8-7-1985

Jesse S. Binford oral history interview by Nancy Hewitt, August 7, 1985

Jesse S. Binford (Interviewee)
Nancy A. Hewitt (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Other Education Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh/4

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Historical University Archives at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

Copyright, 2007, University of South Florida. All rights, reserved.

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.
Hewitt: I am speaking this afternoon with Dr. Jessie Binford, Professor of Chemistry, who arrived at the University of South Florida in 1961, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Let me ask you first of all, what your first contact with USF was and what made you decide to come here?

Binford: I read about it in the New York Times. It was a new university, one of the first in a generation of universities. I was in California and my in-laws sent me a copy of an article from the New York Times. That was my first introduction. I was interested in making a change at the time and I sent letters to the University inquiring about it. That is how it all developed.

Hewitt: Do you remember what your first response was when you first actually saw the campus of USF?

Binford: Do you mean my response or how I felt about it?

Hewitt: Yes.

Binford: Oh, I guess it was "in", the modern look, the clean white buildings and the bright sunshine and all of that.

Hewitt: Now I understand--I have asked other people about the College of Basic Studies and some of the other academic programs--at least part of your fame at this university comes from the fact that you rode a bicycle to campus as opposed to an automobile. Could you tell me why? It would seem like riding a bike was rather a normal thing to do in a state like Florida. How did you manage to turn this into a notorious situation?
Well, I was a victim of circumstances naturally. You might say all cyclists carry a chip on their shoulder. It seemed the reasonable thing to do living about two miles from campus. It was a little too far to walk and too short to drive a car. So I would ride my bike. I bought the bike out in California, and it was the first time since school days that I had ridden bikes and I didn't realize that they had gears on them. They were really nice, and it was easy to ride. So it seemed like the logical thing to do. So I would bring my bike to campus and park on the first floor of the Chemistry building. At that time Dr. Solomon and I were the only people on campus riding bikes, including the students. Doing this for a few months we both received tickets on the same day saying that we were parked out of a designated area. As I understood it, the designated area was the parking lot where the cars were, but there was no bicycle rack. So both of us were locking our bikes up to the railing over in the first floor of the Chemistry building. We both decided that we would appeal this ticket because it didn't seem fair to us. There were alot of bicycle thefts at that time. So we posted bonds; it was a dollar each. We went before the traffic committee; of course we wanted to take a lawyer with us. Dr. Whitaker, in the Chemistry department, whose brother was a lawyer was willing to be our lawyer; but they wouldn't allow us to have a lawyer and they would not allow us to have fellow bicyclists if we could have found any to attend the meeting. We got nowhere because they wouldn't consider the fairness of the rule, but only whether we had parked in an undesignated location or not. So we lost the appeal and we lost our bond and that was that. About a month later--I wasn't parking my bicycle on the first floor of the Chemistry building but on the third floor of the Chemistry building--I parked my bike in my research lab and this
seemed to me to be the only alternative to parking in the parking lot. Someone unlocked the door on my research lab and put a ticket on my bike. I believe it was the same person that gave me my first ticket. But anyhow I got another ticket. I decided that this one I wouldn't appeal because the traffic committee wouldn't consider the rule itself, but only whether it was parked illegally. And I got a notice that it was delinquent after the prescribed length of time and the penalty was now two dollars. Then another notice that said it was delinquent again and then the penalty was three dollars; and if that three dollars wasn't paid by a certain date then all my parking privileges would be revoked for any vehicle that I owned, and it would be impounded if found and would be towed away at my own expense. So at this point I started locking my bicycle up very tightly with lots of chains and locks. By this time a bicycle rack had appeared in the parking lot by the Chemistry building, and I locked the bike to that rack. There were a number of false alarms that Physical Plant was coming over. Every time they brought a truck over to fix the plumbing, some students would run up and down the halls saying that they were going to take our bikes. Then the faculty would run out, I would run, and students would run out and it would be a false alarm. Nobody was trying to take the bikes. One time Dr. Rawning came out with his cameras and took a picture of it which I showed you here. When my wife and I would come up to the theatre in the evening, of course, I was worried about bringing my car on campus, so we would park over at the University Apartments, which were not University property at the time. They were private apartments. On at least one occasion, some students saw us and stopped their cars and wanted to know what we were doing. We were walking over to the theatre, and, of course, then you would wear a suit and tie. My wife had hose on and a dress, all fancied up. He insisted
on throwing the boxes out of his car and giving us a ride over to the theatre. Well, this went on for about a week while I stewed, fretted, and wondered how it was all going to turn out. Then, all of a sudden, in the mail I got a notice that the security office had received three dollars from an anonymous donor to cover the fine. They gave me a receipt for it, and told me that my parking privileges were restored. I neglected to say that at the time my parking privileges were revoked, a letter was sent to the Dean of Liberal Arts from the chairman of the Traffic Committee notifying him, that was Dean Cooper, that the parking privileges were revoked and copies were sent to Dr. Ashford, who was Director of the Natural Science Division, and Robert Denard, who was the business manager. I still to this day don't know who the anonymous donor was. I suppose I owe him a little gratitude if I knew who he was.

Hewitt: Well, no one else on campus told me that they were the anonymous donor. The Traffic Committee doesn't seem to be one of those powerful committees on campus in this day and age. What kind of significance did the Traffic Committee have in those days in terms of the ability to sway the administration?

Binford: I think you are mistaken about the Traffic Committee. They have always had a very strong person as chairman of the Traffic Committee. Today it is the Dean of Natural Sciences, Dean Mandell. Before him, for a number of years, it was Dean Ed Cox, Dean of the College of Engineering. They were both very strong personalities and strong-willed persons. In those days it was Clyde Hill, who was Director of the Physical Plant. I mentioned to you before that they made him a Dean of the Physical Plant in order to give him a little more recognition. Very prominent on the committee was Elliot
Hardaway, who was the librarian. That may not seem like a very powerful position, but he was one of the two original employees of the University. The other one being President Allen. I think the first appointment he made was Elliot Hardaway. After Mr. Denard resigned, Elliot Hardaway was the one the president chose to take his place as the top financial officer of the University. So I think the Traffic Committee represented a lot of power. It was a very close-knit group. I think they made a decision that there weren't going to be bicycles on this campus. I don't know why. Maybe it was the experience from the University of Florida or something like that. They probably thought they would be better off without them. So this was part of the plan.

Hewitt: Now were you a tenured faculty member by the time all of this broke out into the open?

Binford: I'm sure I was.

Hewitt: Were you still here with your bicycle?

Binford: I was still here. This was in '63. No, I wasn't tenured because I came in '61 and this all happened in the spring of '63. So you could say I was young and foolhardy.

Hewitt: Well, you certainly struck a blow for bicycle riders for the next 25 years. Now there actually are bicycle racks. I assume we should name them all after you. You mentioned before we started the interview that the bicycle story was one of two stories that you felt that you had particular knowledge of on this campus. Let me just ask you what other event you were involved in that you think is particularly notable in the early history of USF.
Binford: I think the tutorial program that we had in 1968. This was during a very rough period in the country. Maybe you don't remember, but Martin Luther King was killed in 1968 and, of course, John F. Kennedy in 1963. We had the Tampa race riots in 1967. There was a lot of concern about race relations and that of course spilled over onto the University campus. Through some connections with my church, which is the Congregational Church, we were aware of some tutorial programs that were going on in the inner city housing projects and the public schools. I thought we should start a tutorial program with the very young, where you seem to have most of the difficulty, at the time the children are developing their intelligence and learning the language. Why not have the tutorial program there? There was also a lot of interest at that time in Head Start programs and early childhood education. So we started out with some contacts with some black leaders in the area down in the housing projects like Ponce de Leon and College Hill. We contacted university students that were interested in tutoring. And we just started a little program. Here is a clipping from the Oracle in March of 1968. These are a couple of the early tutors. This is Judy Solomon now. At the time I forget what her name was and Rosemary Allrich who was my graduate student in Chemistry working on her masters degree. And this is "Lucky Alley" which is a house in which one of the black kids lived, Ellisteen Riggins. She was such a terror. So they would take their bag of toys, picture books, and teaching aids down with them, and they would tutor the kids a couple of times a week and just primarily try and draw them out in conversations. We would always talk to the mothers, too, about how important this was for them to converse with the children because this is where they learned to speak. This was a very small project. It only had
about 18 or 20 tutors the first year. And then I went on a kind of sabbatical. I guess it was a Fulbright Fellowship. I was gone for 13 months. When I came back I found out that a student group had picked it up; they called themselves "Intensive Tutorial" and they were operating out of the Sociology department. I know Bob Warner, in American Ideas, picked it up and gave credit to students. They were each suppose to have projects, of one kind or another, and he would allow this as one of the projects. They were able to get a lot of students out of those courses. There were maybe 500 tutors. I've talked with some black teachers in the area and they didn't know what to do with all these bright kids coming in. So the thing was quite active. Intensive Tutorial kept going for five or six years and now there is something else that took its place. As I look back on it now, one of the main benefits of it was the education it gave the students that went down, the upper middle class white male and female. Just the experience of going into the homes and into the projects and meeting with the blacks on their own ground probably had as much benefit as anything else we did. That is a very significant part of my idea of the history of USF.

Hewitt: That sounds like a wonderful program. Since it seems like there would be tutoring in basic language skills and math skills, did you get any of your chemistry students to participate in this project or were there students from all different areas on campus?

Binford: The tutors were from all over. We advertised in the Oracle for tutors. We had a little money from the Danforth Foundation and special projects' money. The church that I am a member of rented a house in the area and hired a black minister to keep an eye on things down there. It was a place for us to store the teaching materials.
Hewitt: So it was really a combination of community and University resources. I have heard over and over again that USF is suppose to have an urban mission and have links with the community, but this sounds like an early project that really put that into effect.

Binford: Yes, I always worked very closely with black leaders in the community. Mrs. Wilson, who was a high school English teacher at Middletown High School, which is in the area, Harold Reddick, who is an active union organizer--these people gave us very good advice. One was to go door-to-door to identify the mothers that wanted their children tutored. They would always advise us in a time of crisis and advise us about what we should or should not do. I think thanks to them we never had any trouble at all. You might expect sending 400 or 500 white middle class kids into an all-black housing project would be asking for trouble. But we never had any trouble. I think that is the main reason, that we were in contact with the black leaders there.

Hewitt: Let me ask you about one other event at USF since you were hired in 1961. It seems like the major event in that year and I guess the following year was the Johns Committee investigation and various spin-offs of that investigation. As a first year faculty member at USF, did you have much contact with the Johns Committee or did it sort of startle you coming to a brand new job and being confronted with something like the Johns Committee?

Binford: It startled me in that you had a legislator that was looking for communists and homosexuals in the University. That startled me. That was a real shock to me. Although I was raised a southerner in Texas, I had gone through college and working for several years at the University of Texas and several
years in California teaching. I really didn't expect a legislator would come around to a University looking for that sort of thing. I didn't have any personal contact. It was a newspaper article to me. I didn't know any of the individuals involved. So far as I know, they left everyone in Chemistry alone. We were pretty safe. I don't have any political ideas anyhow. So I didn't hear anything about it. I got involved in the aftermath when I think some of our faculty may have been testing, or didn't realize that they were really serious. I was on the Grebstein Committee. In October of '62 was when Grebstein got his letter from the president. He was charged with having circulated, for assigned reading in his class in English 221, Advanced Writing, on or about October the 5th, 1962, a mimeograph copy of the "No Nothing Bohemians" by Norman Podhoretz, which is an essay which Podhoretz wrote for the New York Times and published in the Partisan Review. "You are charged further with having stated to your class that this material should not be shown to the Johns Committee." I'm sure that must have been a joke. But that was a charge. "You are charged with having willfully violated the intent and the spirit of the Board of Control policy quoted above, which had been stated and published three weeks earlier." So he was advised then that he was suspended from his duties at the University of South Florida. And then they appointed a committee to see whether he should have done it or not. The president appointed a committee, and I was on the committee.

Hewitt: This was before your notoriety from the bicycle, so they didn't realize that you were not . . .

Binford: Oh that's right, this is the year before that!
Hewitt: I'm not sure you would have ever been appointed after that. Were the faculty members on the committee supposed to make some sort of judgement about whether this was appropriate class material? What was the faculty member's role?

Binford: "Due process involves our faculty members having an opportunity to explain what he did and why he did it thereby letting the ultimate decision be based on the facts brought out in hearings. Closed hearings: a committee of his peers on the faculty . . . " This is from the Board of Control Policy Manual. "This university committee is to be appointed by the president." That is what was chosen. Grebstein had several alternatives. He could have had a public hearing before the Board of Control or an inter-university committee with various faculty from different universities. But he chose to have a committee of his peers on the faculty.

Hewitt: Did this committee call witnesses?

Binford: Oh did we ever! We ran off xerox material. That was in the old days when they weren't so fast either. It was one sheet at a time. We had witnesses from our own university and faculty from other universities. It seemed like a continuous hearing for a month, where we had various witnesses come before us. Of course, there was Grebstein himself.

Hewitt: What was the outcome of this case?

Binford: The immediate outcome wasn't good. He was reinstated, but he was censured by the president for using poor judgement or something of this sort. We thought that he should have been free to choose his own materials and we thought the materials that he chose were not in poor taste. We didn't think that he should have been censured. I thought that he should not have
been suspended in the first place. You only suspend a person when he is a
danger to his colleagues or his students. Grebstein clearly wasn't. I
didn't like the way he was suspended. There was a Board of Control meeting,
that is like the Board of Regents now, out of town. Grebstein was called up
to the Board of Control meeting by the president to confirm whether he had
or had not used this material in his class. He was suspended on the spot.
I think once you suspend a person that you have already taken some action
against his reputation that can't be erased by reinstatement at a later
date. So I didn't think he should have been suspended. There was no danger
involved. There was no emergency involved, unless it was some emergency
with the Board of Control. That was my own feeling and I think now that it
is possible to, in some neutral way, give a person a leave or something of
that sort, without suspending them pending investigation by a committee. I
thought it was wrong on both accounts, that he was suspended and that he was
censured. Grebstein must have, too, because he resigned shortly after he
was reinstated.

Hewitt: So he just left the University shortly thereafter?

Binford: Yes. He left the University.

Hewitt: Obviously your first couple of years here were rather busy to say the least.
Alot of the faculty that I have talked to have talked about the fact that by
the mid-'60s there was a real transition at USF from an emphasis on teach-
ing, innovative teaching, interdisciplinary teaching and a shift towards
emphasis on publication and research, or at least that the balance between
those two areas had changed. I am wondering whether in a field like the
natural sciences if that kind of a change was as significant or as important
in terms of either the development of your own career or just your sense of how Natural Sciences developed as a program?

Binford: No, in Natural Sciences it was understood, from the beginning, that that (research activity) was an important aspect of your future. Maybe not to the degree that it is now. I think now it is difficult to get tenure without research activity. I know it is in Natural Sciences. In the early years you could get tenure without being extremely active in research. But it was always considered a . . . Let's say when promotions and salaries come around it was known by everyone that research was important in those considerations. So I think there is much more emphasis now than there was, but it has been more of a gradual transition in Natural Science. Perhaps it is more traumatic in the last year or two than it has been over the twenty years.

Hewitt: So your trauma just came later!

Binford: Maybe another order of magnitude of expectations in the last year or two.

Hewitt: When you look back over your 24 years here at USF, what do you see as the most significant developments, either positive or negative, at this University?

Binford: I was afraid you were going to ask that. Positively, there has been a huge impact on the community of Tampa. Just the sheer numbers of our graduates that have passed through the doors and passed out again, hopefully picking something up in between, has had a great impact on Tampa. You can't go into a high school without finding a bunch of teachers that learned their chemistry at USF. You can't walk into any business without finding USF students. Alot of these students wouldn't have college degrees if USF hadn't been
here. That's great as far as the positive side. I'm very happy about that. On the negative side, I was always a faculty government type person. I thought the faculty should have a very large say in how the University is run, especially on the academic side. This just never did develop. My earlier interests were in getting a constitution for the University and I fought for that for years and years and never did get it with the original president. President Allen just would not accept it. I always wanted a faculty senate. We finally got those things, but too late I'm afraid. When President Mackey came he was willing for us to have a faculty senate and a constitution. I was a speaker of the senate or the chairman of the senate. I started off being called a chairman and Mackey said that was sexist, and so we became speakers. For three consecutive terms, I was the speaker of the faculty senate. They since made a rule that you can't be speaker more than two terms in a row. I have a hard time looking back and seeing things that we accomplished. Maybe not having to turn in your grades until one weekend has past after the final exams. We got a couple of those kinds of things through. You can't say that the faculty senate is a strong force or that faculty government is a strong force on this campus. That has been the biggest disappointment.

Hewitt: Well thank you very much Dr. Binford. I have enjoyed your stories.