**Interview Log**

**Interviewee:** Charles A. Desnoyers

**Interviewer:** Remus Y. Lee

**Interview date:** April 9, 2013 (2:00PM)

**Interview location:** Dr. Desnoyers’ office; Olney Hall Room 342

**Interview duration:** 2 hours, 36 seconds

Field notes written on April 22nd, 2013

**Abstract**:

Dr. Charles Albert Desnoyers (b. December 7, 1952) was born and raised in North Plainfield, New Jersey with his parents and five younger siblings. He attended St. Joseph’s Parochial School and North Plainfield High School for the duration of his primary school education; it was in North Plainfield High School where he began showing an interest in history, due to the influences of his history teachers. He later attended Villanova University, changing to a sociology major after a year of general sciences. His graduation from Villanova University with a minor in history led him down the path to getting a Ph.D. and teaching at Temple University. In 1988, he graduated from Temple University with a Ph.D. in Modern Chinese History, at the same time finding employment with La Salle University. For the next twenty or so years, Dr. Desnoyers would work in La Salle’s history department, rising to chair the History Department for nine years and continuing to serve La Salle in a mentoring and organizational capacity. Dr. Desnoyers is involved in La Salle’s Travel Studies program, and in his spare time, he plays with the band Boris Garcia.

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Stated the date of the interview, misstating the date as April 9th, 2003, instead of April 9th, 2013 and introduces Dr. Desnoyers as chairman of the history department, as well as stating the location of the interview and asking permission to record. Dr. Desnoyers gives permission to record, and states that he is no longer chairman of the history department. Full name is stated for the record as Charles Albert Desnoyers. He was born in Muhlenberg Hospital in Plainfield, New Jersey, on December 7th, 1952, to Albert Henry Desnoyers II and Ruth Reed Desnoyers. Dr. Desnoyers’ grandfather Albert Henry Desnoyers I lived until 1964, while his grandmother Martha Chevrolet Desnoyers lived until 1974; Dr. Desnoyers’ maternal grandparents died when he was very little. All of his grandparents lived in the North Plainfield area.

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Dr. Desnoyers is the oldest of five siblings, and with the exception of Suzanne Marie Desnoyers, who died in 2002, his siblings are still alive. The makeup of his neighborhood was primarily baby boomers and their families, and to pass the time they played baseball and basketball, as well as skateboarding when the craze swept into the town in the 1960s. Dr. Desnoyers mentioned that his old neighborhood held a reunion party, and stated that the members of his old neighborhood were close to each other. Demographically, the neighborhood was mostly middle to lower middle class. Dr. Desnoyers’ father was an appliance store owner, a job which he inherited from his grandfather.

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Outside of his parents, one of the major influences on Dr. Desnoyers’ life was a next-door neighbor named Jim Stein, whose scientific endeavors made an impression on the young Chip Desnoyers. Other influences included many of his high school athletics teammates and those who were in his Boy Scout troop. Dr. Desnoyers attended the Catholic parochial St. Joseph’s school during his elementary school years; he later attended North Plainfield High School. St. Joseph’s School was run by a religious order known as the Sisters of Mercy, and Dr. Desnoyers credits them with providing him with an interest in the liberal arts. Dr. Desnoyers mentions that while he was being educated in the Catholic rites, the Vatican II council changed the rites so that by the time he was old enough, his knowledge was obsolete.

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Dr. Desnoyers describes his high school experience as “culture shock”, because unlike the other people in his grade, he did not spend his lower primary school education in the North Plainfield school district. Although he did not make friends easily, his activities with athletic clubs allowed him to meld into the school, and he was involved with North Plainfield athletics, including the swim team and track and field, for his four years at the school. It was in high school that Dr. Desnoyers first realized he had a flair for history and writing due to the influences of superb high school teachers, although at the time he thought his career would take him towards the sciences.

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Dr. Desnoyers notes that most of the liberal arts teachers at North Plainfield were also coaches of the various athletics teams, and were on the whole good teachers, including one teacher who he said “made history come alive”. When asked about this teacher, he names him as Ed Steck, who reminds him of Brother Edward Sheehy, and describes him as someone who had interesting anecdotes and could keep students’ attentions. Steck had a sense for the dramatic and could come up with the right anecdote for the lesson at hand.

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Dr. Desnoyers mentions that he initially enrolled in Villanova University under general sciences with intention to chemistry, but he didn’t do well in his first year, so he switched majors to sociology. After he got his bachelor’s degree, he went back to Villanova to obtain his master’s degree, before going to Temple for his Ph.D. He admits he was indifferent as a student, feeling “at sea” due to being away from home for the first time. He also mentions the hippie movement as being a force during this time. Most of the friends he made in college were good students but unfaithful class attendees prone to exploring the Villanova area and engaging in “illegal activities of various sorts”. As a result, his freshman cumulative GPA dropped close to the point of academic probation, and by his sophomore year, he quit college and went to live in a commune in New Haven, Connecticut. It was here that he began playing music in earnest. After living at the commune for six months, Dr. Desnoyers’ father allowed him to work at the family appliance store so he could pay for his own choices in life. Although he didn’t appreciate the skills he learned during the job, Dr. Desnoyers noted that later on, they would become valued skills. In the fall of 1973, he went back to Villanova and kept getting good grades; although he had majored in sociology, he did not feel any desire to pursue that path, opting instead to focus on his minor in history. Through his good grades in history and his rapport with the history professors at Villanova, he was able to get into the Villanova graduate school program. Dr. Desnoyers recalled the demographic shift during this time period, noting that the supply of college graduates exceeded demand, and led to the stereotype of “Ph.D.s driving taxicabs”, before saying he also drove a taxicab for a year. In 1977, he returned Villanova to get his master’s degree in European history, while cultivating an interest in Asian history. By the end of his studies in Villanova, he decided to study Asian history in full. He notes that he got much help from Temple University’s Chinese language supervisor in learning Chinese. He also notes that in order to graduate from Temple, a graduation fee must be paid, but since he wasn’t informed of that requirement, he had to wait an extra semester before he was allowed to graduate. During that semester, he taught classes as part of a teaching fellowship, at the same time sending out resumes to get a teaching job. One possibility that intrigued Dr. Desnoyers was an offer to teach at Temple’s University in Japan, but as he was ready to sign the papers to accept, Dr. Theopolis Fair, then chair of La Salle’s History Department, offered him a job to teach at La Salle. Dr. Desnoyers ultimately decided against going to Japan on the notion that he would be out of a job when he returned from Japan.

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When asked about the supervisor who helped him learn Chinese, Dr. Desnoyers recalled a Dr. Chiu, an educator from Hong Kong who moved to the United States to teach at Temple University. Dr. Desnoyers describes Dr. Chiu’s activities, including working for the Rand Corporation think tank and donating money to Philadelphia’s Chinatown. Dr. Desnoyers contends that Dr. Chiu influenced his career decisions more than anyone else. When asked about his teaching experiences before La Salle, Dr. Desnoyers described the Villanova experience more as grading papers and marking tests; conversely, at Temple, Dr. Desnoyers was able to teach recitation classes for his Western Civ professors. The amount of money that graduate teaching assistants earned was not enough to live on, so Dr. Desnoyers also worked in construction while he was studying for his Ph.D. This allowed him to pay his way through his post graduate studies. Dr. Desnoyers noted that one side effect of his construction work was that he would have to attend classes while covered in concrete dust left over from his construction job. Dr. Desnoyers then noted that as part of the curriculum to study Asian history at Temple, he had to take several Asian history and historical sociology courses. Also, due to Temple’s practice of expanding undergraduate courses into graduate courses, he got his first teaching experience assisting in a course called “Great Figures in History”. In addition to teaching at Temple, he began teaching courses in other area universities. Dr. Desnoyers mentioned that working in Villanova meant that he had to mentally adjust for the fact that his instructors at Villanova were now his colleagues. Dr. Desnoyers also mentioned an interesting anecdote; when he was taking his oral exams for graduate school, the city of Philadelphia was in the process of forcibly evicting members of the MOVE organization.

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Dr, Desnoyers describes the teaching system at Temple, where the professor would lecture in two of the classes, leaving the third class for graduate student-run recitations. He stated that he enjoyed teaching the recitations because he enjoyed the opinions of students engaging in discussion. He also remembers that one of his professors pulled him aside one day and said he had a talent for teaching, a statement which stuck with him to this day. He also mentioned another moment which influenced him; when he was meeting with a professor after the conclusion of a course, the professor commented that he wrote really well and said he had the skills to get a Ph.D.

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Concerning his dissertation, Dr. Desnoyers wrote on the efforts of Chen Lanbin, the first Chinese ambassador to the United States and contemporary of Chinese Educational Mission proponent Yung Wing, whose exploits he uses as background information for his dissertation. Dr. Desnoyers goes on to describe Chen Lanbin’s efforts to improve Chinese-western relations and reform Chinese society, and talks about how his dissertation was about Chen’s role in China’s foreign policy during China’s opening to the world. Midway through, he inserted an anecdote about how he was interviewed by Chinese television for a piece about Yung Wing.

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Other than job opportunities at La Salle and Temple University in Japan, Dr. Desnoyers also considered teaching at California’s Whittier College and Maine’s Colby College. Eventually he decided against teaching at the other colleges because it would have required picking up stakes and moving to locations in order to get employed at positions which were less beneficial than his current job at the time. In the fall of 1989, Dr. Desnoyers began working at La Salle University, filling a need for history professors that the university lacked at the time. He commented that the La Salle of 1989 was not much different from the La Salle of 2013, adding that due to the nature of professorship, one tends to see similarity as classes rotated graduating students for new students, until suddenly students from ten years earlier come back all grown up. He also observed that La Salle started modifying its curriculum to be more international at the time since foreign countries like Japan began dominating the national discussion. Around this time, La Salle landmarks, especially the Japanese Tea House, began springing up. Dr. Desnoyers states that his hiring came in as a result of this internationalization of La Salle University, teaching the Asian studies minor which he still teaches to this day. He also notes that the student body of La Salle was more male-dominated than the modern day, and that the university was less diverse in 1989 since it was still drawing its students from the local Catholic high schools.

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Dr. Desnoyers notes that he still teaches the same courses today as he did when he first started, including world history, as well as special courses based on his specialty, including traditional and modern Chinese history. His favorite undergraduate course to teach is the Chinese Travel Studies course, which allows students to go abroad as part of their studies. On a whole, the travel studies program was a success, although Dr. Desnoyers did note the one time a 75-year-old student died of a stroke after returning home. Dr. Desnoyers also talked about Melinda Ingersoll, a course teacher who worked with him to promote the travel studies program, as well as the travels he and the program undertook during that time period. Of graduate courses, his favorite is the History 510: Historiography course.

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Dr. Desnoyers has been the director of the Asian Studies minor, history department chair from 1997-2008, a member of the faculty senate, chair of the political science department, the director of the Greater Philadelphia Asian Studies Consortium, and the president of the Mid-Atlantic region of the Association of Asian Studies. Dr. Desnoyers describes the Asian Studies field as small due to the requirement of learning several semesters of an Asian language. Being a department chair is, to Dr. Desnoyers, a “difficult but rewarding” position since a chair has to advocate for the faculty while working for the administration, splitting loyalties between institution and employees. The chair of the department is the one who makes the hiring decisions for the department, recommending hires and tenure decisions to the administration, and Dr. Desnoyers states that this makes being the chair of the department a difficult job. As for working on the faculty senate, he opines that the power plays between university administration and faculty mirrors a corporate model, in which the faculty often ends up being dictated to by the administration. All the same, Dr. Desnoyers enjoys his time on the faculty senate. Being president of an outside organization, in this case the Association of Asian Studies’ Mid-Atlantic Region, he notes that most of his duties revolve around presiding over the annual conference. Dr. Desnoyers also mentions being part of the board of directors of the AIDS Information Network in the 1990s.

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When asked about the problems that he as chair of the history department faced, Dr. Desnoyers recalled an incident in which a part-time adjunct was arrested for child pornography possession and another incident in which an instructor was caught falsifying his evaluations and stealing who ended up being fired. He also talks about settling disputes between faculty members as well as between students and instructors. Dr. Desnoyers notes a period of time when La Salle’s finances were not healthy that part-time instructors who weren’t adequately vetted made their way into the faculty because of a lack of funding for more permanent instructors, as well as periods of time when he taught six courses a semester because of a lack of available teachers to cover the courses.

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Dr. Desnoyers was quite happy when La Salle added a graduate-level history program in 2004 because he was on the committee to push for the addition. He mentioned Dr. Francis Ryan as the originator of the graduate studies curriculum. He also mentions that with graduate students, he doesn’t have to sell the idea of the workload to them as much as he does with undergraduate students because of the desire of graduate students to be at the course. The first graduate course that Dr. Desnoyers taught only had six students, two of which soon dropped out, but since then, the history graduate program blossomed into one of the most successful graduate programs in La Salle’s history, something he contends the department can be proud of.

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To Dr. Desnoyers, the favorite part of the graduate program is discussion, when a graduate student offers up a novel idea or a critique which starts earnest debate between the students which broadens their understanding of the topic. The main difference between the La Salle teaching experience and teaching at other schools is that at other schools, the large class sizes at other universities leads to an impersonal disconnect between professor and student. Conversely, the classes at La Salle are deliberately kept smaller, which promotes familiarity between students, and, as Dr. Desnoyers notes, a development which is the biggest distinction about La Salle compared to other institutions. He also notes the influence of the Christian Brothers and their attitude of “teaching them where they find them”, pushing faculty and students to work together to get what they need.

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When asked about his views about the future of the La Salle History Program, Dr. Desnoyers noted that the core curriculum of the program was undergoing another redesign, where the many varied courses undergraduate students can take could be replaced by an option bundle for students to choose from, which opens up the possibility of offering more diverse selections of history courses. Dr. Desnoyers mentions a report by outside representatives examining the history program which gave La Salle top marks, and he states that reports like those makes him optimistic about La Salle’s future.

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Outside of La Salle University, Dr. Desnoyers has been involved in bands and has worked with Dr. George Stow in writing textbooks for history classes. He also does book reviews for several publications. He mentions that in the field of writing, there is a large field of study that a potential writer can create from, and in Dr. Desnoyers’ case, he writes to “make history come alive”, although he admits that sometimes there are things that authors must write about even if they don’t want to in order to keep scholarly productivity up. Dr. Desnoyers talks about his first book, *Journey to the East: Li Gui’s A New Account of a Trip Around the Globe*, which is a translation of the journals of a Chinese citizen who circumnavigates the world after visiting the American Centennial celebration in Philadelphia. He also talks about the upcoming book contracts he has ready to work on with the major book publishers. Dr. Desnoyers notes that the journal article he remembers most fondly was one he wrote in 1996 about the culture of Imperial China during the imperialist thrusts of western powers in the 1860s-1870s, in which he argued that despite the national undercurrent of depression, there was a small but noted portion of the educated class who looked on the brighter side of life and pressed for western-style reforms melded with traditional Confucian ideals. The book he enjoyed reviewing most was *To Get Rich is Glorious* by Orville Schell about China’s transition to a market economy. Dr. Desnoyers likes to study the accounts of world travelers, especially those that compare the world to their own cultures, and his favorite time period to study is China at the latter part of the 19th century, during the opening of China to the world. The rise of the internet has helped Dr. Desnoyers’ research immensely in that research that required going to a distant archive and poring through countless documents in order to find information concerning the chosen topic could now be done over the internet.

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Dr. Desnoyers has been playing music off and on since he was 12 years old, playing such instruments as the guitar and the bass guitar. He began playing pedal steel guitar in the 1970s, an instrument he plays to this day. He has had experience playing with country rock bands and is currently playing with the band Boris Garcia, a country/folk fusion band.

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Dr. Desnoyers talked about a heart operation he had in the fall to correct a condition he contends could have affected him severely had it not been corrected. He had gone on research leave and was stuck in the hospital for three weeks recovering from complications from the surgery.

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During the mid-semester break vacation, Dr. Desnoyers and his wife went down to Jamaica to listen to the band Little Feat, where he was able to join a jam session with the band. He also talked about the Travel Studies programs’ trips to China, including the difficulties of snow when traveling to China in the spring, as well as time constraints put while travelling abroad during the mid-semester and end of semester breaks. Originally the program went to Hong Kong, but later on the program streamlined the itinerary to visiting the cities of Beijing and Xi’an. Another component of the program involved exchanging students between La Salle and Chinese schools. The next Travel Studies program will involve La Salle students staying with Chinese families. Dr. Desnoyers notes that since the Travel Studies program started, China has become more prosperous and more modernized.

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When asked about comparing the La Salle Masters’ program to other universities’ programs, Dr. Desnoyers notes that La Salle puts emphasis on including practical aspects in the curriculum for real world applications. He cites the work of Dr. Ryan and Dr. Stuart Leibiger as great influences in making the history program at La Salle both practical and enjoyable for the students involved. He also believes that the La Salle history program can easily make bonds with programs at other schools. He believes that over the years, the attitudes of undergraduate students have evolved from getting a degree for self-fulfillment to making the degree work for the student, which can run into trouble for the department when a student questions the employment viability of a history degree. Dr. Desnoyers also note that oftentimes old students come back and comment that they wish they paid more attention to the class, saying that they’ve only just realized the importance of the history education. Dr. Desnoyers notes that the graduate program has become more rigorous in its admissions since it started, and is pleased that more tracks, such as the public history track, have been added to the program. As to advice for prospective students for the history program, Dr. Desnoyers suggest that they sit in during some of the courses to gauge how well they like the program.

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When asked about the raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula during April 9th, Dr. Desnoyers notes that China is poised to become a diplomatically powerful force in keeping the peace throughout various crises, and that with American diplomatic resources strained due to its wars, the Chinese influence will become the major player in diplomatic crises in East Asia.

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When asked about what contributed to La Salle’s longevity as an institution, Dr. Desnoyers notes that La Salle kept itself as a teaching institution as opposed to a research institution, which he credits to the influence of the Christian Brothers. As to the future of La Salle, Dr. Desnoyers sees universities as being in transition, and that in an era where institutions are becoming more market-oriented, La Salle has been able to resist the call to make the university more profitable. Dr. Desnoyers also believes that with the rise of the electronic era, distance learning will become a larger part of the La Salle curriculum. When asked about his favorite memory at La Salle, Dr. Desnoyers remembers when the Travel Studies program visited the Olympic Village, a news crew began interviewing them, and took a picture of them jumping into the air, which he sees as a sign of the closeness of the La Salle students.

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