

Interview with Dr. Russell Magnaghi discusses Glenn T. Seaborg

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Marquette, MI

Interviewer: Unknown

RM: Okay, let me just give you a little background. I kind of heard about Glenn Seaborg and then it wasn't till I guess the mid-90's or so that I was sent out to Berkley to do an interview with him and found him to be a charming individual, no pretensions. I was quite impressed by the man, because here was this larger than life individual who has played a role nationally, internationally, and so on with his chemistry and with his physics and so on, and kind of what I found was a typical... I don't want to say typical Yooper, but a down to earth individual that was not giving me some kind of a wild physics lecture or something, and pushing his field and so on. Just a very down to earth person, kind of the boy from Ishpeming. I was impressed by the fact that since about 1928 he had kept a diary, a journal, and most of those journals had been published I think well into the 1980's. I think... well we have the published versions of the journals in the archives, and I think there are transcripts that were not published that we have as well. In there might be, as I think I pointed out to you, it's going to be somewhat difficult because you would then have to read year-after-year and so on, and you're not going to know... I don't think they've been indexed... that would give you any indication when he came back to Ishpeming. Now, what I can tell you is that he did have a love for his birth place. He did have relatives up here. He had a house, certainly you could find it in the Marquette County directory, and I think he lived on Wabash Street. He enjoyed talking about growing up in Ishpeming, and it wasn't like they went to Southern California, I think they went to Bellflower, a suburb of Los Angeles, and then he cut off all connection, but he had a great deal of fondness for the area, and he had a number of relatives, an uncle, an aunt, still living... because the only people that left were he and his family, so the rest of the Seaborgs remained. I think even today there's a Seaborg down in Menominee, an engineer or something, or an architect down in Menominee. The person that you might want to check is someone up in the development office. In the old days they kept a record of some of these people in case they were having some kind of event or something commemorating Seaborg, but now this more when he was alive, they would have the address and they would invite these people. So, he did have a connection while he was alive. He had family members up here. And he would come up with talking and so on... because I was kind of interested... did he return or did he walk out of the area and he never came back. But he did return frequently, and he talked about coming up when he was working at the Argon Labs in Chicago, and during the war they were working on the atomic bomb and plutonium was part of it and so on. And he would come up on trips by train and would visit people up here. So he was never, even with all of his stature and fame, he was still a very common individual and would come back to his roots. So he came up during the war on numerous occasions visiting, and then after the war would return. I don't know how frequently, but not like every 20 years or something, I would put it into the frequent category that he would come back. I think he was kind of sad that the family house had been sold when they left and the family didn't own it. However, I think it was his uncle that was the immigrant from Sweden... they had a house by, I can't quite explain it. It was... when you're coming by the backroad from Negaunee to Ishpeming...

IN: By the Brownstone on Lake Division St.

RM: But it was a little house, it wasn't a big house. It's by the old railway shop type area. And you'd come around and kind of make a sharp turn, the house was right there. And I was impressed with all of this because again, he talked about all of this stuff. About the house, and his uncle, and how he loved the area. It went on, and on, and on. And he would tell stories for instance of one time it snowed so hard that they had to ski out of the second floor of the house, off the roof.

IN: It's pretty (inaudible)

RM: Is it? Yeah.

RM: And so he had this love for his origins. And then he talked about this house that his uncle owned. And at one point there, I forget the exact year, it might have been... Vandament was here so it was before 1997... I don't know if it was 1996 or something, but he was coming up here for a visit and he was going to the uncles house, which was a relatively small house, but typical of a Swedish immigrant. So it had been sort of the ideal place, and I went out there on a number of occasions and interacted with him, interviewed him and so on, and I did a tape of him giving a tour of the house. There wasn't that much to tour, it was like one or two rooms. But anyways, I did it all... the tour of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy house in Brookline, Massachusetts. Well, we kind of did a similar thing, but it wasn't an elaborate place, of Seaborg telling you where the kitchen was. It was something like that. You walked into the kitchen or something, it wasn't elaborate. But anyways, that should be some place in the archives. So then was coming up to donate the house to Ishpeming, and then I get a phone call from the president's office and he said, Vandament said "There's a problem here, because he's coming up but the Mayor of Ishpeming is going to sell the house." It was like this whole plan was now unraveled. Here was the man with his love of the area, and what he wanted to do was give the house to Ishpeming and then they would develop it into a typical Swedish immigrant house and then you could tell about immigrant life with the tour from Seaborg and so on. So all of a sudden he's coming up here and it's like there is no house. And I forget, we talked about... the idea was to try to bail the situation out, and at that time there had been some talk about developing a kind of a living history site on campus, maybe a little collection of buildings typical of the area, a one room school house and so on. And so I told Vandament "If that's the case, he's coming up to give away the house and they're going to sell the house when he leaves town practically, what if we had the house moved? Kind of a wild idea but maybe you could get unions into it, and have the house moved to campus. And then we could start some kind of a living history thing with the house." And that obviously didn't get too far, because there would be money involved in moving the house. But the other thing about Seaborg, the story I'm telling is sort of towards the end of his life, he came up here often because President Appleberry in the 1980's and other administrators and faculty, thought that it would be nice to honor kind of a hometown boy, Glenn Seaborg, with naming the Center for Mathematics & Science after him. And so they did. It's the Glenn T. Seaborg Science Center. And he was taken up with the whole thing. I found it very interesting because when you went to Berkley, you might say Nobel Prize winners were almost a dime a dozen, by the stadium they had a special parking area, and I think there was like a dozen slots or something for Nobel Prize winners that had taught at Berkley that might still be teaching, or they might be retired, but they had a spot there. But, what I found was, the bottom line was they could really care less about Seaborg. You know here were making a fuss in the UP, but when you went out there it was like "we've got a bunch of other ones that are a lot younger" and so on. And so he was sort of highlighted here with the

Seaborg Center, and out there... As a matter of fact, his papers went to... they were kind of seized by the government because of their atomic technical information... and I think then the copies of all these papers were given back and the Library of Congress kept the originals. I think there are some in our archives. So he had this center named after him. At first he thought, well, it was one of many, other people have done this. Then, I began to realize that no, this was it. And so then I found that... when I went out there, he wanted to give us what he had in terms of his papers, and he had this collection of photographs which was this huge wall bookcase, and he had like two or three shelves with all these binders with all of his pictures from when he was with the Atomic Energy Commission, pictures with Kennedy, and on and on. So I went out there once and said "Could we have all of the photographs, and we'll put them in the archives here," and he said "No, no, no, I'm going to need them" or something. And so he allowed me to go through each page of the binder and pull out a second copy. We could have the second copy, but the first copy he wanted. And this got very complicated with the secondaries, because every photograph had to be Xeroxed and whatever was on the back location, identification numbers, et cetera had to be put on the Xerox copy. So anyways, I'm pulling these things... and this goes on for days, it was it was never going to end with these books, but we did end up getting all the photographs. Then when he eventually passed away the family gave us all the photographs. So we do have... you might say the Seaborg stuff has come to the UP. So his connection with the UP is sort of final. So we had all of that. We had all of the papers and whatnot. Then one day, I don't know maybe five or six years ago, I get a phone call from... well, the thing was that when he was the people at the Berkley Lab... it's a federal laboratory complex up in the hills above the university... at the time when he was alive there was a lot of commotion. "We're gonna have this," "We're gonna have a museum to him," "We're gonna do this," "We're gonna do that," and so on. So I kind of backed off with a lot of this stuff, because they said they wanted this, that, and the other. Now we did... he was very kind to give us... so, I'm there talking to the man and I asked him "Would it be possible maybe that you would give us some of your gifts," you know, what people at universities and whatnot had given him, and he turned to me and said "Take what you want," all of this stuff you know. So, I identified it, and I didn't want to be a hog and take everything, but I identified a lot of pieces and a few weeks later they had been boxed up and they were here in Marquette. So we brought more material back, and I'd almost say a lot of his stuff is returned home, because what I found was the Bancroft Library, which is like the archives of the University of California, wanted nothing. I didn't want to get into a crossfire with you know... here are these people from the UP. What are they doing? They're taking all of Seaborg's stuff. There was going to be a lot of fighting and I didn't need that. If you want to give the stuff to us and everybody's happy with it, fine. If we're going to get into some shouting match over it it's not necessary. And the thing was that nobody particularly wanted any of his stuff. Now the science lab said, yes, they were going to put something up, but nothing ever came of it. They didn't do anything. So, as I looked at this... and at first I wasn't thinking this way, but I said "This stuff really belongs in the UP." We seem to be the only ones that are really concerned about this man and honors he won, the job that he did, and so on; and so we got the stuff. But then, sort of the grand finale came in about... maybe '04 or '05... I get a phone call and it's the Berkley Lab. Now this is maybe seven years after he passed away. Do you remember when he passed away?

IN: '99?

RM: '99, okay. This would have been maybe six or seven years after he passed away. So there was all this talk that they were going to put up the museum, and I saw this first hand, because I was there at his

lab and whatnot, I mean his office, which was quite a complex. And I talked to the people and I said "Can we have this and that?" And "No, no, no. We're going to have this big museum honoring Seaborg" and so on. So anyway, I get this phone call, and they said "We are going to send you, do you want the remainder of Seaborg's stuff?" And I said "Yeah, sure." And they said "You don't have to pay for it," it was all being covered, the Federal Government, Berkley, somebody was going to pay for it... "We'll send it to you"... and it was sort of on its way. So, about a week or two later I get a phone call from the UPS office in Iron Mountain, and they said "Sir, where do you want this stuff delivered?" and they said it was just boxes. Well, I said "Why don't you go and deliver the stuff to central receiving on campus, and then we will distribute it on campus." So, I remember it was the middle of June and they call me from central receiving and they said "The boxes have arrived." Well, it ended up being 450 boxes. I mean, it was like an archipelago of islands. They were all on the boards and whatnot... the lifts... to be lifted up, and it was like one and one... they were all over the place. All of a sudden half of central receiving is filled with these boxes of his stuff. So, I took a deep breath and I said "Oh my, they didn't quite tell us it was going to be that much." I thought it'd be one or two boxes and that'd be the end of it. Well it was everything they had. Again, all of a sudden, nobody out there cared about Seaborg and his life, and the only people that really cared, maybe because we didn't have anything of his and we were building our archives... we got all of his stuff. So we ended up with 35 boxes of photographs, and these were the photographs I was taking the duplicate boxes of, well now he was giving us the whole thing. I didn't have to spend several weeks going through these... and if you've ever gone through photographs that are in files in a binder, it's a pain looking at it and pulling it out and so on. All of a sudden we got all of that and much more. And then there were boxes and boxes of his books that went back to 1928. Well what do you do with a 1928 physics book? I mean, there was just so much you could put on in terms of an exhibit of Seaborg, but you're not going to keep the whole thing. So we eventually just... and if it's in physics it's not up-to-date, so you're talking about a historic book that was used by Seaborg, but that's about it. So we pitched a lot of stuff, there were books like, kind of a program type book written in Russian, and things like that. I had chemists come in, and physicists, from the Chemistry and Physics Department, come over and take a look at them, and I said "Can you figure out what this stuff is? Should we keep it for a part of the library?" and so on. So we did keep a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff was thrown out, we just couldn't keep it. Then he had like multiple, multiple copies of articles. So you might have an article he did with 50 copies. The archives only wants one or two copies, three copies maybe at the most, but not 50. So all of a sudden, all of this stuff is going out. So we very quickly reduced the pile, and I would say that we had that entire pile of stuff in the archival area, we either dumped it or it went to the library, and what we had leftover then went to the archives and into their storage area. And so we ended up with a great collection of material, and then later on Dr. Meade worked with some of the stuff with students and so on, and was bringing the stuff up to classification, and date, and where it can be used.

IN: The whole Seaborg isle.

RM: So, what you might say is that the memory of Seaborg... in his life he had this connection with the UP, and so in his death we've made the connection back with the UP permanent because we brought a lot of his stuff up here. And sort of the bottom line is nobody else wanted it. I mean, I was in a state of shock that they'd look the other way and say take what you want.

IN: I thought maybe the family had deemed it towards the university, but it was actually...

RM: No, no, no, now the family did. There were two collections, there was like his private items from the house, and that... I and former President Vandament had worked with the family, and they gave us a lot of the material from his home collection, most of it they went and sent in boxes. Process never sent me a bill for any of it, which is fine with me, but we had all of that. But these 450 boxes, that was from the Berkley Science Lab. They were sending us all of that stuff, so it wasn't from the family. So then we were getting everything. We have everything that was available. So, it sort of came home then if you look at it that way. But he came back many times... in the summertime for a visit, visiting family and whatnot. Then, after the Seaborg Center, what they wanted to do... the idea was, and over the years it's been my observation that the Seaborg Center is not as strong as it was once in the past... but it too becomes a monument to the man that was born here. And the thing was, he only lived here for 10 years. He was born in 1912 and they left in 1922, which kind of blew me away because I thought we were going to have a whole story of Seaborg growing up, and high school, Ishpeming high school and so on, and in 1922 his mother decided that the educational possibilities and institutions in the UP weren't what she thought they should be, and that they should leave. So they left for him to get a better education, which I don't know if he did or not, but he did use what he did learn. So they kind of packed up and left, and then it was like, now what do we do? How do you put that into a museum exhibit? "Oh! The education was so bad the family left." No we don't want to go into that. So anyway, that's kind of the... and then he would return for these trips, and there was this one time with the house...

IN: Did you meet him then?

RM: Oh yeah, when he came up here he would have meetings with us, and then I had, because of gathering the material and bringing it back and so on. We even went out there... he had a famous Seaborg Medal, and it was for the former football player of the UC Berkley team that had gone on and done well in their field in endeavor. So for instance, when I went out there they gave the Seaborg Award to a cardiologist from the Twin Cities, I forget his name, but he got the award. So Seaborg was kind of a closet... he wanted to be a football player. He even said it. But here you had this tall gangly man, and then when I knew him he had horrible arthritis, his fingers were... I don't think he could even move them, and when he ate he would just kind of put his hands together and then take a glass and pour it down, but he couldn't move his fingers. But he came back on a number of occasions and the thing about Seaborg was, for his journal he wanted to know everybody that attended an event. So when he was here we were going to have a luncheon. It was after school was out, it might have been like mid-May. It was kind of a bright sunny day and... the history department gives the Waldo Award. The Waldo Award is named after the first president, the first Head of the History Department, he was the only member of the History Department, but the president taught history for the first five years or so. So, we give the Waldo Award to a person that has done something over and above to promote history, and the work of our students et cetera, and Vandament had done that. He had provided jobs and so on. So anyway, we were giving him this Waldo Award, and we're having a lunch, and we had a big table there, a charcoal grill, it was filled with people. I don't know what groups were there but they were all students. And so we told President Vandament, I said "We're getting done with the meeting, why don't we all go to lunch?" and Vandament said "Well, can we bring the Seaborgs?" He and his wife were here, and so we had the Seaborgs there, but one of his things was that he wanted to know everybody that was at the meal. So, knowing that this was going to be a request and I wasn't going to be able to go and recreate the list, I immediately sent around a sheet of paper and everybody signed in. Then when it was over we gave him the sheet of paper and he was delighted. But he came up here many times, to visit relatives,

and then when he had the Seaborg Center, he would come up for the Seaborg if there was some event or something, but he would also kind of teach classes. So there were some students at Northern who met Seaborg when he was here. I told the students when we had lunch to come on over, that this was going to be an opportunity to visit with this icon in this older fellow, and you're not going to always have that opportunity. So it was... but he would come up here and kind of teach classes and whatnot.

IN: Around what time as it?

RM: This would have been like, I would say all through the 80's and 90's. In the 19...

IN: So the house in Ishpeming, did it end up being sold/

RM: Well that ended up not being very clear, because I think they decided in the end not to sell the place. So I don't know what the status of the house is.

IN: I guess I'd have to ask someone there, because I'm from Ishpeming and I've never heard anything about it.

RM: Yeah there might have been some talk of moving it to that theme park area over by the cabaret, but I don't think that that was done. After he passed away things just kind of declined. Nobody was saying "We're going to keep his material" or "It should come to Northern" and so on. As a matter of fact, in maybe around the year 2000, we went out to Berkley... anyways, I came up with the idea of replicating his office from the very beginning, and so we got all the artifacts. We got pictures and videos of the room, we got the telephone, all the paper boxes on his desk, and we got the whole thing. I got the plans. I called the engineers office at Berkley "Do you have plans of this office?" and they said "Yes, we do." They sent us the office plans. So, we would be in a position now of replicating Seaborg's office as it was. Now, what happened was, the question was "where are we going to put this." And again, coming full circle bringing Seaborg and his memory back. So, we came up with the idea that in the space that was going to be over the Seaborg Center, there was supposed to be a store on corner there by the exhibits, and that never materialized. So we had this room. So my wife who was working on the museum at the time said "Ok, let's see what we can do." So anyway, we had his original desk, we had the lamp that he had on the desk, and we were basically able to recreate his office at the time of his death. So we put that together, but for ten years the desk sat in this giant shipping crate. We opened it once to take a look at it, but that was like it, and in it was his telephone, all the stuff and whatnot was in the desk and sat there, and then finally after about ten years somebody found the money to put into recreating the office. So, I'm trying to think, maybe it's been about three years or four years that we had a dedication a dedication of the office and whatnot at one of the (inaudible). But that sort of, I don't know if you've seen it, but if you go over to the science building...

IN: The Glenn Seaborg Center.

RM: The Glenn Seaborg Center there at the entrance is his office. You push the button, the buttons stays on for about 15 seconds, and you have an idea of what it was like, and it was pretty accurate. So that's kind of the Seaborg story.

IN: Did he really have any say as what was going to go into the center? Or was he just more... he was on the board...

RM: I don't know if he was on the board. He would save things for future use, artifacts and so on, but he wasn't an imposing person, where he was imposing himself upon you. So you didn't get that feeling. But he was certainly very happy when this came about, well the Seaborg Center; that delighted him. I'm trying to think, he was up here for an event and we... but he was up here for a lot of events. He was sort of in and out. Then he came frequently with the opening... that's what I was getting at then I got sidetracked... with the opening of the Seaborg Science Center. He would come up and work with students and senior faculty and whatnot. So he was a given presence, and if people remember him... a part of the problem is that unless you do this type of stuff and then save dwelling et cetera, you're not gonna remember the guy. The guy's gonna get lost. So we would save the material, you could put his office up, because I find myself... Seaborg to younger people nobody knows anything about. I know about him because I was there. I worked with him, I talked to him, we did things, and we pulled things together and so on, but younger people... what's this. I would say probably, as kind of a conclusion, Seaborg and his stuff... his body is still out in Berkley... but he's sort of come full circle in terms of his memory and trying to preserve it. All the material has come back, and we're in the position where we could put on an exhibit of Seaborg without much trouble.

IN: And in his interview, even at 80 plus years old he was very lucid and...

RM: Oh yeah.

IN: So to be teaching at that age is surprising too.

RM: Yeah well, I think there were some surprised students when he came back with "Let me show you how this works" and so on. And if you knew who the guy was, it was like, woah okay, you're the guy in the encyclopedia, Seaborg. And then he was very proud of something. He went online or something and found that there were some humungous number of pages dedicated to him. I forget, what was his bibliography? That was it. And he went online one time and he was like "Do you know what I found?" "Oh, that there was like 3,000 articles that I had done" and so on. And I think he tried to get a lot of that stuff shipped back here. Even if you took two or three issues of stuff that he had written, all of a sudden you're almost filling this room with two or three issues. So, I feel that he's kind of come full circle after all this time, that his stuff is back here in the UP, as opposed to being out at say Berkley or UCLA in Los Angeles, people could care less about Seaborg.

IN: I mean, that's sad that he gets glossed over.

RM: Yeah.

RM: Yeah, he's just kind of forgotten about. Part of it is when you're from the area, well I am, you're interested in preserving the culture and doing the exam... the office space and so on. And I was interested in doing that with the idea of bringing his memory back to the UP, and it's there. If people dive into it and become familiar with it fine, if they don't well... but at least I've done my part in that. He was a very typical Yooper, a very wonderful down to earth person.

IN: Were you surprised at how good his memory was? When he talks about when he was seven or eight years old.

RM: I don't know. Yeah, he was up there. No it was just kind of, it was kind of him. You're sort of expecting it from him. But yeah, he didn't have any memory lapses, he was very together.

IN: He was very clear.

RM: Yup.

RM: Does that pretty much cover it for you?

IN: I guess, besides that luncheon, were there any other specific times you remember meeting him, or having conversations with him?

RM: No, that was a... when he came to Marquette, he was usually bust with the meetings and doing things, and checking the equipment in the lab. So when he came to Marquette you really didn't have a lot of time to meet with him. So most of the interviews and whatnot were done out of Berkley where we had time to meet with him. Then we had some of these events that he joined us with, but I didn't do any interviews with him here. They were all done out of Berkley where he kind of had more time. And then, see the... in the Hall of Science there. There was some talk of getting the American Chemical Association and some of those other companies to put money to help develop some of this stuff like the recreation of the room, the archives, and maybe more of a museum; and in terms of the museum, there were supposed to be on the... you have the entry floor there on the street level there, and then you go to the second floor. Well above it, you can probably see the big circular area up there, kind of like a tower. Well, that was supposed to be his museum, that whole circular area, and that never became a museum. I had planned what we should be doing and so on, but for whatever reason it was never done, and so today it's kind of, I don't know, meeting room. They have some stuff piled up there. It's sort of the mystery room, what's this for? But originally the grand plan was that was going to be the big entry area of the museum. You'd go up there and then...

[Phone rings]

IN: Well, we can end there then.

[End of interview]