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Albert M. Gessman oral history interview by Nancy Hewitt, July 18, 1985

Albert M. Gessman (Interviewee)

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Hewitt: I am speaking today with Dr. Albert Gessman, Professor of Ancient Studies at the University of South Florida, as part of the Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Could you begin by telling us what your first contact was with the University of South Florida?

Gessman: I could possibly be quite brief about the preliminaries. They wanted me at the University of Minnesota. For health reasons I had to decline because of the climate up there and for health reasons I was to stay south of the snow line. So they told me that if I couldn't come to Minnesota that there was a university being founded in Tampa, Florida. They encouraged me to send my application there. The dean at that time was Dr. Cooper. So I sent him my application and I was invited to come for an interview. Dr. Cooper grabbed me! But as I said the first year I preferred to stay where I was at that time in Alabama because I wanted to get some students through their graduation. During that year I was helping Dr. Cooper in establishing a curriculum for languages. So this was my first contact. Then in the fall of 1961 I came here. For the first semester I had only a couple of classes in modern languages and I believe it was already the first time we had a Latin class. By that time I became the program chairman. We didn't have departments at that time. I became the program chairman for the classics. Later departments were developed over the years until it became a rather comprehensive core curriculum.

Hewitt: When you first arrived here from Alabama, do remember your first image of the University of South Florida?
Gessman: I don't know what you mean by image, but it was a sand hill plantation. There were only four buildings here. The rest was a sand hill plantation. So this was the visual impression. But what can you expect of a new university. Of course academically, I could not have an impression yet because it was just beginning. We did hope to eventually establish a prestigious university in the academic world, but that was in its first stages.

Hewitt: When you first came I assume you worked closely with Dr. Cooper on the development of the language program?

Gessman: Yes. There was no chairman named yet at that time. Dr. Cooper really acted as a kind of chairman even though he was a historian. He was not familiar with all the details that I acquired for a language program.

Hewitt: One of the comments that has been frequently made is that in the development of the early curriculum at USF that the emphasis was really on teaching rather than on research and publication.

Gessman: That is correct.

Hewitt: Then your first years ... since languages are something that I would guess would require a very specialized kind of knowledge to teach ... Did you do most of the teaching yourself early on or did you hire other specialists in the department?

Gessman: As a matter of fact until the demise of the Department of Classics in 1974 I was teaching alone, but I had a couple of student teachers in 1974. Then I had adjunct faculty. So there was, for instance, a couple of members from the English Department that were teaching Classical Mythology or Classical Literature. So I had, as a matter of fact, in the last year of the
existence of the department, I had five people working for me part-time. I was doing it full-time.

Hewitt: There have also been several comments made in various interviews that the relationship between faculty, staff, and administrators in those early years was much closer than it is these days.

Gessman: It was. Today you only know the face and the name of the president. You practically never talk to him. It is all distant. Of course, it is an institution with about two thousand faculty now. What can you expect in such a mass institution. At one time I knew all of the faculty members during the first few years. Today I don't even know all the names of the faculty members in the next door department. It is just getting too big.

Hewitt: Since you did work closely with Dr. Cooper, could describe what it was like working with him and what he was like as a dean?

Gessman: I think he was an excellent dean. We couldn't wish for a better one. I was in favor of him. He was an excellent person.

Hewitt: How long was he the dean over your program?

Gessman: He lasted until Mackey came. I believe that was in 1971. As you know, President Allen retired and then Mackey came and destroyed practically everything that had been built for more than a decade. Cooper was kicked sidewise. As his task he was asked to write a history of the University of South Florida. He ceased to be dean and as a matter of fact, the College of Liberal Arts was completely destroyed and broken up into colleges of Social Science, Natural Sciences, and Language/Literature. Each then received its
own dean. So Cooper had no function anymore. Then he died unfortunately, I believe it was in 1973.

Hewitt: When the College of Liberal Arts was broken up and you moved into the College of Language and Literature, how did that change your department? Did you have to make changes in terms of the curriculum or faculty?

Gessman: No. I am quite not sure about the administrative consequences, but with our first two years—we were no longer, of course, under the College of Basic Studies because the College of Basic Studies was abolished completely, and nothing was really put in its place. The students were then called DUS. It was not an organized body as the College of Basic Studies used to be.

Hewitt: Because then you just got students who were taking language courses but whom you didn't necessarily have contact with in any other way because they might be from a different college?

Gessman: No.

Hewitt: The Department of Classics existed until 1974?

Gessman: With name changes. It began as the Department of Classics. Two years later it was renamed into Classics and Linguistics. That existed for several years under that title. In 1968 Linguistics was broken out of the department. I suppose there was a good reason for it because some people were unhappy with the way I practiced linguistics. I have a European education. In Europe, at that time, linguistics was something different from what it is considered in America. It was basically comparative historic linguistics. Here they primarily understand descriptive linguistics. I was an expert in historical and comparative linguistics. So there was a good reason
There was no interest and there is still no significant interest in the United States in these two disciplines. They are the classical disciplines of linguistics or the disciplines of classical linguistics. So it is a different thing. I still have a couple of courses, at least theoretically in linguistics. One I give every year. This is the structural linguistics—"Languages Types of the World." Occasionally, historical linguistics. So this is a graduate course, but it is not frequently given because there are not enough students to want it. There is no interest here. More interest goes towards applied linguistics. For instance, they have a lot of students in English as a second language, but this is applied linguistics so this is not my field really. Then Linguistics was established as an extra department. I was still a member of that department. I still taught courses in it, but it was an extra department and we assumed the title of Classics and Ancient Studies because it also includes civilization courses which cannot be called Classics. Something like that existed until 1974 at which time a profound change was instituted and the Classical Languages were broken out of the department and assigned to the Language Department, which was first a modern language department, but then became a foreign language department. So I was left only with the civilization courses and a few other courses like Middle Eastern Mythology and things like that. That classical mythology going the languages became a miracle. Mythology became a language. This is administrative wisdom. For one more year it remained the Department of Ancient Studies only. Then that was abolished together with a few other small departments. So I was shoved into Religious Studies with the rest of my program. This was in 1975. Since then for the past ten years I have been in the Religious Studies Department.
Hewitt: Do you still teach languages?

Gessman: What was not broken out because nobody knew it anyway was Sanskirt and Hebrew. But Sanskirt died of a natural death because they began to enforce minimum numbers of students in their classes and there weren't enough. So the last time I had only seven students in Sanskirt and the year after that only two so then the whole thing died of a natural death. Hebrew is still taught. So this is the only language that is left now for me to teach.

Hewitt: You also were involved in organizing Judaic Studies at USF and how did that program develop?

Gessman: With high hopes that haven't been completely fulfilled. Our department head was trying to get the cooperation of the Jewish community here in Tampa and it started out quite well. There was some interest, but somehow the whole thing fell asleep. So we do have a sequence of courses. A person who wants to major in Religious Studies can choose Judaic Studies and the curriculum is different from the general religious studies. There hasn't been very many students that were interested in that.

Hewitt: It sounds like, partly because of your own areas of expertise and partly because of the department that you have been in, to a great extent you have maintained a sort of interdisciplinary perspective on teaching, which was part of the early mission of USF.

Gessman: I suppose it is because when the department was abolished they were to incorporate what was left. It would fit into Humanities, it would partially fit into History, it would fit partially into Religious Studies, and it would probably fit into some other slots, but a choice had to be made. So
it went under Religious Studies. There is a certain overlap of course because we are teaching Middle Eastern Mythology, which deals with ancient pagan religions. We have Biblical Hebrew. I have a pretty unique class called the Tongues of the Bible which is an introduction to Biblical linguistics. So there is a partial overlap. Of course, the Hebrew Civilization, the Byzantine Civilization, the Egyptian Civilization also have to do with the history of the Bible and the history of the Hebrews. It partially fits in, but partially it would rather fit into linguistics or into humanities or something like that. By nature it is an interdisciplinary field.

Hewitt: When you first came to USF the emphasis was on interdisciplinary education to a greater extent.

Gessman: Yes, to a much greater extent than now.

Hewitt: I assume the emphasis then, of what I heard, was also very much on teaching?

Gessman: Yes.

Hewitt: How have the changes in the University's attitude towards both interdisciplinary education, research in place of teaching or research as an area of greater emphasis in the past years--how has that changed your experience at USF?

Gessman: I had been publishing quite a bit of articles also. It seems when I came here I brought six books. They are still used as textbooks. They are not necessarily textbooks in the common sense of the word because there is a lot of independent research in it. It is not just quoted from Ellsworth. In as much as I have instituted classes and courses here that are not generally given, there was practically no academic text available or if so, then at
great cost. For instance, I instituted a course here on the History of the
Script. Of course, the emphasis was on the western script. It is called
the History of the Alphabet. There are numbers of books that deal with the
development of writing. Some of them are not usable here because they are
written in German. There are quite a few. There are some that are written
in English. The best is the Derringer. These are two volumes that deal
with the whole world. At the time when I bought it many years ago it cost
forty dollars. So really there is no possibility of getting a textbook. So
this is why I wrote one.

Hewitt: So for you teaching and writing went hand in hand since you needed to . . .

Gessman: The same thing goes for Biblical Linguistics. I wrote a textbook for that
because there is nothing available, at least not in the English language.
In many areas you have excellent books written in German or French, but they
are not usable because my students don't know German or French for the most
part. There is not too much in English. So there is about six books and
about two dozen articles that I wrote in the beginning of 1962. So it
really didn't concern me too much except that it was difficult to get credit
for these writings because it goes all by a pre-established pattern. You
have the concept of the textbook. So you don't get credit for writing a
textbook. If you write another type of book it is alright. If you write a
textbook there is no credit for it. Of course, there is not a precise divi-
sion line between a textbook and a non-textbook. You can use a book in
English. Just, for example, you use a novel written by some modern author.
It is not a textbook, but you can use it as a textbook! So it is very
unfair as a matter of fact to make this division and then you have the
difference between the refereed journals and the non-refereed journals. Non-refereed journals doesn't mean too much. It all depends.

Hewitt: Since you originally taught in Czechoslovakia, was the system in Europe that you were used to substantially different from the system in the United States?

Gessman: Yes, of course. The whole educational system was different. If I am using American terms, these are only equivalents. This is not quite the same thing. You have a Bachelor of Arts for instance. This is derived from the Latin baccalaureus and in France they still call it baccaloria. The same thing is abitur in Germany. In Czechoslovakia it was called matura. This is really the end of a curriculum that includes the American high school and the first two years of college. It is an eight year school and whatever it is called in Europe. In French it is called a lycee. There are different names but it is basically the same pattern. There is no equivalent in the anglo-saxon countries because when we have first class to eight class in the institutes, there is an incision there. The classes went to six or represented by high school and the classes seven and eight already freshman and sophomore year of the American college. The whole thing is very different.

Hewitt: Did you find students to be very different in the United States from Europe?

Gessman: Of course. The first thing that strikes you, that almost slaps you in the face is the unpreparedness of American college students. When you go to a university in Europe, most European countries . . . I am not sure that it is still the same thing behind the iron curtain because they have made a mess
out of it. In the free countries of Europe, a person that comes to a university has already had a certain number of years of courses in all the significant areas like history. In my school I had in Austria we had eight years of history. We had eight years geography. We had seven years of Latin and four years of Greek. We had eight years of mathematics, including calculus. When you got your degree you were really thoroughly prepared. The students here are just ready to . . . The last week in U.S. News and World Report showed that students were tested in Miami and eight percent of the people that took the test could not even find Miami on the map. You understand what I mean by that? They know nothing about foreign countries. As far as American history goes, I suppose it begins with their birth years or something like that. Very few people knew who Adolf Hitler was or even Benito Mussolini or something like that. Joseph Stalin for that matter. They don't know any geography. When I tell some people that I was born in Austria they begin to ask me about the kangaroos. I am not lying, that actually happened to me because they confused Austria with Australia! So it really slaps you in the face. I don't know what they do in high schools, but they don't even teach English because up to the senior students here nobody can write a straight English sentence and cannot spell. Their spelling is terrible. In Europe the spelling test takes place before you go into a middle school. If you go to a school in Europe before you are accepted you have to pass a test. The test includes a rigorous exam in whatever the language of the country is. If you don't pass it you are simply not admitted. But here you are even admitted to college in spite of the fact that you can't spell. So there is a tremendous difference in that. A native American probably cannot imagine the consternation that a person in education elsewhere feels when he faces the American student.
Hewitt: Since there is such a dramatic difference between the students you are accustomed to in Europe and the student here, have you seen many differences in the students here over the twenty-four years that you have been at USF?

Gessman: I suppose there is. I'm not sure. I cannot possibly prove it. My impression is that it is getting worse. For instance, the spelling skills are deteriorating. I suppose this is also due to the fact that the emphasis today is no longer on reading but on watching television. It is not a school imposed fact, but normally before there was radio and television everybody was a reader. Now since the mass communication media has appeared the emphasis has been shifting to them and the people don't read. Of course, extensive reading is one of the means of learning how to spell because you cannot acquire it only in school classes. The readership is diminished except for some blood and thunder stories perhaps. I think it is deteriorating. I'm not sure of course, I cannot prove it. It is just a feeling. So are the skills in history and geography getting worse.

Hewitt: Do you think that the original vision of the curriculum here which was oriented towards basic studies would be more helpful in getting students prepared, at least after they come to college if they are not prepared when they arrive, to teaching them basic skills?

Gessman: I don't think that there is too much of a difference because while we don't have a formal college of basic studies, we have requirements for undergraduate students to take a certain number of credits in various areas. I believe it is eight credits in Humanities, eight credits in Natural Sciences and so on. The principal is still valid to give them a broad education.
The idea is excellent, but of course, it is only on paper. The students take eight credits in social sciences and they still don't even know the presidents of the United States in the nineteenth century. Or they don't know where Panama is or where Egypt is, something like that. In practice I don't know where the cure for this disease is, but it is definitely not a desirable thing. It is so important to be informed about other countries and cultures. There is not love for that here. There are of course some people that are interested in it, but the bulk of the student population and even the bulk of the adult intellectuals are not very much given to that.

Hewitt: Since 1962 you have been the Editor and Chief of the USF Language Quarterly. How did you get involved in that project? How has that developed over the years?

Gessman: I brought the Language Quarterly with me from Alabama. I became enrolled in it. It started in Montgomery. I became associated with it in 1954. Eventually I really took the main responsibility for it in spite of the fact that I was not in Montgomery. Then the legislature said that there wasn't enough money for such a project. Then the Foreign Language Quarterly died. It was two years before I came here. I showed it to Dr. Cooper, and Dr. Cooper was very enthusiastic and he said that I could restart it here. The first issue came out in the fall of 1962. It was only a few pages. Now we have a blooming product. We have orders from all over the country and some from outside the country. We have some orders from the University of Nigeria in Africa. They have taken a liking to us. We were quite honored. I got a letter from France which asked me to supply some inside information about the Quarterly because they are doing a project. They have chosen two thousand scholarly journals from all over the world in all fields. Our
Language Quarterly was one of them. I think this is quite a compliment. It is all fields and all countries. So I sent the information, but I haven't heard from them yet. We will print it some time next year. It always takes a long time. It shows that the journal is very much estimated outside USF. USF does not estimate it at all.

Hewitt: So they don't see it as part of some kind of outreach program or an attempt to create . . .

Gessman: I don't even get credit for doing it. One should suppose for putting over four hundred hours a year of work into it, besides a full teaching load and having this international evaluation to speak for you, I suppose one should expect this is merit. But no, not here.

Hewitt: So you are giving USF a good image, but it is not . . .

Gessman: I think in a way it has put USF on the map because what would be the reason that for instance in Australia they should know about the University South Florida or in Israel or something like that. We have subscriptions from all these countries, not many, but they are there. A few copies go to Israel, a few copies go to India, to Turkey, to Japan, to the Philippines, and to Australia. We didn't solicit these subscriptions. We were approached. I suppose that this speaks quite well of the product. But there is no interest here. As a matter of fact, since 1975 the University has not been supporting the journal with anything. During the administration of Dr. Cooper, the College of Liberal Arts paid all the expenses like the printing and mailing. All of it was paid by the University. When Mackey came there was a complete reversal. So for a couple of years I did it out of my departmental budget. Then the chairman with a vote of five to four decided
that the journal should no longer be supported at all. I also lost my student aide that I once had. So it is now a one man operation. I do all the typing. This is where the four hundred hours comes from! All the typing, all the proofreading, and cutting the titles. As you can see all the titles are cut out of the individual letters. All that takes a lot of time. All the correspondence, filing, and everything is a one man operation. So this is the support we get from USF.

Hewitt: What would you say have been the best developments and the worst developments in the twenty-five years that you have been here at USF?

Gessman: I am not enough familiar with what happens university wide. After all they now have ten colleges or something like that. So in the beginning we knew of everything. It was small. But now it is very difficult. In general I would say that the first ten years were quite exciting and productive. Then of course came the break. I think Mackey ruined the whole thing.

Hewitt: So when you think back on those first ten years you think of it as really exciting?

Gessman: Yes. It was an exciting thing to build something, but then you saw everything practically destroyed. Not one brick remained on the other. I don't know why our new presidents are trying to impress their personal characteristics on the institution. So with Mackey everything was broken up and started fresh. I don't have the impression that it is very exciting now. It has become quite run-of-the-mill.

Hewitt: Thank you very much Dr. Gessman for participating in this USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project today. I appreciate you taking the time out from your many activities and I wish you the best of luck with the USF
Language Quarterly. It is a very exciting journal and I am sure your many hours are well spent.