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X.2. Rural South: Back Ways: Understanding Segregation in the Rural South

Interview X-0027

Tom Magnuson

18 June 2014

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Abstract – Tom Magnuson

Interviewee: Tom Magnuson

Interviewer: Darius Scott

Interview Date: June 18, 2014

Tom Magnuson, founder of Trading Path Association, was born in July 1944. Raised by adoptive parents in a St. Paul, Minn. neighborhood, Magnuson began leaving home in his teens for hitch-hiking expeditions and merchant seaman work. Prior to becoming a notable figure for historic preservation in the North Carolina piedmont, Tom served in the United States Marine Corps and consulted in the tech start-up industry. In his interview, Magnuson discusses race relations in and the economy of his small Minnesota neighborhood as well as Orange and Person counties (N.C.). He covers his developed interest in the history of transportation paths that began in his childhood. He offers personal and anecdotal information regarding best practices of conducting fieldwork on and around historical roads and foot paths. Specifically, he touches on how scholars might best conduct research on informal or abandoned roadways in historically African American communities.

FIELD NOTES – Tom Magnuson

(compiled June 26, 2014)

Interviewee: Tom Magnuson

Interviewer: Darius Scott

Interview Date: June 18, 2014

Location: Tom Magnuson's home in Hillsborough, NC

THE INTERVIEWEE. Tom Magnuson is the founder of Trading Path Association. He grew up and lived in close-knit St. Paul, Minnesota community until his teens when began hitchhiking and eventually taking work as a merchant seaman. He has served in the military, worked the U.S. government, and acted as a consultant to tech start-ups. Currently, he lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina where he remains involved in the community through preservation advocacy. In his interview, he speaks about his travel, career trajectory, as well as his research process.

THE INTERVIEWER. Darius Scott is a field scholar at the Southern Oral History Program and a graduate student in University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Geography Department.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in the living room of Tom Magnuson's home in the afternoon. The process went smoothly, with an occasional knocking sound picked up from shuffling feet hitting the table on which the microphone was set.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded using the Zoom H4n and a video camera

TRANSCRIPT: Tom Magnuson

Interviewee: Tom Magnuson
Interviewer: Darius Scott
Interview Date: June 18, 2014
Location: Home of Tom Magnuson in Orange County, NC
Length: One audio file, 1:05:13

START OF INTERVIEW

Darius Scott: Alright. The date is June eighteenth, 2014. I'm here with Tom Magnuson for an oral history interview with the Southern Oral History Program. Alright, Mr. Magnuson, could you tell me a little bit about your family?

Tom Magnuson: My immediate family here?

DS: Your family growing up, your parents, siblings?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they were both first-generation Americans, my parents. My father was born in 1897 on the way over from Sweden. And my mother's family moved here in the 1880s from Holland. I was adopted, as was my brother and my sister, and we grew up in a little burg in Minnesota, a real Huck Finn kind of town on the St. Croix River. It was an idyllic youth, and I got out of there as quickly as I could.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: The opportunities were quite limited.

DS: Okay.

TM: I got my Merchant Seaman's documents when I was fourteen and worked on the rivers and the lakes for two years, and then went blue water out of New York. I got a ship, a

Finnish ship, [they] had a crewman get injured in New York, and they hired me to work my way over to Europe. And I hung out in Europe for a few months and then decided to go back and go to school. And managed to find an American vessel with a missing crewman, and I had my seaman's documents, so they hired me, and I stayed on that vessel for some weeks. Went in to Szczecin, Poland, behind the Iron Curtain—this was 1964—and was very impressed by the deplorable situation behind the Iron Curtain.

And started to go to college, but really hated it. I was wasting time and money. And I was at the University of Minnesota and had to walk to class across the Minnesota River. And there was a day when that wind was coming down that river and ripped through everything you had on. I got to class, and I had a graduate student teaching a bonehead English class, and I was listening to him for about fifteen minutes. I got up and I walked downtown and I went in the recruiter's office and told the Marine Corps recruiter to give me San Diego.

DS: Okay. How old were you when you—?

TM: [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Went back to school after the merchant seamanship?

TM: Nineteen.

DS: Nineteen?

TM: Yeah.

DS: Okay. Did your parents or older relatives tell you any stories about how life was in Europe?

TM: No, there was no active memory. My grandparents were, all four of them were dead before I was born, so I didn't get any of that. And, really, as first generations, they abandoned their European past pretty thoroughly. My dad grew up speaking Swedish at home, but quit

speaking it as soon as he moved away from his parents, and he couldn't speak any by the time I was asking him about it.

DS: Wow. How old was he when he came over?

TM: He was born on the way over here.

DS: Okay. That's interesting.

TM: In actually, I think, Erie, Pennsylvania, where his ship was docked and where he was recorded.

DS: Was there anyone else besides your immediate family who lived with you in your home when you were growing up?

TM: I had an uncle that lived with [us]—he had been in the Marine Corps in World War II. In fact, I was his namesake. He disappeared in the Pacific. And so, the family gave me his name. When he got out of the service, he lived with us for a couple of years.

DS: Okay. Very interesting. Do you think he, I guess, motivated you in a sense to get involved in the military?

TM: Yeah, I think so. He was a very impressive guy in a lot of ways and not very militaristic at all. He was a very gentle man. And the only advice he ever gave me probably saved my life. When I was getting ready to go to Vietnam, he said, "Don't volunteer for anything." [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And a couple of times, I was tempted and didn't, and I'm reasonably certain that that was a lifesaving decision.

DS: What did he mean, "Don't volunteer for anything"?

TM: Well, the last thing in the world you want to have go through your mind is, “I don’t have to be here.” [Laughs]

DS: Okay. [Laughs]

TM: And he had done it. He had volunteered for a particularly awful mission in the Pacific, and it had almost cost him his life. So, that was his warning to me, and it was good sound advice.

DS: Okay. So, could you repeat where you were born?

TM: I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. My birth mother was in a foundling home. She had me out of wedlock, so she was in a home for foundlings, and the adoption agency paid for her birth so they could have the baby.

DS: Okay.

TM: And there was some finagling going on, because twenty years ago, my birth family contacted me. And I found out that my mother’s father worked with my father. The two of them worked on the interurban railroad together, which was a pretty small cadre.

DS: Okay.

TM: So, I’m thinking that there was a swap.

DS: Yeah. That’s interesting.

TM: My folks were having trouble having babies, and I think everyone knew that. So.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: It’s a good story anyway. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Yeah. Could you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

TM: Yeah. It was a one-factory—we had a state prison and the Anderson window factory. And Fred Anderson ran everything in the entire valley. And the neighborhood was all

Anderson workers. We were a mill village, really. And we had the oldest structure in town. It was a traders warehouse that had been erected in 1848 when Minnesota was first being settled by Europeans. And it sat about the flood plain, and water got within a hundred yards of the house one spring, and that was about it. So, it was, like I said, a very Huck Finn kind of place. We could go anywhere anytime we wanted, generally speaking. In the summertime, we'd leave the house in the morning and come home at nine o'clock when the siren went off, telling us that we were supposed to be off the streets. That's the kind of town it was. And wherever you were at lunch, that's where you had lunch—somebody's mother was going to feed you.

DS: Okay. So, it was a small town feel?

TM: Oh, yeah, yeah, fifteen hundred people, I think, including five hundred inmates in the prison.

DS: Did it change much over time?

TM: Not until—well, after I left, it changed considerably, because Anderson's influence diminished. And Mr. Anderson died, and that was a big change. And the character of the town—it became much more of a cultural enclave, like Hillsborough, in a sense, where it created an image of itself and, by golly, that's what it was going to be. Did a nice job of it. Wasn't much truth to it. It was a pretty rough town in its founding, so all that roughness went away.

DS: Okay. So, when you were growing up there, the kids in the town would all play together?

TM: Yeah.

DS: Who were the kids you played with?

TM: Well, actually, I played with the North Side.

DS: North Side?

TM: Yeah, I lived on Central Avenue, and it was the middle of the town, and I lived on the north side of Central Avenue. So, my friends were almost all from the North End.

DS: Okay.

TM: And then, we would have wars with the South End up in the hills behind the town. We had fox holes and bunkers and stuff.

DS: So, what was different about the North Side? Was it like the Central, or was there a different feel to it?

TM: No, the architecture was much the same all over town. It was a pretty homogenous place. It had two wealthy neighborhoods, and the rest was all working class. And the big difference was that the South End was mainly German, and the North End was largely French, which, in that part of the world, when you say "French", it's a euphemism for "Native American". There were a number of mixed families up on the North End, and they all had French names.

DS: So, what was school like for you?

TM: Grade school was great, because I was hyperactive and had the attention span of a gerbil, which I still do. And I had split classes, and I was always in the lower division of a split class, so the first and second grade were together, and third and fourth graders were together, and the fifth and sixth grade. And I went through, always with the upper class, so that I could hear their material. So, I was always well ahead in reading, and one of my teachers recognized this. And so, instead of having me in a classroom where I was going to be a disruptive influence, she'd send me down to the library. So, I spent most of my grade school in the library. I read every book in there. I read the encyclopedia.

DS: Wow. What was most interesting to you since you had free rein to all the different subjects?

TM: Well, it was a grade school library. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: I had to go elsewhere for *Candide*. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: But it was the science, a lot of science. I sucked up a lot of science. And high school was—I was a jock and, as a result, I didn't take very much very seriously.

DS: Okay. So, thinking about traveling, around your neighborhood, how did you get to school?

TM: I walked to grade school and junior high school.

DS: How long of a walk was that?

TM: Three blocks.

DS: Three blocks? Okay, that's not so bad. And then, for your family, like buying groceries or running errands?

TM: Well, the groceries were delivered then.

DS: Okay.

TM: You'd phone your order in, and a truck would show up with your groceries. We got a supermarket, finally, in the [19]50s, a Red & White. But we still used the grocery because they were much more convenient. And we had in that town of fifteen hundred people, we had three groceries and a bakery and a supermarket. So, you had plenty of choices. And Archie's grocery store was the closest one to our house, and he had the best candy, little jars stuck up on the wall,

and he would take the lid off and reach in and grab some candy. He was always chucking candy at us.

DS: Okay. So, it was very communal?

TM: Yeah, yeah. And everybody had the right to cuss you out.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And the old guys, the ones that—this was a logging town. It was really rough. And there was one old guy there, his name was Slab Byers, and Slab was named that because he was as tough as a slab with you. Have you ever seen a sawmill? When you slab the side of that tree, that wood that gets tossed aside and it's too rough to use, that was Slab Byers.

DS: [Laughs] Okay.

TM: And Slab was a millionaire, because he started working in the woods and then discovered that cutting ice was a more valuable thing. So, he set up an ice gantry next to the railroad tracks and fed the Northern Pacific ice all winter long, because the river would freeze three feet deep out in front of our town. And when you were fourteen, you could go to work on the ice gantry.

DS: Nice.

TM: I got in on the last year before they shut it down.

DS: Did you enjoy that?

TM: Oh, gosh, yeah!

DS: Yeah.

TM: It was manly work.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And you were hanging out with guys. And, frankly, if you were working full-time on a man's job, the bartenders didn't ask anything.

DS: Okay. [Laughs]

TM: Everybody knew who you were.

DS: Yeah.

TM: You couldn't walk into a bar and fool anyone, because it was full of people that knew you, so.

DS: Uh-huh.

TM: But when I went to work in the Anderson window factory, when I was fifteen, I went in that bar. Somebody said, "Let's go get a beer," and on the way home—we were working the swing shift, and it was about eleven o'clock at night or something like that. And the bartender set the beer up for me, and one of the guys at the bar said, "You're Tommy Magnuson. You can't be in here! You're not old enough." And the bartender said, "He just did a full trick at Anderson's. He gets to have whatever he wants." [Laughs]

DS: Interesting rules. [Laughs]

TM: Yeah, yeah. And it used to be, the cops in that town, if you were drunk, they'd give you a ride home.

DS: Wow. When was this? When did you start working there? What year?

TM: Anderson's?

DS: Uh-huh.

TM: It would have been [19]56.

DS: [19]56.

TM: Well, actually, I went to work for Mr. Anderson in his yard and on his boat when I was eleven. And when I was ten, I got my first job. It was in a dry cleaning shop, sweeping out the cuffs and the pockets. I could keep anything under five dollars.

DS: Oh, wow. [Laughs] That's a pretty good gig!

TM: Yeah. So, then I got a job with Mr. Anderson as a yard boy and a boat boy, and I worked for him until I was fourteen. I went and asked for a raise, and he said, "What do you need a raise for?" I said, "Well, I'm worried about going to college." He said, "I'm going to give you good advice." He said, "Don't ever worry about anything. If you worry, it spoils your appetite and wrecks your breakfast. By dinnertime, you find out you've been worrying about the wrong thing all day anyway."

DS: Yeah. So, I imagine he was—.

TM: "And no, I'm not going to give you a raise."

DS: [Laughs]

TM: "You're fired." [Laughs]

DS: Oh, no! [Laughs]

TM: It was cute.

DS: Yeah. So, I imagine he was a pretty big figure, though, in the town.

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was the waterwalker.

DS: What did people think of him?

TM: It ranged from adoration to detestation, as usual when you're in a position of power.

DS: Typical, yeah.

TM: You couldn't buy a house in the St. Croix Valley—the entire valley was under the St. Croix Land Company. Every mortgage had to go through the St. Croix Land Company, and

that was him. And you couldn't buy a house if you were a Jew or black, or I don't think Native Americans could, unless they were totally assimilated.

DS: Wow!

TM: So, yeah, Fred was a pretty harsh man that way. But every year he'd take his employees out on his yacht, and that's upwards of two thousand employees. And he'd stand at the head of the gangway and greet each one of them personally, knew their names, knew their wives' names, knew their kids' names, amazing memory, but also management. He introduced profit-sharing in that company in 1913. So, it was the most sought-after job anywhere in the region. People came from a hundred miles away to try to get a job there.

DS: Okay.

TM: And on profit-sharing days, guys would show up and rent Cadillacs and limos, to pick up their profit-sharing check, because that was about anywhere from fifty to a hundred percent of your salary. It got to be such a big deal that television crews from the Twin Cities would come over on profit-sharing days and watch the Anderson employees pick up their checks.

DS: Wow. And so, you saw a lot of this when you were growing up?

TM: Yeah, yeah.

DS: Interesting. What role did religion have on your childhood experiences? Was church something everyone went to?

TM: Yeah, done deal, Sunday School every week. Mother would burn a roast, and you could smell it a block from home when you were walking home from church.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: Yeah. I actually mandated my kids had to go to Sunday School for a couple of years as an inoculation. But, yeah, I remember we had three main churches. There were some sects meeting in people's basements, but there was a Lutheran church, there was a Catholic church, and there was a Congregational church, and that was it, pretty much. You had to go out of town to find a Methodist.

DS: What church did you—?

TM: Congregational.

DS: Congregational?

TM: Yeah.

DS: And you guys would walk there, as well?

TM: Yeah. All the churches were within a hundred yards of the school.

DS: [Laughs] Okay. I'm getting a sense that it was a pretty small place.

TM: Yeah. And the Catholic priest, Father Miller, wouldn't allow the Catholic Boy Scouts to go to a Lutheran or Congregational church on Boy Scout Sunday, and that about tore the town up. [Laughs]

DS: Is that right?

TM: Yeah!

DS: How did people react to that?

TM: Oh, they were, "Damn papists!"

DS: [Laughs]

TM: Mackerel snappers! [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Okay. You mentioned a bit about race when it came to home loans and things. How was it on a day-to-day basis interacting with people of other races when you were growing up?

TM: We didn't.

DS: You didn't?

TM: When *Brown versus the Board of Education* appeared in *Weekly Reader*, my parents drove me twenty miles to St. Paul to see an elevator operator at the Dayton's store. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: You could also find some black folks fishing off the [0:19:33 – inaudible]. They were fishing for carp.

DS: Wow.

TM: Up in Stillwater, five miles away. And every once in a while, you'd drive over to St. Paul. But I'm telling you, it was lily-white.

DS: Um-hmm. That's a common thing I hear when people experience these—.

TM: Well, and the racism was as profound as anything you could find in the South.

DS: Okay

TM: It was that they didn't have any reason for it, because there was no black folks anywhere near them.

DS: So, how did you know the racism was so alive there?

TM: Well, my brother was a horrible racist. It was all about "mud people" and just ridiculous. My parents were closet racists. My mother told me once, "Oh, those people wouldn't *want* to live here."

DS: [Laughs]

TM: [Laughs] “They like to be with their own.” So, yeah, it was pervasive. But the fundamental argument in the [19]50s that swayed all of the, almost all of the young people I knew, was that what they can do to the least of us, they can do to any of us. That was the argument that was put forth for why we have to integrate and why we have to kill Jim Crow, was that if it could be done to them, it could be done to you.

DS: Okay.

TM: And World War II was still so fresh in everyone’s mind that it was undeniable.

DS: Okay. So, are there any particular recollections you had about your—you have about your childhood that you would say impacts the way you think about race? Any particular moments where it became something you thought about—?

TM: Yeah. Yeah, in 1955—his name will come to me in a minute. It’s been that long. At any rate, the head chef at the state prison was a black dude. And his nephew from Atlanta was sent to live with him while there was rioting in the streets in Atlanta. His parents were afraid for him in school, so they sent him to live with the uncle. And he and I became pals. I’d walk him home from school every day.

DS: And who was he?

TM: He was just a kid from Atlanta.

DS: Okay.

TM: This was like fifth grade, I suppose.

DS: And how did your other friends and your family react to hanging out with him?

TM: Some people, I’m sure gave him crap, but he was generally speaking left alone. And it happened that I decided I wanted to learn more about his experience.

DS: Okay.

TM: And that's as chummy as we got; we walked through the town together. It was about a half-mile from the school to the prison, maybe three-quarters of a mile.

DS: Um-hmm. Okay. So, what work did your father do?

TM: He was a town maintenance supervisor, electrical, water and sewer. Saturday mornings, one of the chores that we had to do was ride around with Dad and find burned-out streetlight bulbs and replace them and hose down the sewage treatment plant with high-pressure hoses. That was every Saturday when we were home.

DS: Did your mother work?

TM: She started working when I was ten. She went back to nursing. They adopted my sister and there was a recession going on right then, and money was really hard to come by. So, she went back to nursing and she continued that the rest of her life. She ended up fairly high in the hierarchy of geriatric care, I guess.

DS: Um-hmm. And when did you start working yourself? Was that with Mr. Anderson?

TM: No. It was the year before that, in Bob Mauer's dry cleaning shop.

DS: Okay.

TM: Mr. Mauer was the shop teacher at the junior high. So, he was trusted to supervise me during the day.

DS: So, he taught the class and he had the dry cleaning.

TM: Yeah. There was no way for a teacher to make it on a teacher's salary. So, they either had a business outside the school, or else they had a summer business, like painting houses and stuff.

DS: And this was in the early [19]50s?

TM: I started school in [19]49. So, yeah, I was done with grade school in the mid-[19]50s, late [19]50s.

DS: Okay. So, starting at the dry cleaning shop, would you mind speaking about your career trajectory leading up to—? [Laughs]

TM: [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] I'm just kidding.

TM: [Laughs] Yeah.

DS: To the Trading Path Association? [Laughs]

TM: Well, let us say it was not a straight line.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: [Laughs] It was, in a way. I wasn't a real happy kid. I, in retrospect, found I was probably pretty depressed. And I wanted to get away, so starting at thirteen, fourteen years old, I started hitchhiking.

DS: Wow.

TM: On the weekend, I'd stick my thumb out and I'd hitch all day Saturday, and then hitch back on Sunday. And then, I—.

DS: Where did you go?

TM: Anywhere. Whatever direction I was headed.

DS: How far do you think you went when you were that young?

TM: Oh, gosh! In the summer that I turned fifteen, I hitchhiked to Seattle from Minnesota. I wanted to see Skid Row. They were going to tear it down to put up the Space Needle. That was the Seattle World's Fair. The purpose was to get rid of the bums, the hobo

jungle. They had the biggest hobo jungle in North America on that land where the Space Needle is now. And I wanted to see it before they destroyed it. So, I hitchhiked out there.

DS: Wow.

TM: I carried a letter from my county sheriff, saying I was of good character and that my parents knew that I was traveling. "Please give him every assistance." So, there was more than one night I spent sleeping in jail cells that the cops would let me have a bed.

DS: Interesting. So, you hitchhiked after that, as well, didn't you?

TM: I hitchhiked about a quarter of a million miles by the time I was eighteen.

DS: Wow.

TM: Yeah.

DS: And then, where did you go? What were some highlights?

TM: Well, the first time I went to California, I was fifteen. Yeah, I was fourteen when I went to Seattle, and I was fifteen when I hitchhiked down to California. And then, just for giggles, I hitchhiked from California to New York, and then back to Minnesota, to see if I could do it. I hitched out to California three times during high school, because, of course, that was the place to be.

DS: [Laughs] Was this something you think a lot of people were doing at this time?

TM: Nah. No, everybody said, "Oh, God, that's too dangerous!" But one of the most liberating experiences of my life was when I was fourteen, I wanted to get my Merchant Seaman's documents in. In order to get them, you had to go through hell. It was a Catch-22: "We'll give you your document if you have a ship; we'll give you a ship if you have your document" type thing. And so, I had to go to Chicago to get a letter from the Seamen's Union, saying that if I had the document, I could get a ship.

And I was hitchhiking down to Chicago and got picked up late in the evening by a very gay gentleman. And he hit on me, pretty seriously. He was offering me an apartment on the north side of Chicago and stuff like that. The offer was getting tempting, so I told him, I said, “No, I can’t do it. You’re going to have to let me out at the next stop. Pull up to the next truck stop and dump me.” And he stopped and he told me, he said, “If a gay person ever hits on you, all you ever have to do is say, ‘No, I’m straight,’ and they’ll leave you alone.” And I tested it, and it worked. I never had a problem with a gay person ever again. The fear went away.

DS: Okay. So, that was your biggest worry, I suppose, being young and hitchhiking, dealing with men and maybe sexual predators, really?

TM: Yeah, you never knew—. I’ll tell you one of my defense mechanisms, and it irks my wife, but is that I learned while hitchhiking to mimic accents and speech patterns. So, you hear the person and you feed back to them what they’re saying. It works great in graduate school, because that’s what professors want to do: they want to hear their voice.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And they want to hear their vocabulary and stuff like that.

DS: That’s true.

TM: And I learned to do that hitchhiking. I would give them their accent, I would give them their vocabulary, to ingratiate myself or defense—as a defensive mechanism, to make them not fear me. And that’s been useful all my life.

DS: Interesting.

TM: My first publication was a chapter in a book called *Hey Now, Hitchhikers*.

DS: *Hey Now, Hitchhikers*?

TM: *Hey Now, Hitchhikers*.

DS: When was that published?

TM: Some guy published it back in the—I suppose, the [19]60s. He contacted me. He had heard about my hitchhiking and asked me to write a chapter on how to get a ride. There's my first publication. We're already on the trajectory to authoring history. [Laughs]

DS: Yeah! [Laughs] So, I guess, in more ways than one, your experiences hitchhiking had a profound impact, I imagine, on what you do now?

TM: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

DS: With the trading paths, in particular?

TM: I don't know. I tend to think that I've always been interested. That is, when I was a kid, I found an old road up in the hills behind town. And I took my dad up to look at it, and he said, "Yeah, this was the original entrance road to the town." What I found was a ford that was overlaid with hewn beams, which is the first time anyone in Bayport had seen one of those. And Dad explained it to me.

And I've always had that interest: What was it like before? What are the infrastructures like? The neat thing about infrastructure is it's not racial. It has nothing to do with gender or wealth. It's neutral, totally neutral. But it also gives you insight into all groups. Here's where they *had* to go, and this is what they *had* to deal with, no matter. And infrastructure is that way. Everybody has got to use it.

DS: Um-hmm. Interesting. So, thinking about what you do now with infrastructures and pathways, particularly with the Trading Path Association, how would you define your work, basically?

TM: Cheap thrills and easy amusement.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: One of the things I've learned, and this is a valuable lesson in life, is: if it ain't fun, don't do it. My definition of a calling is something *can't* not do. If you do it reflexively, or if it's a part of your life, there's your calling. Go ahead and do it. If you can't make money at it, big deal.

DS: Yeah, okay! So, when you start a new project with Trading Path, there's a new, I guess, pathway you've discovered, or someone wants you to come check it out and use your expertise to make sense of it or maybe to find something, what are your first steps?

TM: I stumbled into it. I was studying military history at Duke, and my mentor had me reading geopolitics. I had two small children and no income, so we couldn't join a swimming pool up in Person County, North Carolina. It was a county that was a bit backwards, even by Oxford standards.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And anyway, we ended up swimming in the Flat River. And I found a series of pools that were pretty cool, and then I realized they were mill ponds, blown-out dams. And then, it dawned on me that those cuts in the hillside were roadbeds. And with that realization, it dawned on me that the piedmont is geopolitically governed by river crossings. That is *the* key to strategic control of the Carolina piedmont is to control river crossings.

And the big realization was, "Oh, you can find these things!" There is geophysical earmarks of where you would have a ford. And if you can find them, then you can know where all the archeology is, or at least the vast preponderance of your archeology is going to be within meters of the center of that roadbed. So, that was the realization, the aha! moment. And then, I looked into it. I did a business plan, which was so depressing because there was absolutely no way to make it pay for itself, and I would revisit that business plan. I did that in the [19]80s, and

I would revisit that business plan—it was called the Piedmont Fords Project—and couldn't find a way to make it work, couldn't find a way.

And then, in the [19]90s, the Park Service changed its standards for what's preservable. They started preserving landscapes, view scapes. And I said, "Oh, this is a view scape. These are landscape features, you know. So, it's possible." I ran the numbers and I said, "Yeah, it's *possible*, if I could get grants." So, in 1999, I started the Trading Path Association, because I thought fords were too parochial and obscure. People wouldn't know what a ford is.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: Meanwhile, in the [19]80s, when I finished up at Duke, I—my research question when I went to Duke was: Why do so many reasonably intelligent, well-motivated people fail when it comes to military affairs?

DS: And what were you doing at Duke?

TM: I was doing a military history degree.

DS: Military history?

TM: Yeah. I was trying to figure out how we screwed the pooch in Vietnam. And why is it we couldn't see the fatal flaws, the defects? Why is it we still didn't see them after the fact that the failure analysis was so totally wrong? And so, what I was studying, really, was the doctrinal process: How does the profession learn? And why doesn't it learn when it doesn't learn?

After I finished that, the Marine Corps engaged me in reforms on the Marine Corps—again, romantic story. When I was in Vietnam, there was a really cool officer. The guy was charismatic as all get-out, and he became my godfather, my Dutch uncle. He would keep me out of trouble. And I was his scrounge. If he needed something, I knew where to get it and I'd get it for him. Long story short, I noticed a squib in the newspaper saying, "A.M. Gray is taking over

as commander down at Little River.” And I called his office and asked his secretary if that was Al Gray. [S/he] said, “Yeah.” I said, “Will you see if he’ll talk to Tom Magnuson?” When he came on the phone, he said, “I’m not paying any bail, Magnuson!” [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And he hired me to work on the reforms, and that’s what I did for about four years in the [19]80s, until he and I had a falling-out over the Osprey.

DS: Um-hmm. Is there anything else you want to add about the military and, I guess, your interest in it? You went on to do military history.

TM: Well, I was only interested in figuring out how to avoid the stupidity that we exhibited in Vietnam, which, obviously, I failed. [Laughs] There was a big battle in the [19]80s, the [19]70s and [19]80s, over the soul of the military, exemplified by two books. There was a book by Samuel Huntington, which proposed that the heroic warrior ethos should govern the military and it should be separate from society, as it is now, and that’s exactly what we got. Opposite to him, opposing him, was a guy named Morris Janowitz. And Janowitz argued that doing so would result in a disastrous schism in society, where the society would be militarized and simultaneously lose any knowledge or interest in the military, which is what’s happened. So, I was fighting against the all-volunteer force for a number of years and lost that fight.

So, I wasn’t really tied into the military any longer and, at that point, had enough experience with startup businesses and writing business plans that that’s what I did. I became a consultant to startups and I wrote business plans. And a company from Australia adopted a business plan and then asked me to implement it. So, I spent three or four years flogging their computer-based training programs.

And then, a kid I hired to help me for that turned out to be a genius programmer, world class, self-taught. His cousin taught him how to program, from Oxford, or Creedmoor, rather. And he's got an idea for a business, and he gets screwed by everyone. He gets partners that rip him off, and his clients are ripping him off. So, he asked me to manage his business. And what we did is we created, in the [19]90s, a virtual company. He was in San Diego, and we had one partner in London, one in Seattle, one in Moscow, and I was here, and I was the managing partner. And we sold NT problem-solving, NT solutions.

DS: NT?

TM: Windows NT. They're server software.

DS: Okay. Wow, you've had quite a work history.

TM: Oh, yes! Yeah, can't hold a job.

DS: [Laughs] Sounds like you've done some interesting things.

TM: Yeah, they've all been interesting. If it isn't fun, don't do it. And I got out of that—two reasons. One, the Park Service made that change, and I told the guys I had to leave. But I also was getting old enough that I couldn't keep up with the technology anymore. It was blowing me away. It was depressing, but the fact is you can only change your paradigm so many times before the system collapses.

DS: Right, yeah. So, you were doing some technical stuff in the military, too?

TM: Yeah, yeah.

DS: That's when you started?

TM: The military trained me in electronics. And then, when I got out, I went to college and I got my first degree in electrical engineering, and decided I wasn't going to be a happy engineer. But I was working in the integrated circuit industry to pay for school. And I went to—I

tried law school and went to law school for a couple of years. Decided I was never going to be a lawyer. And at that point, I had been in the integrated circuit industry for about three years, and the U.S. Navy hired me as a purchaser, procurement officer, for the Fleet Ballistic Missile Program's special projects office, buying electronics for the A3, C3, D4, and D5 missiles. And then, I got into logistics. I love logistics. I could have been happy in logistics if it wasn't for working for the government.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: My buddy and I sat down one day, and we calculated exactly where we would be, where our houses would be and where our careers would be, for the next twenty years.

DS: Wow. You didn't like the predictability of it?

TM: God, no!

DS: [Laughs]

TM: [Laughs] Nor what you had to do to get it. The way you get promoted working for any defense program—I'm sure any office in the government—is you increase your budget. You get paid proportional to the amount of money you manage.

DS: Okay.

TM: It's fundamental progressive policy. They realized in the 1890s that guys will take bribes if they don't get enough money. So, you're always paid proportional to what you make, and your boss is, too. And when your budget goes up, his budget goes up. So, if you want to make yourself popular around the office, you find ways to bring in more money into your budget. And that's fun. It's a lot of fun, but it's corrupt as all hell.

DS: Alright. So, could you talk about, switching gears a little bit, how you came to Hillsborough?

TM: When I came to Duke in [19]78, my buddy and I both quit the Navy office at the same time. He went to law school. I came to Duke to study with Ropp. And the first place I came in North Carolina was right here, Hillsborough.

DS: Why is that?

TM: Well, it looked good. It was the same size as the town I grew up in. It had the same ambience in a way. But it was a Boss Hogg town. Two brothers ran the place. The chief of police and the mayor were brothers, and you could get a permit to do anything in this town. There was no security for homeowners whatsoever. So, I bought a place up in Person County. Coming from California, I had to buy much more than I needed, to avoid capital gains. And I bought an eight-acre farm up there, and it was a great place for my kids, too. I was feeling guilty about taking them away from their pals. And so, I bought a place that I thought I would like if I was a kid.

DS: Okay. How old were your kids when you moved out here?

TM: They were five and two.

DS: Okay. And compared to California, what was your reaction to the social climate—?

TM: [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Of Hillsborough?

TM: At that point, I had lived on three continents, in combat, in—I'd been in Africa for months on end, Europe—but I had never suffered culture shock quite like I did moving here. The thing is, it looked so familiar. It looks like the same, but it wasn't the same. And it was a long time before I could accommodate the fact that I never could understand this place. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Do you still feel that way?

TM: Oh, yes!

DS: [Laughs]

TM: Well, it helps the historian who never thinks he understands anything.

DS: Yeah, it's good motivation to keep trying anyway.

TM: Yeah, yeah.

DS: And what about the racial tensions or the racial climate of Hillsborough? You guys were able to—?

TM: Well, that was a big part of it.

DS: That was a big part of it?

TM: Well, Hillsborough—I never experienced Hillsborough's racial climate until I bought the house here. Person County was a classic rural southern patronage system, where every worthwhile black person had a patron that would cover their back, so the cops would leave him alone and the rednecks would leave him alone, and that's his "boy". Getting used to that was really painful.

DS: And this was in the [19]70s?

TM: Yeah. Well, it still is. I was up at a friend's house, and his "boy" was cooking the chicken. It's the way it was.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: It was shocking. And we had black neighbors. The house I bought was the westernmost slave quarters for the Cameron plantation, Stagville. And there were fifteen hundred slaves on this place at one time, and there's a slave graveyard out back that had over three hundred graves in it. I went around trying to find somebody that would maintain the graves and couldn't find any black church that would pick it up. I did find some guys that told me that they were there to bury the last person buried there in 1954. A slave lady died, and they said, "She's so mean, we buried her ten feet deep!" [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] That's funny.

TM: But our neighbors would not come to our house. We'd invite them over for a party, and they wouldn't come. And I couldn't figure that out until I asked one guy. There was one black dude who drove a cement delivery truck, and I got to know him, hanging around this country store where I was trying to get educated. And I asked him forthright one day, I said, "Why can't—why won't my neighbors come over and come in the house? They'll come to the backdoor and they'll stand out in the yard, but they won't come in the house." He said, "If anything disappeared from your house, they'd be the first people the cops picked up." I said, "Okay." I understood. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] So, thinking about the first time you came to Hillsborough and the area your first encounter included, how do you think from then to now, you became someone that community members and people would come to with preservation and local issues? How do you think you got involved with working on these topics?

TM: Well, it's what I do. It's my calling. I can't not want to save old things. I started actually going around to churches and any meeting, anyplace where three or more would gather. I started doing this back in the [19]80s, trying to get the folks to preserve curing sheds. I heard an old man tell me about coming of age in the 1950s. He said, "You knew you were a man when you were trusted to tend the fires in the curing shed," because if those fires went out, and you lost that shed, that was a lot of money. So, when a young man was trusted to feed the fires while the old men drank and passed out, that was a coming-of-age moment. And every guy I talked to talked about that night. They got their first sip of liquor. They got to sit up and listen to the old guys lying, and probably make a cross for tomorrow night. And it was very, very social.

And I thought, “Gosh, this is such an important moment. How do you tell a kid about tending fires at a tobacco curing shed when there’s no tobacco curing sheds to look at? How good are you at articulating a structure to the point where somebody will realize it?” You’ve got to have the thing. And so, I spent a couple of years in my free time. I’d go get a gig at a church or something like that and say, “You guys have got to do something about this. You’re losing your heritage.”

DS: Okay!

TM: And once I started doing that, then people asked me to do other things like that. And so, I wrote articles for the Person County heritage books and was an editor on a heritage book. So, all the blue-hairs forgave me for being a Yankee.

DS: [Laughs]

TM: I taught a class up at Piedmont Tech called “Why You Are Where You Are” and used nothing but maps, historic maps, to show people the logic of locating settlements and why their families came to where they did.

DS: Um-hmm. So, since you started doing this type of preservation work in the area, I suppose churches have been a big focus over the years.

TM: [Sighs] Yes and no. I mean, they’re—that’s a part of the South I’ve never really worked out. Churches have such mixed history, and so much of it is shameful that folks don’t like to look at it, and they don’t like to remember it. It’s where we go for amnesia, more than anything else, the church. The bliss the church produces is ignorance. And so, many times, you have to overcome so many falsehoods in order to even begin the conversation that it’s not worth it. So, I’ll go to Rotary meetings and that level of society, but I’ve quit going to churches.

The town we were living in, Timberlake, didn't have a fire department. Had to have trucks come down from Hurdle Mills or over in Roxboro, ten miles away, to deal with a structure fire. That's stupid. I was a fireman out in California when I was working for the Navy and realized your insurance rates go down when you have a fire truck nearby. And I took that message around to the churches, thinking, "These folks are sensible." But, no, they'd been fighting this issue for twenty years, because there were two families, and each one of them wanted the fire truck located on their side, and neither one of them could get enough support to beat the other one. So, it dangled for all that time. After I moved, they finally got a fire department.

DS: Interesting. So, wrapping it up, let's talk a little bit about the Black Roads. In particular, first of all, what is a Black Road? How would you describe that?

TM: It's an abandoned right of way that was adopted by colored people. The nomenclature of "colored" has always frightened me, because it's changed so many times in my lifetime. But, in fact, there—in Orange County, for example, there were Negro schools, there were colored schools, and there were white schools. And the colored schools were basically for the Native American population, or the blended population, and I don't think there were very many subcontinental Indians in North Carolina at the time. But at any rate, these were roads that were apparently used in lieu of traveling on public right of ways during Jim Crow. And it's apparently a rural phenomenon. And I say all of this "apparently" because I haven't really studied it.

I stumbled on the subject. When I started the Trading Path, I got some good press. And, anytime you get an article in the paper, people start calling you: "I've got an old road in my yard."

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And this guy called me up and said, “Could you help us find our church?” And I said, “Geez, that will depend on an awful lot. Where did you lose it?”

DS: [Laughs]

TM: [Laughs] And it turned out that what happened was in 1924, their church—the road that accessed their church was taken off the maintenance list when they built a bridge over Seven Mile Creek west of Hillsborough.

DS: Which church was this?

TM: It was Harvey’s Chapel.

DS: Harvey’s Chapel, right.

TM: Yeah. And so, I said, “Well, if you know approximately where people came from to get to the church, and you know kind of where the church was, we should be able to find a ford. And if we find a ford, we’ll walk the road up to the church.” And that’s exactly what we did, and it took us two hours one day. It was wham, bam, thank you, ma’am! There was the cemetery. And they were happy as they could be.

DS: What was your reaction to finding this?

TM: Well, the hair always stands up on my arms. [Laughs]

DS: Yeah.

TM: When it works. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: If you step into a moccasin path, and I’ve found a few, I mean, it is a thrill! It’s a rush! I’ve found—there is—did you ever read William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line*? If

you get a chance, you can find it in used book stores. It's a parallel text. Byrd was an eighteenth-century—[speaking in a Virginia accent] “The Virginia Byrds, if you don't mind.”

DS: [Laughs]

TM: And he was a rake and a Renaissance man, a good writer, and he kept a journal. Every time he boffed his wife, he'd make a journal entry on how they did it, where they did it and stuff. He was a weird fellow. And he kept a double journal during the survey of the North Carolina-Virginia border that he was assigned to. And one of them was for publication at the state government level, and the other one was for his personal amusement, where he assigned names to all of the other surveyors and then told the most horrible scandalous stories about them. And the text you get today is parallel, so you can see where they are on any given day, and what he's observing, and so forth.

And I followed his directions and I said, “I bet he was right here when he made that observation.” He said, “After doing this, that, and the other thing, early in the afternoon, we found ourselves standing in the trail that the packhorse men used to use.” This is 1728. The packhorse men are already out of business. And so, I said, “I bet I can find that.” And it's—the long and the short of it is, I did. I got ahold of the property owners, they gave me permission to trespass, and coming up out of Lake Gaston was a horse trail, as clear as could be. And that was a hair-raising moment.

DS: Right. Sounds really exciting.

TM: Yeah.

DS: Wow. So, let me see if I have anything else here. Is there anything else you want to add about your current occupation or the Black Roads, in particular?

TM: Well, the Black Roads thing, Arwin Smallwood is interested, and I do hope that somebody looks at it carefully enough to see if there's substance there. I think there is. And I think the idea of using the highway commission, the maintenance list, as a way of making life uncomfortable for undesirable populations has a ring of truth. That's the way, southern gentlemen would like to make it work. "Don't flog them. Just make them so miserable they've got to leave," you know. And, some counties—like Davidson County was a sunset county. They got rid of all of their minorities, just wonderfully, in a few years, in the [19]20s. That was the big movement down there, was to make life miserable, so they'll leave.

DS: Right.

TM: And now we look on it as the Great Migration, when folks discovered the North. I don't think so. It was a kick in the pants. Folks don't move unless someone boots them in the butt. And that's what happened. But it will be up to others to find the truth or falsehood of it. The Black Roads, again, it's intuitively right. Why would you want to share space with people that hate you and have a right to hurt you? If a white man hurts a black man, he is *not* going to get in trouble.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: And so, it would be logical to find ways of moving that don't involve meeting white folks. And so, I think there's truth in it. And the proof of it is that there's all these old roads that were—that the abandoned right of ways had nothing but black infrastructure on it. They had black churches, black schools, black stores on roads that were not on the maintenance list. So, I've also heard them called "the back way".

DS: "Back way"?

TM: “The back way”. If you talk to older black folks, they’ll say, “Well, it’s the back way.”

DS: Uh-huh.

TM: Yesterday, [laughs] I’m scientifically as loose as any cannon can be. And I gave talks at the National Genealogical Society for a couple of years. And I started asking black genealogists what they knew about Black Roads. It was wonderful. There was a group of five black ladies, gagging down the hall, and I stopped them. I said, “Can I ask y’all a question?” And they said, “Yeah.” A little discomfort. I said, “What do you know about Black Roads?” And this lady got really huffy, and she puffed up and got in my face. “We don’t know *nothing* about that!” And another lady put her hand on her arm and said, “Now, you’re from the city.” [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

TM: She said, “Yeah, this is Back Roads,” and she told me that, “yeah, that’s what we did. Any time there was an abandoned right of way, we would move onto it, because that was a way you avoided having conflict with the rednecks.”

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: And the urban lady knew nothing about it. And I found, asking around Orange County, that the urban Hillsborough blacks knew nothing about it. But you go talk to anybody that grew up in rural Jim Crow, and they’ll say, “Yeah!”

DS: And which event was this where you met the—?

TM: The National Genealogical Society meeting down in Charleston.

DS: Okay. Interesting.

TM: Wonderful coincidence.

DS: Yeah. So, what do you think—could you detail the process, I suppose, of I guess, seeing how real this is, or learning more about it from a researcher's standpoint? What would need to be done, do you think?

TM: Well, somebody is going to have to find out where the archives are for the maintenance lists, if that's going to happen, as a first step, we need to see if it really happened, and what you're doing this summer will probably produce either enough evidence that it did, or enough evidence that it's not worth chasing, that is, interviewing the elders in these black churches, the black churches that have been forced to move. I have not found a white church that had its road cut off; but I've found three black churches, and they're all within five miles of Hillsborough and all got their roads chopped about the same time. So, it was an intentional device for applying the screws to undesired populations.

DS: Okay.

TM: But that's my thoughts. I hope somebody can gather the evidence. It's a shame that we're not interviewing the old Klansmen. We really need to talk to those peckerwoods and find out exactly what was going on in their febrile minds. But it's not happening.

DS: Um-hmm.

TM: We interview the victims and not the predators. I wonder if that's possible.

DS: That's a good question. Okay. So, is there anything else you want to add before we wrap it up?

TM: If y'all hook up with—what's-her-name, the judge?

DS: Beverly Scarlett?

TM: Beverly, yes. I saw her at this event where I spoke last weekend, and she's ready to help. And her family is so pervasive in the area around St. Mary's, which is one of the

churches—Lipscomb Grove Church is one of them that was cut off and had to move, but they successfully reconstituted very close to their old church. It didn't work effectively that way, but the one—I would do the deed work.

The deed work on the land between Dimmocks Mill Road and Chestnut Ridge, and Highway 40 and, golly, what is that—I can't remember the next main road that crosses between Chestnut Ridge and Orange Grove Road. All that property, is my impression, was part of two plantations. And the plantation foundations, the houses' foundations, are amazingly large, the two that I've seen. My understanding is that after the war, for whatever reason, the plantations were abandoned, and the property devolved unto slaves. It was a Reconstruction effort of some kind. But the Reconstruction records, the Freedmen's Bureau records, need to be scrubbed to find out if there is any visible evidence in there for this group. I talked to Harold about a list of the names of the people that used to live in there.

DS: Harold?

TM: Harold—yeah, I've sent his name in. You'll have to excuse me. That's the worst possible situation: a historian with no memory.

DS: [Laughs] That's okay.

TM: At any rate, you need to build a surname list of all the black families that farmed that land after the war and build genealogies or family histories of them, because that's the biggest concentration. It's about five square miles of three ridges, three ridge lines that were occupied by, I'm told, all-black farmers that got depopulated. By the 1940s, they no longer could get to their property and they were all gone. That land stayed fallow, stayed rank—and I don't know how it was acquired by the people that acquired it, but—until about twenty years ago. People started building in there again. And now, there's developers eyeballing it, because it's a

nice big parcel in there, and I'm sure there's people breathing hard to get ahold of it. But I would try to get these folks before they do like me and forget everything, and find out who it was that lived in there, and then do the usual census data and so forth.

DS: Very good. Thank you, Tom!

TM: Have fun!

DS: [Laughs] Thanks, I'll try.

TM: [Laughs] That was painless.

[Recording ends at 1:05:03]

END OF INTERVIEW

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