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## His High School Annual Foresaw Byron Bushnell as 'Great Engineer'

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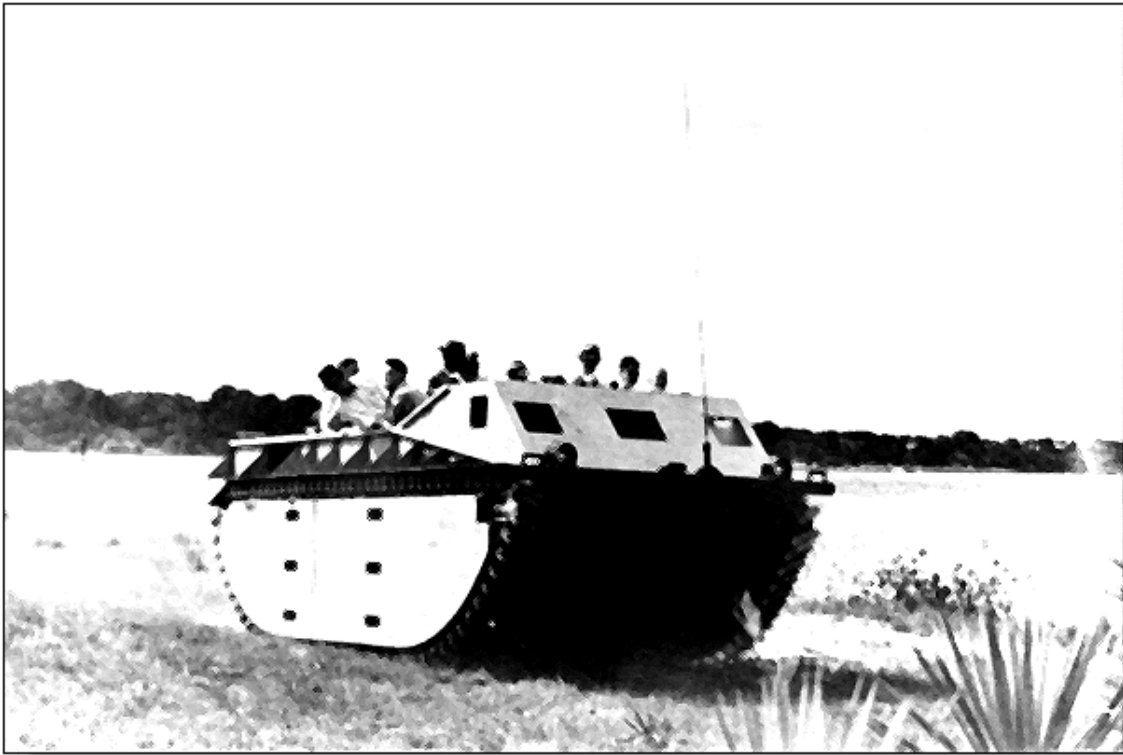
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**Byron Bushnell designed the hull for Donald Roebing's "Alligator " amphibious tank. The No. 1 of a contract for 200 steel Alligators is shown on its Navy trial run in July, 1941. Admiral Ernest King and U.S. Senator Claude Pepper of Florida were among the dignitaries on the demonstration.**

-BURGERT BROS. Photo courtesy of Eleanor Lehner.

## **HIS HIGH SCHOOL ANNUAL FORESAW BYRON BUSHNELL AS 'GREAT ENGINEER'**

**By ELEANOR B. LEHNER**

Byron Earl Bushnell was named for his grandfather, a 19th century Florida pioneer who homesteaded in several parts of the state, including what is now downtown Bradenton.

Although he was born in Minnesota, the young Byron was brought to Tampa as a child. He attended local schools and graduated from Hillsborough High

School in 1913. One of his classmates was his future wife, Estelle Byrd, the daughter of Benjamin Franklin Byrd and Eleanor Carpenter Byrd of Virginia. Among friends who graduated with them were Blackburn Lowry, Rex Farrior, and W.B. Henderson. Also Melvin Asp, who became a World War I Army pilot, and Rondo Hatton who, after being injured



**Byron Earl Bushnell served as Regimental Executive of the 116th Field Artillery from 1934 until 1941 when he was temporarily transferred to Navy duty. His military service began in 1916 on the Mexican border. He was on active duty in both World Wars and retired in 1946 as a Colonel**

in the war, became a Hollywood celebrity.

In 1916, between his junior and senior years at the University of Florida, Byron responded to the suggestion of his friend, future General Sumter Lowry, that serving on the Mexican border with the U.S. Army would be a great "summer job." World War I broke out that summer, and Byron did not get back to Gainesville until the fall of 1919. By then he had a wife and baby daughter to support. And since there was no GI bill in those days, he had to borrow money for tuition and expenses.



**Barges built for the U.S. Navy by Bushnell-Lyons Iron Works during World War II were christened with beer instead of champagne.**

### **'A GREAT ENGINEER'**

His high school annual had described him in these words:

*His few, pointed words leave a greater impression than the long speeches of others, his stately bearing and gentlemanly manners have made his presence in the class a pleasure to his fellow-students. Byron's head is full of mechanical ideas and we expect to hear of him some day as a great engineer.*

Byron Bushnell was also an outstanding high school and college athlete. (He played football for Florida in the days when players had to buy their own uniforms.) (He preferred, and specialized



**BYRON EARL BUSHNELL**

in, gymnastics.) And he did receive his engineering degree in 1920. But, in addition, The Seminole listed him as President of the Senior Class and of the Student Body and Chairman of the Honor Committee.

After several years as a U.S. Government engineer Byron brought his wife and daughter, Eleanor, back to Tampa to live. As an employee of Ingalls Iron Works, he continually criss-crossed the state's bumpy roads in his Model T, procuring contracts and designing structures. And as a member of the National Guard he was on call in emergencies, such as the Lake Okeechobee (Sept., 1926, Miami and Moore Haven) hurricane in the twenties and the election day hurricane in Tampa in 1935. It seemed to his family that he almost never slept.

## **DESIGNED KRESS STORE**

His unprecedented design for their new Tampa store excited Kress officials to such an extent that they engaged him to spend a year in New York city designing similar structures for other stores around the country. His was the first store building designed without any interior columns.

When the boom ended and the depression began, the demand for tall buildings supported by steel beams came to an end. In 1935, like so many other families, the Bushnells abandoned the Palma Ceia home they had purchased ten years earlier and rejoined the Byrds in the house they had acquired early in the century. In those days they had lived next door to Judge Shackelford, up the street from the Nelsons, around the corner from Hutchinson House and the big Lowry family. And a trolley car or a bus could take them wherever they wanted to go.

Two years later, without a penny of investment capital, Byron resigned from Ingalls and signed an agreement that would give him ownership of the local Lyon's Iron Works (Steel when you want it) if ever he could manage to pay off its massive debts. To manage the office he brought his father (Frank Bushnell, formerly of Tampa and Dade City) to Tampa from North Carolina where he had been living with one of his daughters after retiring as a wholesale grocer.

Ingalls promptly sent a replacement to Florida. He departed before a year had passed.

## **SERIOUSLY ILL**

Saved by the reputation he had earned as a brilliant engineer and a tireless worker, able to take on jobs that were too small for Ingalls, and helped by loans from a banker who trusted him, Byron eventually managed to extricate himself from what had appeared to be an almost hopeless situation. His friend and future Florida Steel partner, Sam Flom, impressed by this example, decided to take a chance on starting a business of his own. He said he never would have dared to try if Byron hadn't shown it could be done.

Somewhere along the way Byron became a director of the Exchange National Bank and a founding member of the University Club (among other things).

Early in the 1960s it became evident that he was seriously ill. He was one of the hundreds of people who became victims of a malady that at that time had no name. Every family touched by it had to handle it without any support from the medical profession or from community agencies. Except for a brief period when he was hospitalized, his wife Estelle cared for him at home until his death in 1970. Their daughter and her husband (Eleanor and George Lehner) bought property in Tampa and began building a home to move into as soon as he could arrange to retire early from his teaching job at UCLA (Professor of Psychology). She commuted back and forth as often as she could. Few of the family's associates realized the seriousness of his illness. Today, fortunately, this disease has a name, Alzheimers, and relatives of contemporary victims can mutually

assist one another. (Estelle Bushnell died in 1981.)

Old friends and even strangers often tell Eleanor how much they admired and loved her father. And, in a way, she feels that the Tampa Theater and Kress building are his lasting monuments.