yet every single one of them was written *after* I had been promoted to full professor. I was writing them because I wanted to, not because I was forced to. I think where there is a lot of pressure to publish, too many things get published only because of the pressure. You weren't necessarily writing what you wanted, only what you hoped might get published.

MJ: It doesn't sound like you had any trouble getting books published.

DG: I presented a paper on a mystery writer at a conference and a week or two later I received a letter from someone saying, "I was at the conference and I happened to pick up a copy of the your paper. Would you mind if I published it in a journal of mine called *The Armchair Detective*?" I said I'd be thrilled. A couple of months after it appeared, I get a letter from an editor in New York who said, "I just happened to read your essay and we're thinking of publishing some books

on mystery writers. Would you be interested in developing the essay into a book?" Of course I said yes. And then the first one led to the second and the second one to the third.

MJ: Can you take us into getting interested in crime fiction?

DG: I was asked to write a guest blog about this recently and it got me thinking about how I did get involved in this. When I was in undergraduate and then in graduate school, students were discouraged from reading what was called "trashy" writing. We were supposed to read the canon of great books, which meant only books by dead authors. So I read Milton and Shakespeare and Dickens, and it was all good. But I remember one day sitting in my office during my final year of graduate school at Purdue reading the *New York Times Book Review.* I was surprised to come across a review of a mystery novel by a writer named Ross Macdonald. What was the *New York Times* doing reviewing mysteries? It turns that Macdonald had a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Michigan and he was incorporating classical myths into his crime novels. This encouraged me to read one of his books and I thought to myself,"Wow! This is really good!" And that led me to another crime writer named Raymond Chandler. I began to realize that what I liked about the modern novels I was reading was what I was also enjoying about Chandler's mystery novels — vivid characters, colorful language, comments about society. I realized that there really wasn't such a big gap between serious literature and good crime fiction. There are plenty of crap mystery novels being published today, but there are also an awful lot being written by serious and talented writers. I began writing some essays on crime writers and eventually began teaching courses at Eastern on mystery and crime fiction. I taught a "Murder in Literature" class several times that included Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* along with detective novels by Ross Macdonald and Raymond Chandler.

MJ: Yeah. It seems like crime fiction, mystery fiction — it must have just as much to say about culture and society as anything else.

DG: Exactly. I'm working on an essay right now on a Scottish crime writer named Phillip Kerr, who loved Raymond Chandler's 1930s private eye, Phillip Marlowe. He modeled his private eye, Bernie Gunther, on Philip Marlowe, but instead of living in LA in the 1930s, Gunther lived in Berlin during the time of the Nazis. He often finds himself being forced to work for them even though he hates them. The novels are very entertaining because the detective narrator has a very sarcastic sense of humor like Philip Marlowe. But they are also chilling accounts of what he was witnessing happening in Germany at the time. Kerr used his mysteries to explore such things as how the Nazis came into power and even used historical characters like Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels to describe the evils of Nazism.

MJ: Can you give me the name again?

DG: Phillip Kerr. K-E-R-R. His first three novels were collected in a volume called *Berlin Noir.* Then it was 15 years before he picked up the character again and wrote several more.

MJ: I'm going to check that out.

MJ: I don't want to skip forward too fast, but moving up to 1980 when you created your first detective fiction class. Can you take us through the nuts and bolts of creating a class?

DG: Yes. The English Department was very supportive of new classes. We had a Special Topics course where you could propose a new course that, once approved, you'd teach. That was one of the things I loved about the department. If you had an idea you wanted to work on, you could do it. Over the years I created maybe a dozen or more different courses. I created several crime fiction and mystery novel courses, some at the 200-level, others at the 400-level. The course I am proudest of I co-created with EMU Foreign Language professor Jim Holoka in the early 1970s. Bill Shuter of the English department received a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to establish a series of interdisciplinary courses at Eastern that would be alternatives to basic studies or gen. ed. Each one of them would be team-taught and would involve at least two disciplines. There were eventually maybe 8 or 10 of these courses. Bill asked me if I would be interested in creating a course that would combine the classics with modern literature. We came up with the idea for a course comparing ancient Rome and contemporary American through the study of literature. So we hired Jim Holoka, a classics professor fresh out of graduate school, to help design the course which was a 6-hour interdisciplinary course. We met three hours a week in lecture and three hours in recitation. Unfortunately, when the grant ran out, Eastern didn't pick up the funding. Some of the other courses that were created just fell by the wayside. I'm happy to say our course continued for the next thirty-five years until I retired in 2010. It was my favorite EMU teaching experience because I loved team teaching with Jim Holoka, a wonderful teacher, wonderful man. We taught it virtually every fall. We would introduce students to the classics of Roman Literature — Virgil's *Aeneid*, the satires of Horace and Juvenal, the poetry of Catullus (all in translation). We would also read a selection of American novels and plays that would address similar issues. We would compare such topics as the role of the hero or the definition of success in both countries. It continued as a general studies course for many years and later was offered as a seminar for students in the Honors College. As far as I know, it was the only 6-credit course ever offered at EMU.

MJ: How did students react to that first detective fiction class?

DG: Great! Detective fiction tends to be a little more plot-oriented than some novels. There is a mystery and you want to find out who did it. They're very readable and fun to talk about. They were very popular courses and I enjoyed teaching them very much.

MJ: Do you remember how many registered that first year?

DG: Those special topics were for 40 students. When "Murder in Literature" was offered as an Honors course, enrollment was limited to 20 students.

MJ: Do you think it would have been as successful anywhere else?

DG: Other universities also began teaching such courses at about the same time. I recently received payment from my publisher for the rights to use a chapter from one of my books in a mystery-novel course currently being taught at the University of Texas. Such courses are still popular today.

MJ: You've taught more than 30 classes here?

DG: Yeah. In the early days, everybody in literature taught at least one writing class. For most of us that meant freshman composition. But then gradually we had more and more graduate students teaching that course, so we would more advanced writing courses. I even taught a creative writing course. Then we had quite a few basic studies literature courses — Lit !00, LIT 101, LIT 102, LIT 103. Intro to Shakespeare was a required course for all majors that many of us taught at one time or another. Then there were all the special topics courses as well as the courses we routinely taught for majors and minors. I also taught several graduate courses, some of them Special Topics. My favorite courses of all were the "Rome and America" course I taught every year and those I taught on EMU's Fall European Cultural History Tour. There were four faculty and we taught interdisciplinary courses to between 25 and 35 students as we traveled to fourteen counties over four months. We began in London and ended in either Israel or Egypt. That was a real teaching thrill.

MJ: I've always wondered, when you create a special topics course, which is greater- the desire to teach something you really like or something you think the students will really love.

DGL: It's both. I made the mistake my first semester at EMU of pitching the level of the assigned readings in an introductory literature course far above what the students could handle. I was satisfying my interests, not theirs. The next semester I had much greater success because I kept their needs in mind. I still managed to teach them what I thought was important, but I did so by choosing readings that were more appropriate to their abilities. In the end, I wanted to make the course something I enjoyed teaching, but that was also a valuable experience for the students.

MJ: When you came here in 1969, it was a particularly tumultuous time for the university. Do you have any recollections of things that were going on campus?

DG: John Norman Collins had been arrested just before I came to EMU. There was still a buzz about it because the killings had gone on for so long. In my course on "Murder in Literature," I had the students read *The Michigan Murders,* the book about John Norman Collins, which scared the daylights out of them. Students would say, "I'm reading this book and I'm reading about a student who was killed who was living in my dorm." They really identified with the victims in the book. I also remember in my first or second year here, there was a big protest planned on campus and the word was that sheriff Doug Harvey was planning to use helicopters, tear gas, and dogs to shut it down. So various departments were asked to send volunteer faculty into the dorms in the hope that Harvey might not attack if faculty were present. We really didn't know what we were getting into. I was assigned Buell Hall. At first, the students were genuinely afraid, but as the evening went on, it was clear that there was going to be no attack. Around ten or eleven o'clock that night, we were just sitting around when one of the students said, "Why don't we make some popcorn and watch some movies. I'll go get my movies." So we began popping popcorn, and several of the guys in Buell Hall brought down their movies, which were all porn films. That's how the night ended. I thought, "well they don't need me anymore." I also remember another protest march that involved thousands of students ringing Pray-Harrold. I taught a class the next day on the second floor in Pray-Harrold in a room where the windows had all been broken the previous night. I could hear the sound of crunching glass as I walked

across the floor, and you could still smell the tear gas in the halls. It was certainly an interesting time on campus.

MJ: Rachel spent the last semester doing interviews with some of the activists. It was such fascinating stuff. It's good to hear a faculty side of things as well.

DG: Yeah. One other troubling thing about those days: there was an awful lot of pressure on male students at the time. If a male student wasn't doing well in his classes and was in danger of dropping our or flunking out, he would lose his student deferment and faced the prospect of getting drafted and sent to Vietnam.

MJ: Did you have any opinions on the BSA (Black Student Association)?

DG: You know the Eastern Magazine had an article on that in the latest issue.

MJ: Yes.

DG: That was actually the year before I came here.

MJ: Oh I see.

DG: Yeah. I was aware of it, but I wasn't here for it. When I was here, it was mainly anti-war protests and then specifically the shootings at Kent State.

MJ: OK. Well, there was a teacher strike in 1976. Did you take any kind of position on that?

DG: I fully supported the union, as did most of the the faculty. A few faculty members got fired for no reason and some of the Regents were interfering in academics, so we felt we really needed the protection of a union. I mentioned Ivan Schreiber earlier. He was a very witty man. Ray LaBounty was either the vice-president or the acting president of EMU at the time of the first strike. Ivan carried a sign on the picket line that read, "Mutiny on LaBounty." (laughter) That was the kind of wit he had. He could find the humor in a strike.

MJ: Do you think the administration handled it appropriately?

DG: I think it was a learning experience for them. At first, the university didn't believe a strike would work, but it did. As time went on we had fewer strikes because I think both sides decided that compromise wasn't a dirty word, as it has become today. You're not going to get everything you want but if you sit down and compromise everybody's going to get some satisfaction.

MJ: Did not the students react too because they were paying?

DG: There were students who were completely supportive and some who complained,"I paid my money here and want my education." The strikes didn't go on that long. I remember one year, to make up for the time we were out on strike, some administrator came up with the idea that we had to add 5 minutes to every class the rest of the semester to equal the time we were out.

Five minutes of extra time didn't really make a difference. I don't think that anybody's education suffered. (Laughter)

MJ: You've been here 40 years teaching, served under a lot of different department heads- Milton Foster, Marcia Dalby, Russ Larson. Do you have any thoughts on these department heads? Their styles?

DG: I know some departments where the faculty had trouble with their department heads for a variety of different reasons. During my entire time at Eastern, we had only one lousy department head. The rest were all good people who listened to the faculty and treated everyone fairly. My first department head, Milton Foster, is still alive: He and his wife recently celebrated their 94th birthday. They retired and moved to Arizona where they still live. Marcia Dalby came from Washington University in St. Louis. She was our first outside department head. Wonderful to work with. Jim Reynolds and Russ Larson were both great heads. We were very lucky. The one bad department head came to EMU from another university and when he arrived he didn't listen to anybody and started making bad decisions that upset the faculty. Also, within a day or two of his arrival on campus, he began a relationship with a newly hired female faculty member. About midway through the semester, the dean asked Russ Larson, who had previously been a candidate for department head, if he would take over. He did and served effectively for several years. The head who was removed had tenure in the department so he remained here for another year or two until he found another job.

MJ: Department heads answer to the Dean right?

DG: Yes.

MJ: Is there ever any tension between the faculty and the department heads.

DG: Yeah. I think that department heads have a difficult job because they have to answer to the faculty and to the administration. They have to please the Dean and the Provost, and they also have to please the department. They have to fight for the department but they've got to be careful if they want to keep their job. It's a very tough job, especially in a period of budget cuts. They also have more and more paper work. The best of them do a really great job of maintaining the department's respect while standing up for the things that are important. There were terrible stories before we were unionized about some department heads who would be given X amount of money to distribute to the faculty as merit raises, but who only gave them to friends. That caused an awful lot of dissension. The union contract put an end to playing favorites when it came to raises, but even after we had unionized, the problem came up again. One year the administration offered to fund merit-pay increases. Every department set up a committee to determine who would get merit raises that year. It was a nightmare because those who were passed over became angry at the people on the committee who were making these decisions. And then at the end of the year after people really were upset, the university discovered it didn't have enough money to fund the the merit raises, so those who were supposed to get them only received a certificate. Every time the issue of merit pay comes up, the union says no.

It’s too divisive. How do you determine who deserves it? ? What do you look at? How many pages did one publish vs. how many another did? Student evaluations?

MJ: What year was that? Was that late 70s?

DG: The first contract was in the 70s. The merit pay issue must have happened sometime in the 80s I believe. I do remember one faculty member in the English department became so angry at a colleague on the committee that decided who got the merit raises that I don’t think they spoke for the rest of their careers. The irony is that at the end of the year, the university said, “Oh, by the way we don’t have any money.” Bad feelings all for nothing.

MJ: Are there any faculty members you remember that never seemed to get their due? That did more behind the scenes work?

DG: No, I don’t. I thought people were treated fairly. You knew the people who slacked off, who didn’t pull their weight, who didn’t go to department meetings, didn’t do very much. We had some people that didn’t publish but they worked tirelessly advising students or they served on several committees. Not everybody had to do the same thing. So maybe you had faculty who published but they didn’t serve on committees as much. You had people who were outstanding teachers and advisers but they didn’t do any publishing. Everybody knew the majority of their colleagues were contributing and accepted the fact that we all got the same raise. I suppose there were a couple of people who thought they should get more because they felt they did more. But that thought never came to me.

MJ: You have four decades of teaching. What kinds of changes did you see in the way that students learn, in the way they are prepared for college?

DG: Although I haven’t been in a classroom for the last nine years, it seems to me that the college experience has changed dramatically from what it was for most of my career. There’s been a kind of an assault on education in many ways. The rise of online classes has dramatically changed the nature of the college experience. I think one of the biggest factors is the cost of college education. When I went to college, I could get through by working summers, saving a decent amount of money, taking out a small loan, and going to a university that was funded 90% by the government. That’s the way it used to be at state universities like EMU. Students today are forced to work multiple jobs, take more courses online, and borrow heavily. All that affects the students’ attitudes towards education. You can no longer take a course just because you want to learn a subject because you’re afraid you’re wasting money. I don’t blame the students; I blame the situation they’ve been put into. I also I don’t think the way our public schools put an emphasis today on testing is the best way to educate students either. Tests are important but they shouldn’t be the tail that wags the dog.

MJ: Were you able to make improvements to curriculum as you saw fit?

DG: The great thing about most all the courses I taught was that I had complete autonomy over content in them. If I were a math or science teacher, I’d have to teach the same material all the time. I could change my entire reading list every semester. There were certain favorites that I

always wanted to teach but I always looked for new material. We had a very active curriculum committee and we could revise our major and minor requirements to meet the changing interests and demands of the students.

MJ: I think I actually read a quote — I think it have it on here somewhere — students saying that you had a way of changing the material to get them interested and keeping them interested and keeping the material fresh.

DG: I avoided lecturing as much as I could. I always conducted discussion classes. It was my goal to get as many students involved in the discussion as I could. The more I could get them involved, the better the classes were. They were livelier, and I believe the students learned more.

MJ: Do you remember anything that didn't work?

DG: I remember one mistake I made in a summer class. I assigned a novel by Saul Bellow that I hadn't yet read. I had read other Bellow novels but when I started to read this book I thought, "Oh no, this novel is so dull, I don't know how I'm going to teach it." I went into class one day and reminded the students that this novel was the next reading assignment. One student piped up, "This is a dull book." And another one agreed. So I said, "Would you mind if we changed the syllabus and didn't read it?" They were delighted, and we selected another book instead. That was my mistake. But there were other times where I went into class really having high expectations about a particular novel or short story and the students simply didn't respond, so I often didn't teach that work again.

If I went back through my reading lists I could find many assignments that I taught only once and it usually meant it just didn't work. Sometimes I would try to find another book by the same author. And sometimes I had to teach a difficult book because it was important enough to teach. It wasn't the case that I made sure everything was going to be an easy reading experience for students. William Faulkner for example is one of my favorite authors but he is really difficult. And so when I would teach Faulkner, I knew there were going to be challenges for the students and I would have to change my approach to teaching that novel.

MJ: Faulkner is actually a great example because sometimes I don't like how much I like it because it is so hard.

DH: There are some books you have to work hard at teaching, but the effort is worth it. In a novel class, I might teach ten to twelve novels in a semester and I know students have other classes and they are working and sometimes they're going to have trouble simply finding the time to get through all the books. That's the reality, and when you try to teach something that nobody has read, it's difficult. There were a couple of times when I've had no choice but to cancel class. If nobody had read the assignment, there really wasn't anything we could do in class. I did find that when I was forced to cancel a class, and that didn't happen often, the next class was usually a great one because the students realized they had a certain responsibility they didn't live up to and so they made a special effort for the next class.

MJ: How did you get assigned to teaching European Cultural History Tours?

DG: Thanks to Emanuel Fenz in the History Department. He was born in Italy, and he felt it was important for American students to see the rest of the world. He created the European Cultural History Tour, which began as six-week travel programs in the spring and summer, one from London to Rome and the another Rome to Egypt.

MJ: Do you remember what year that started?

DG: I think it started in the late 70s or early 80s. Emanuel mentioned to a friend of mine in the History department that he was thinking of adding literature to the program and asked if he knew anyone in the English department who might be interested. He suggested me and I met with Emanuel. I taught with him for the first time on the six-week program from London to Rome in the spring of 1985. He later came up with a plan for a full fall semester ECHT. And then I think it was 87 or 88, he was in a terrible automobile accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. Gordon Knutson, then a faculty member at Heidelberg College who had previously taught on the program, came to EMU as the new director of ECHT. George Klein, the head of EMU's Study Abroad programs, asked me if I would teach in the fall program in 1988. My youngest son was still in high school, so I told George I couldn't do it that year, but I would be able to do in 1989. That was the first of four Fall ECHT programs I did. There were usually three and sometimes four faculty members in art, history, literature, and political science. We all went to one another's classes and tried to make our reading assignments link up as much as possible. We were on the road with all of our possessions on our backs for four months. It was crazy, exhausting, thrilling. The teaching was unique. Juvenal was an ancient Roman writer who wrote a satire about walking through the Roman Forum. So I held my class on Juvenal in the exact spot in the Forum where the character was walking in that satire. I taught Thomas Mann's novel *Death in Venice* on the beach in Venice in front of the hotel where part of the novel is set. The students performed scenes from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in the theater of Dionysus at the Acropolis where the play was first performed. The art teacher got to teach all the art classes in the museums where the actual paintings and sculpture were on display. The historian taught classes on the historical sites he was lecturing on. You can't do any of that in a campus classroom and we did it every day.

MJ: I can't even imagine your impression of seeing your students on their first trip over. Just the change in everything.

DG: The students were typically loud Americans when they arrived. But by the third or fourth week of the trip, I noticed that they began criticizing other Americans they'd see for being as noisy as they had been. To see them change during the course of the semester — not just intellectually, but personally as their eyes opened up about the world — was exciting. The whole trip was an experience of a lifetime, and I got to do it four times.

MJ: Four consecutive years?

DG: Not consecutive. What happened was, after I got back, two of my colleagues in the English Department wanted to go. So we worked out a rotation where we each got a chance to go every

third year. My wife wouldn't have been happy if I went every year. I had some of the most wonderful experiences, hilarious experiences, scary experiences…

MJP: Can you give us a scary one?

DG: We were on the main street of St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) in Russia. We took a lunch break and while I was standing in line waiting to get something to eat, a student came running up to me and said that one of our students had just been arrested. He was an EMU student from Germany who did what he said many Germans do — he decided he didn't want to look for a bathroom so he went into an alleyway and peed against the wall. This was a German peeing against a Russian wall in a city where during the Siege of Leningrad in the 1940s something like a million of its residents were starved to death by the Germans. The policeman was furious and marched the student down an alleyway and through a door. So I located the door and knocked. When I was allowed to enter I saw a scared student and a noticeably drunk Russian policeman, his face beet red, screaming. I'm thinking, "we're never going to get out of here alive." The policeman kept ranting and raving and shouting. The only words I understood were "No respect." Finally he stopped and pulled the student, with me following, into another room where his boss was. He explained to his boss what the student did (in Russian) and I'm trying to explain (in English) "American. Student. Mistake." The two of them conferred for quite a while, and then the drunk policeman grabbed the student and me by the arms and marched us a down a dark hallway to a door. He opened it, and shoved us outside into the alley. It was a scary experience, but it did have a happy ending.

MJ: In the 80s?

That would have been in 1994, shortly after the fall of Communism. But during my first trip in 1989, when we visited Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, they were all still Communist countries.

MJ: What did you teach in Soviet countries?

DG: In Russia, I taught Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.* In Dresden, which was in East Germany, I taught Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* about the fire-bombing of Dresden. Almost everything I taught had a specific link to where we were. In Florence, for example, I taught stories from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron.* We held class in front of the church where the storytellers in *The Decameron* gathered before leaving for the hills above Florence to escape the plague.

MJ: That sounds amazing.

DG: I've not had that kind of teaching experience anywhere else than on this trip.

MJ: I have about five questions left here. I ask a lot of faculty about serving under the different presidents that were here. You were here from Sponberg, Brickley, Porter, Shelton, and then some of the shorter term presidents in the early 2000s. What were your impressions of these people, even though sometimes faculty sometimes don't have much of a relationship?

DG: The one president I got to know more than any other was Sam Kirkpatrick because his son Shaun was one of the students on my first Fall European Cultural History Tour in 1989. Like Shaun, who was a student at the University of Arizona, most of the students on our trips were from other universities. When Sam was appointed president in 2000, I got in touch with Shaun, and whenever he come to Ypsilanti to visit his folks, we would get together. I think a lot of people would agree that Harold Sponberg was our best president in many ways. He knew all the faculty, partly because Eastern was a smaller school when he took over. At the beginning of the fall semester he would invite the entire faculty to McKenny Hall and would greet each one and introduce himself. He was really the person responsible for the growth of EMU in the late 60s from a teachers' college to a university. I think John Porter was also a pretty widely respected president. Some faculty had concerns about him initially because though he had a doctorate, he was a political appointment and didn't come from a university but from the public school sector. But he worked hard and he came up with some good ideas and I think people respected him.

MJ: Sponberg always sticks out a lot because of the time he was here. What was happening, everything was changing so much.

DG: He had to deal with student sit-in protests in his office among other things. That puts pressure on a president to make the right decisions. Not many of our later presidents had that kind of crisis to deal with. It was a very difficult time to be a president. I think presidents burn out pretty quickly and I think that's part of what happened to Sponberg. But he was well-liked and he certainly had the best interests of the university in mind at all times.

MJ: What did you think of Bill Shelton?

DG: I think I saw him only once or twice, I had no connection with him. I have absolutely no opinion.

MJ: I keep hearing that. That's why I keep asking.

DG: Talk about a low profile. I don't know anything specifically that he accomplished.

MJ: You were here for Fallon during the Dickinson murder here on campus.

DG: That was a terrible time and a lot of people lost their jobs because of it. Friends of mine lost their jobs. I think that the decision to hide the fact that the young woman's death was a murder was a terrible mistake. It was also later found to be illegal to do that. Some good people lost their jobs. It cost Fallon his job.

MJ: What was the provost's name who lost his job?

DG: Jim Vick was the Dean of Students. If Jim made the decision to hide the truth about the murder, I think he did so based on what he thought was in the best interests of the university. It happened at the end of the semester right before Christmas break, and I think the feeling was we don't want students getting upset if they learn it was a murder. They didn't know that the law required the university to make public the murder of a student on campus. To this day I

don’t know whether Fallon talked with Jim or directed him to lie. If Jim was involved in making that decision, I think he thought he was making the right one. It wasn’t.

MJ: You have said that you consider yourself lucky to be able to have done what you love to do at your job. Why do you think Eastern was a good place for that? Do you think it is unique in that? That you could do that?

DG: Yes. I don’t think every English department encouraged you to develop scholarly interests in areas that were not as traditional as in some other places. I can’t imagine some universities allowing a faculty member like me to create and teach as many different courses as I did. Few universities offer the opportunity to teach an entire semester while traveling through Europe.

MJ: Why EMU?

DG: Our ideas were valued. We figured out how a way to do things. We wanted to create a new six-hour team-taught interdisciplinary course and we were encouraged to do it. We wanted to offer a semester in Europe that borrowed faculty from different departments and we were allowed to do that. I don’t know whether it’s still the case at EMU, but certainly in my time the people in charge — department heads, deans, the provost — were open to opportunities that allowed the faculty to develop different interests and grow. I certainly appreciative all the opportunities I had at EMU.

MJ: It goes back to that comment you’ve heard a few times about the University seeming to have been familial or tightly knit. What do you think has changed?

DG: I think it starts at the top. University presidents today are expected to be CEOs and colleges are increasingly being operated on a business model. In a time of diminishing finances and declining enrollments, decisions are being made purely on the basis of money, and many of those decisions cause a lot of unhappiness and dissension. When things are going well economically, everybody benefits. When things start to get tight, then everything becomes a fight. Classes are now routinely being cancelled if enrollment falls below a certain number that in the past would have been acceptable. That hurts both students and faculty. Maybe it has to be done because of limited resources. I once had a graduate class of six students that was allowed to be taught despite the low enrollment. If the class had been cancelled, students who needed that class to get their degree might have had to spend an an extra semester in school. Making decisions on arbitrary numbers is not in the best interests of the students.

MJ: What do you consider the greatest weakness of EMU?

DG: I think location. It’s nice to be so close to the U of M but sometimes we’re too much in its shadow. Also, the state of Michigan has drastically decreased support of its universities. Maybe a university like EMU can no longer offer everything it once did, but drastic reductions alter the notion of what a university should be, or at least what it once was.

It’s great to be close to a library like the University of Michigan’s. I know of other places where faculty doing scholarly research have to travel long distances to get to a major library. On the

other hand, there's almost no relationship between our English Department and theirs. We're seven miles apart but we live in different worlds. I read an article in *The New York Times* yesterday about electric cars that pointed out the problem of finding convenient charging stations. It mentioned a U of M student who bought a new Tesla T-3, which cost something like $75,000, and then complained to his landlord about the lack of a charging station. We're talking here about vastly different student bodies between EMU and U of M.

I was a first-generation college student and one of the things I've always liked about EMU was the number of students like me that it educated. And over the years, Eastern has been a welcoming place for adult returning students. Some of my best classes have benefitted by having returning students who had to drop out of school for a while.

MJ: Are there any other strengths of the institution that you want to talk about?

DG: Eastern recently put up signs all over town emphasizing its welcoming environment. Students are made to feel comfortable here. For the past several years I have served on one of the final interview teams for the Presidential Scholarship Competition. One of the comments I heard over and over from the students I interviewed was how warmly they were welcomed on their first visit to campus.

MJ: I was proud of it when I saw those signs. I loved that.

DG: I think Eastern has done a very good job of promoting and encouraging that atmosphere.

MJ: is there anything else you like to say for the record?

DG: I never thought about becoming a teacher until I was near the end of my undergraduate days, but I can't imagine having spent any more enjoyable career than the forty years I taught at EMU. I really love teaching and I'm not sure I would have loved it as much being somewhere else mainly because of the people I worked with, the students I taught, and the many opportunities I had to follow my interests, both in scholarly activities and the experience of teaching abroad.

MJ: And you work for the Emeritus Association?

DG: Yes, that helps me stay in touch. It isn't hard work. We get together six or seven times a year as a board and sit around drinking coffee and planning several activities. We have two social meetings a year— one at Christmas and one in the spring — and two general membership meetings. It's a great opportunity to stay in touch with other retired colleagues and to meet some I never knew when we both worked here.

RB: Are you still local?

DG: Yeah, I still live just a couple of blocks from campus.

Recording fades out.