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MRS. GRACE ALLEN: FIRST LADY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

In 1985, the Grace Allen Reading Room, in the Special Collections section of the University of South Florida Library, was dedicated to honor the contributions of Mrs. Grace Allen to the university community. Mrs. Allen, wife of USF's founding president John Allen, was interviewed in the summer of 1985 as part of an oral history project commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the University of South Florida. That conversation is excerpted here.

Q: What was your first knowledge that there was going to be a University of South Florida?

Allen: There was a commission appointed by the Board of Control and the governor and it was determined that, because of the growth of the state, there were needs for new colleges. The Tampa/St. Petersburg area was one of the places that was obviously in need of a new university. When the first thought of having a new university came into being, the members of what was then called the Board of Control approached John and asked him to save himself for the University. At that time we were considering two or three other prospects, but the idea of building a new university outweighed any other considerations. When the formal offer came to move to the Tampa area, John was ready to accept and, of course, I was too.

Q: What year did you actually move to Tampa?

Allen: We moved here in 1957 and we were here for three years in the planning stage until the University opened in September of 1960. For quite sometime Mr. Allen was all by himself, but for a secretary officed in the Court House. The county made available two rooms and a supply house supplied desks and chairs. So that is where we opened. Immediately, the first appointment that was made was the librarian (Elliot Hardaway). He arrived on the scene immediately. He came from Gainesville. Those three people were busy with the original planning, and immediately books came in for the library so that soon books grew in such large numbers that the people were crowded out and they had to make provisions for more space. They moved to a house that was on Plant Avenue that had one time been a clinic. So that was taken over for the offices. That house soon became crowded as more people came on the staff: deans, business managers, and so on. Mary Lou Harkness, who is the present librarian, was of that early group. The house also became so crowded that one desk touched the other, and if anyone was going to move or pick up something, you had to give a signal. Everybody moved chairs, and it was a wonderful arrangement for inner office communications. It was a little difficult to work. They stayed there then until the Administration building and others were ready on the campus in 1960.

Q: Was the Administration Building the first building that was actually completed on the campus?

Allen: There were five architects who worked on the buildings simultaneously. So buildings were under construction and going up at the same time. The Administration Building was ready in the sense that we moved in, but the air conditioning didn't work. When we opened, the buildings were ready. We had an opening convocation, and it was announced that as soon as it was completed classes were in session. The campus was planned so that the library would be the tallest building, the most conspicuous building, to symbolize that the library was the heart of the University. And the library symbolized the scholarly research that was to go on here because John kept saying, over and over again, "A university is a combination of scholars searching for the truth, and that includes students and faculty."



Dr. John Allen, (circa 1960).

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Q: How did the library develop its collection?

Allen: Universities often get excess copies of books, and when the announcement was made of the establishment of the University, other universities were willing to send us excess copies. Mr. Hardaway, the librarian, set about a diligent search for books and also for journals. It was easy enough to subscribe for current journals, but he set up a diligent search for back copies of journals, especially scientific ones. So that on the day that we opened, we had a collection of books. It was a modest collection, but it was a very workable collection. And it was announced, in the community, that we were anxious for gifts, but we would not accept just any title. We would accept books whose title was on the list of the Harvard-Widener Library. And that has proved, over the years, to be a very workable collection for a liberal arts college. So if a title was on that list, we accepted it very gratefully.

Q: Did the community get very involved?

Allen: Oh yes! The community was very supportive. Of course, John came here by himself, so he had to be his own publicity agent. People were anxious to know about the University, and the speaking invitations just came in right and left. So he was busy informing the community and they were very supportive. They did respond to the collection of books and journals and that kind of thing. And they have continued to do so.

Q: How did the University get the name University of South Florida? If you look on the map, it looks a bit more like we are on the west coast of Florida than on the southern tip.

Allen: The name was something that intrigued everybody—the community, the newspapers, and everyone. The newspaper, in fact, had a contest and, as you might guess with that kind of thing, all sorts of names came in. The idea of the name was of much concern to John because he felt that the name should express to the community what type of an institution this was to be. It was to be an institution for learning. It was to be an institution for research and an institution of liberal arts and the professional schools, but not a trade school. So finally the name University of South Florida was accepted by the Board of Regents and the Governor. And the Governor hesitated a little bit, but then he was reminded, being an Episcopal communicant, that this was in the District of South Florida and so he said it was alright to name it the University of South Florida. We were very happy with that because it does express that this is a true university in every sense of the word.

Q: You already lived in Gainesville which, of course, is very much a college town. What were your first impressions when you came here and there was not only no school, but no university community?

Allen: No school, no name, no students, no anything! For so long John and I were it. When we first came, John said he wanted to take me out and show me the campus. So we came out and turned on to Fowler Road, which was then a sand road. And it was very heavily rutted, and we didn't dare stop for being mired in the sand. We got out in the general area of the campus; John waved his hand to the empty acres and he said that this was it. He always claimed that my response was "Holy Sam, what are we coming to!" And so for a time, I was stunned by the vast nothingness. But we hired a campus planner, Jefferson Hemmle from the University of Florida, and he came here and worked with John. They sketched out the layout of the campus with the plan now as it was laid out then: sections for the medical school, areas for the liberal arts, areas for the administration, the library, and then social sciences were collected in one area, and also the plan for engineering which we knew was coming. Those sections were laid out and they were marked on a big sheet of paper in greens, blues, and yellows and so on. With that the place really came alive for me. It got exciting from then on to think we were going to have a building in this spot and to help plan and to show people what was to be out here. We had models made of the buildings and that helped a great deal. Much to our surprise, the buildings turned out to look just like the models.

Q: In those early offices at the Court House and Plant Avenue, did the people start to form a sort of university community?

Allen: They did spend time together, but there were some people that moved into the Temple Terrace area and that created a community. Others moved into the Carrollwood area and they formed a nucleus. But the rapport among the faculty was amazing. One of the first things that I was interested in was the establishment of the Women's Club. It filled a very important function and it still does because it is a place where all people get to know one another. The department lines are crossed and women come together regardless of what their husbands are doing. So they formed very close friendships that lasted throughout the years. Then there was this feeling that everybody was new. We all had to work to make

our place in the community. We all had to work to get to know friends, and it created a very friendly atmosphere and a good *esprit de corps* that was prevalent on the campus. Everybody felt it. It was a very precious thing. And people worked very hard because here was this new institution, no name and no students, and practically all those that came as administrators, as deans and so on, had left very good positions. And here they came and their careers were on the line. So everybody worked very hard to make this thing go. And it did.

Q: What was so unique about this university?

Allen: It was the first university in this century to be planned from the ground up as a full-fledged university with liberal arts, professional schools, and so on. Other institutions had broken off from agricultural colleges or they were branches and so on, but not the University of South Florida. We were a full-fledged institution.

Q: Now you mentioned that consultants had to be brought in to help lay out the buildings and to lay out the programs. How did you and your husband go about deciding who should be brought from all over the country as consultants?

Allen: Faculty know faculty people. Deans know deans. One of the interesting things was that John and I were given a Ford Foundation Grant to travel all over the country for a year. We used that year to visit universities, to talk to faculty members, to speak to deans, to employ prospective faculty, and to invite consultants to come here. We looked at buildings, we looked at programs, and we even looked at medical schools. Consultants came here in large groups. They met, laid out plans, and as a result we had the program for the basic studies, liberal arts, education, basic engineering and others. Those plans were laid out and as time went on staff was hired. One interesting thing developed. John was at a meeting at the University of New Hampshire, and they asked the very same question. They asked the very same question on how to get faculties. Faculty don't really apply for jobs, and so John replied saying that we have so many applications coming in that we are overwhelmed. They are anxious to come because they are thrilled with the prospect of building a university from the ground up where you can put in new ideas, new concepts and really make something that is distinctive. So when the word got out—there were announcements all over the country in newspapers everywhere—people responded and we were able to pick and choose. As a result, on the day that we opened, we had a staff that marched in academic procession and were ready to receive the students at the close of the convocation.

Q: What do you think were some of the most distinctive ideas that were put into effect as a result of this being a brand new university?

Allen: Basic Studies was one thing, and cooperative education was introduced. That was not a new idea, but it was one very good for this community because we were obviously a commuter college.

Q: One of the things that seemed distinctive early on was that there were no intercollegiate sports planned for the University of South Florida.

Allen: There were intercollegiate sports. They were planned. This was the thing that was considered important, but there was no plan for a *football* team with the expense of a stadium and all of the things that would be entailed in a football program. But right from the beginning there were plans for intercollegiate sports. The golf course was laid out, tennis courts were laid out, swimming pools, soccer, basketball, and all of those things were taken into consideration so that athletics were not overlooked. But the idea was to have some form of athletic activity that the majority could participate in, not the eleven men alone with all the rest of the people sitting on the bench. Of course, the primary reason was the expense and as the first bulletin said, the “Accent was on Learning.”

Q: When was the official ground breaking at the University of South Florida?

Allen: The ground breaking, I recall, was in September, 1958, and we had several juniors from the high schools participating in wielding the shovels. They were to represent the prospective class that would be ready to enter the University when we opened in 1960. Then in 1960, September, we had the opening ceremony with the governor here. I think that was the time when I really felt married to the University, when they placed a silver medallion around John’s neck and the governor announced “I declare the University of South Florida officially open.”

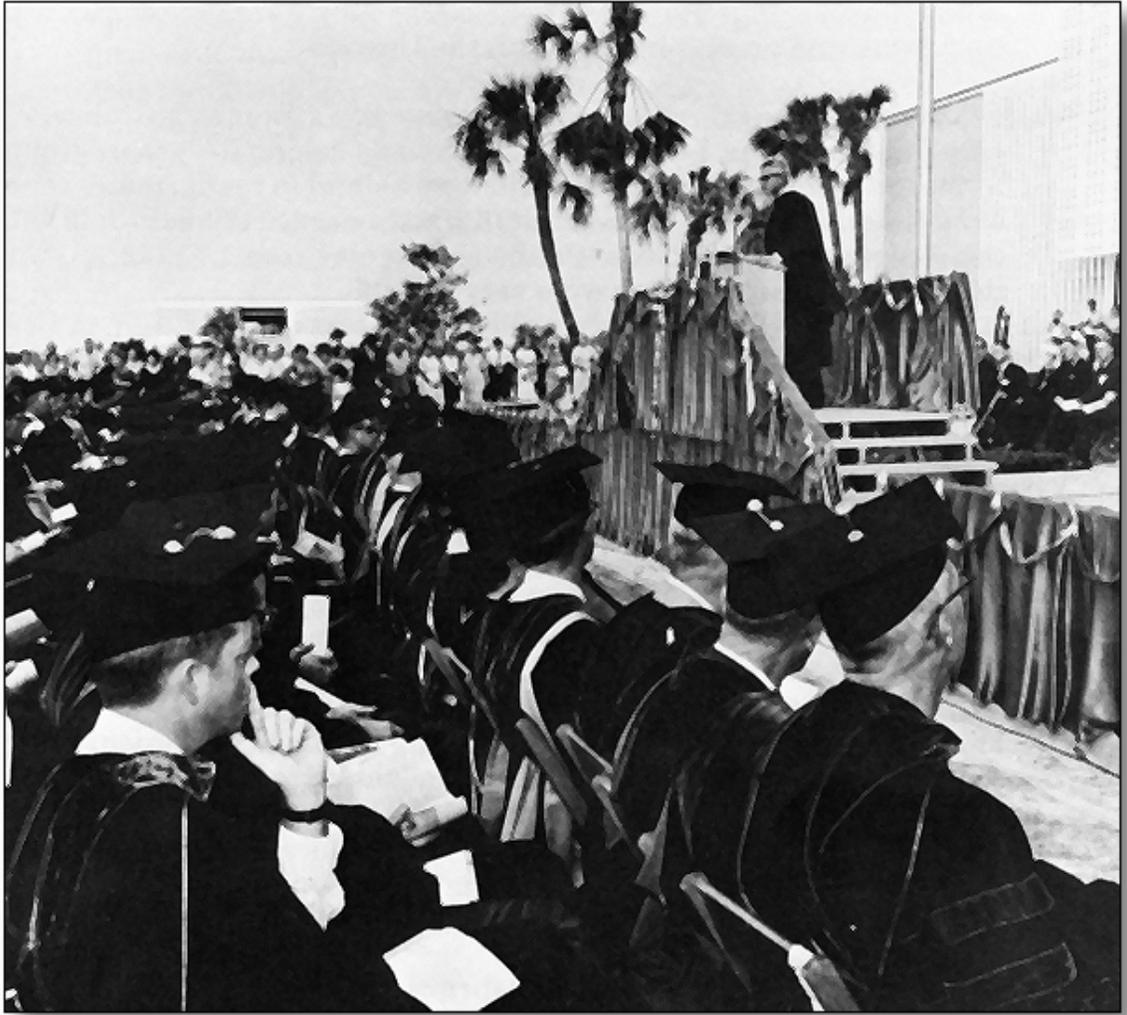
Q: Were there any resident students that first year who actually lived on campus?

Allen: There were not. We did not have any dormitories in the beginning. It was obvious that we were a commuter institution, and it was announced to the first students that that was one of the things that they would have to do, would be to find their own living arrangements. Later on, we had a campaign that became known as “Dollars for Dorms” and the newspaper helped support this. Contributions came in and the county made a sizeable contribution. With that money we built the dormitories. Then we got federal loans.

Q: How did your role as the wife of the president of USF change when the school actually opened?

Allen: I never was aware of any change except for greater contact with students and increased contact with faculty. I was sort of a catalyst that could help people to know one another. We had quite a campaign of having dinners, receptions, and that kind of thing to acquaint the community with the university. I had a reception in every building that opened. And the townspeople were interested and they came. So I don’t think that my role changed greatly. It was just that I reached out and touched more people.

Q: What kind of things did you do to help give people greater contact with each other and greater contact with the University?



Faculty, staff, students, and townspeople listen to Governor Leroy Collins as he speaks during the opening convocation ceremony at USF in September, 1960.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Allen: I think, as I mentioned before, the university's Women's Club was a very important one. I had the good fortune to belong to various groups in the town and they responded and were helpful in many, many ways. My garden club was always on hand when I needed them, to help with the receptions, for instance. So the community responded in anyway that they were asked. They were very helpful.

Q: Thinking of the garden club, how did you grow grass on the sands surrounding USF?

Allen: Well, as you know this campus was just a big Sahara Desert. The wind blew and you emptied your shoes when you walked across a campus and when you entered a building you had to take off your shoes and pour out the sand. Everybody carried a whisk broom

in their car to brush out the sand that had collected during the day. It looked sort of hopeless, but they discovered that there was a peat bog on campus and we were able to scrape up \$500 to go to Blanding and buy a bulldozer from surplus. We over the campus which stabilized that sand. Then we were able to plant grass. Right from the very beginning, we also had gardens where we grew azaleas from slips so when the buildings were completed we had shrubs to use for the landscaping.

Q: How long did it take to actually have the campus look like a campus with grass, trees, sidewalks, and lights?

Allen: When you see it now with its trees, shrubs, buildings, and so on I think back on the way it looked then. I really don't know. It looked so much better when we got grass. We did have some trees so that was a help. People gave us trees and shrubs. So as those things came in we had a more stable, settled in look. The architects, as a matter of fact, were so pleased with their buildings that they didn't want shrubbery in front of them.

Q: Many faculty members who were here in the early years have mentioned the fact that Dr. Allen would come into their classes, watch them teach, and really have a sense of what was actually happening among the faculty in the University. Did he make a concerted effort to try and keep in touch with all of the faculty in those early years?

Allen: He would have liked to have done more of that sort of thing than he was able to do. He was a teacher. He started out as a teacher. Teaching was his first love. One of things that he kept emphasizing always was that we would recognize good teaching. We were anxious that the best teacher on the staff teach freshmen. As I said, he was a teacher and so he very much loved the classroom and would have liked to have done more of that. But administrative duties became very heavy as we added more buildings, more programs. You always had to have what they called "lead time." The planning, the budget, and all of this sort of thing that you would present to the legislature to meet your needs in the future. So this was a very busy time and he didn't get into the classroom as much as he would have wanted to.

Q: In the first decade that USF was open, what do you think were some of the biggest changes in the University?

Allen: Yes. There was a great demand for the University in this area. I remember when we first came, John made speeches and he predicted that in ten years we would have ten thousand or more students. Everyone in the community thought he was just daydreaming. The need was here and obviously meeting that need was his goal. And the demand continues. The growth of the University did not surprise him. He fully expected it. It surprised the community.

Q: Did the University seem to be growing at an astonishing rate in those early years?

Allen: Yes. There was great demand for the University in this area. I remember when we first came, John made speeches and he predicted that in ten years we would have ten thousand

or more students. Everyone in the community thought he was just daydreaming. The need was here and obviously meeting that need was his goal. And the demand continues. The growth of the University did not surprise him. He fully expected it. It surprised the community.

Q: Were programs like Fine Arts and the Medical School actually implemented while Dr. Allen was still president?

Allen: Yes. The Fine Arts program was very active. When I think back on the Fine Arts program, I am amazed that we were able to draw such outstanding figures. We had Carl Sandberg, Archibald McLeish, and a number of outstanding people like that and they were anxious and willing to come. We had music before we had any auditorium or theatre to have it in. We had concerts in the lecture room in the Chemistry building so that Fine Arts functioned right away. And in the plan, areas were laid out for the medical school because it was also obvious that this was an area where growth existed and that a medical school would have to come as part of the growth. So before we left the University, the first dean of the Medical School was hired and the first staff member.



John and Grace Allen posed behind the Foucault Pendulum in the Chemistry building shortly before Dr. Allen's retirement from the University of South Florida.

Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Grace Allen.

Q: After you retired from the University of South Florida, did you keep in contact with programs and people there?

Allen: When we retired, we went to Jacksonville. We went to the University of North Florida. That was planned as a two-year university with graduate work where they have juniors, seniors and master's degree programs. So John was invited to go to the University of North Florida as a consultant. He stayed there for two years while they did the planning and the staffing and that kind of thing. When they opened and took their first classes, we moved back to Tampa.

Q: When we think back on the years that you were here planning and the years you were here after the University was open, what are your most pleasant memories of the University of South Florida? What things do you think back on with particular fondness?

Allen: The University, of course, was like a child and so it was a case of giving birth to this, and as a child you love it and feel continued pride just as if your child has grown up and married and was successful all on his own. That is the way I feel about the University now, just with a great pride and love for the place and a delight in being able to participate in the things that it offers. I have been delighted with the programs for senior citizens and it's a real joy to be able to go to concerts and plays and partake in the things that the University continues to offer. So as I say, I feel like it is a child that has grown to successful maturity.