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## Robert D. Whitaker oral history interview by Milly St. Julien, August 19, 1985

Robert D. Whitaker (Interviewee)

Milly St. Julien (Interviewer)

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DR. ROBERT WHITAKER

St. Julien: Today I am talking with Dr. Whitaker, Professor of Chemistry, for the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Dr. Whitaker, what was your first Contact with USF and why did you chose to come here? Could you also tell Us some of your first impressions?

Whitaker: At the time USF opened, I was a Professor of Chemistry at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, which happens to be my undergraduate alma mater. Naturally, with family in Tampa and a brother then serving in the state legislature, I am well aware that USF was in the process of being funded and actually opening its doors in 1960. I recall driving out on the little unpaved Fowler Avenue and viewing the area where the University was to be built. This was prior to the time of the real construction. I don't remember the year exactly, but obviously it was something prior to 1959 or 1960. So I heard about it basically through family and friends in the local area here. It just so happened that certain personal matters occurred that made it seem like a good thing to return to the state of Florida in the early '60's. Since I was already a professor at a chemistry department, it seemed normal to try and secure a job in the Chemistry Department at USF. So I submitted my application to the president.

St. Julien: So you actually came here in 1962?

Whitaker: September of 1962 was my first time on the job.

St. Julien: What were your first impressions of the physical appearance of the

University?

Whitaker: I thought it was interesting. I thought that the architecture was a good one for Florida. I had done my graduate work at the University of Florida in Gainesville where you had a strange mixture of the old and the traditional, and then later on they tried to bring it into a Florida-type atmosphere. It was clear that at least here they would try to have an architectural pattern that was uniform. There weren't many buildings. Its hard for us today to even recall that there were only a couple of buildings. There was the Administration building, the library, and the old Chemistry building which is now Life Science. We have every imaginable discipline housed in that Chemistry building. We had Psychology, Math, Biology, Chemistry . . .

St. Julien: Was that because of the School of Basic Studies that they put all those . . . Or just because they didn't have any . . .

Whitaker: No, just because . . . We even had alot of activity people . . . That was the building. There were just no buildings.

St. Julien: You mentioned that your brother was in the state legislature. What could you tell us about the founding of the University through the work of the legislature? How did we get a university in Tampa?

Whitaker: It was, as these things usually go, a political decision. The Tampa Bay area in the late '50's obviously was an area that was destined for a lot of growth. At that time I recall Sam Gibbons was our representative from this area who is now in Congress. He was instrumental in getting legislators to make the decision to put it here. My brother, I believe, served his first term in the State

House in 1958. Those were the critical years. I believe '56 is the year the University was chartered. I think the actual money didn't start flowing until about '58. When I arrived in '62, my brother had moved over to the Senate. He was the local state senator. In those days there was only one state senator from this area. It was a political fight and, of course, other areas were fighting for the location, and we were fortunate enough to have enough political savvy and power to get it placed. I think it was pretty obvious from demographic studies that it should probably go here. Of course, you have areas like Miami and Orlando, and they claimed they needed it. Of course, they subsequently got their university.

St. Julien: It is amazing that this place got it first.

Whitaker: Yes, I guess it is, except Miami already had the University of Miami. Aside from the University of Tampa, which is a rather small, private school, there was obviously a need in this area. I recall many people in the area were so thankful that finally they had an institution of higher learning where their children wouldn't have to run to Miami or . . .

St. Julien: So there really was a positive response in the community?

Whitaker: Definitely, yes.

St. Julien: What about the businesses? Do you think that they had a lot to do with getting the University in this area?

Whitaker: I'm not sure I can really make an informed statement on that because as I mentioned I was actually out of the state myself. Tampa was such a different place in the late '50's from what it is today. We see a bustling place

with two interstates intersecting and just growth out of site. Tampa was still a much smaller, more laid back community in the late '50's. We had no interstates. I'm sure that many businessmen actively supported places around the University. I think if they had opposed it, it wouldn't have happened. Just how much clout they carried I really can't say.

St. Julien: What could you tell us about the Chemistry Department at that time as compared to today?

Whitaker: There was, as you mentioned, a College of Basic Studies. There was also the College of Liberal Arts. All of us in Chemistry, at that time, held what was known as joint appointments. We were members of the College of Basic Studies and also members of the College of Liberal Arts, which Chemistry was under. We were expected to spend part of our time teaching the basic courses that all students took in the College of Basic Studies in areas of science as well as courses in chemistry and our specialty. Mine happened to be inorganic chemistry. I was the fifth person hired in Chemistry. I was hired when I was, I'm sure, because by that time we had progressed to the point that we needed an inorganic chemist. It was time to teach inorganic because the students who entered in 1960 were beginning to get to that level where they needed that. So we taught jointly. As I recall, all of us did that to varying degrees, some a little more in one college than the other, but we did have those joint appointments and that is the way I was hired. I basically had two different bosses.

St. Julien: How did that work? Was that a smooth . . .

Whitaker: It was a problem. I think it was one of the inevitable results of split responsibility that way. On the other hand, a few years later, when it was totally divided, and you had to make your decision to jump to one college or another, this was unfortunate, too, because those of us who decided to jump with the Liberal Arts were more or less forever cut off from Basic Studies. I enjoyed teaching some of those courses. I had a lot to do with developing the lab as a matter of fact.

St. Julien: Tell us about that.

Whitaker: Dr. Clarence Clark was the head of the Physical Science course which students had to take in the College of Basic Studies, and we had quite a few students even in those days. I think there were about 2500 students when I came in '62. We were adding somewhere between 500 and 1000 students each year. I had just happened to get involved with developing the laboratory that accompanied the Basic Studies courses. I was involved with physical science. I had nothing to do with biological sciences. For about a year one of my major responsibilities was seeing that the laboratory experiments worked, and then seeing that it was all set up for the students when they came to class. We taught all those classes right over in the old Chemistry building.

St. Julien: Was Dr. Allen supportive of any new projects that the Science Department might do that was not involved with the Liberal Arts?

Whitaker: Oh sure. Dr. Allen himself had a scientific background. He was very interested in all the basic studies. Of course, there is a lot of verbal support. Sometimes we thought maybe not enough of the other, but a lot of verbal

support stemming from the administration for the basic studies. The idea, at least administratively, was to make the dean of the College of Basic Studies on an absolute par with the dean of the other colleges. They supported it at least as long as the really tough decisions didn't have to be made on the tremendous numbers of students that where you really want to put your resources on. I think in later years it really became a problem and, of course, the first day that the Basic Studies was split off and faculty had to jump from one or the other and then I think the Basic Studies began to lose out. Really, alot of the faculty felt like they were being passed by or forgotten because they were in the Basic Studies program rather than in Liberal Arts. It was quite clear when I came in that I was expected to teach and this didn't bother me at all. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, I found it rather interesting.

St. Julien: When the school first started, Dr. Allen had the mission and he was a very strong believer in this mission. From what I understand, It was basically an emphasis on teaching rather than on research and on the students and the faculty joining together to accomplish this mission. Could you tell us something about . . . I understand that everybody had to read a certain book?

Whitaker: The "All University Book." Actually I only heard about that. That had gone by the boards as really an expected sort of thing where I think they had seminars and discussions about the book as the months went by. But that had already dropped by the boards by 1962 although I was aware of it because they had been doing it for the first two years.

St. Julien: How do you see the change from teaching to research and would you describe

how that came about? Who was influential in changing that?

Whitaker: That is a long, deep story. Let me tell you a little story that happened. Soon after I came on campus I met the dean. In fact this might have been during the time that I was doing some interviewing. But in any rate, it was near the time that I actually came on in 1962. I happened to meet Dean Cooper. I was interested in letting him know that I had one or two more publications in a technical journal since I had sent my resume. That was one of the first things I mentioned. He gave me a little straight lecture in which he informed me that research was all well and good and he was very happy if his faculty could do that, but the number one priority at USF was teaching the undergraduate students. I should realize that if I were hired that would be what I was expected to spend most of my time on. Any time left over or anytime I wanted to make on my own, I could do some research. So this was the atmosphere upon which I came and it was more or less the prevailing administrative atmosphere that our first mission was teach undergraduate students. Research and scholarship was a good thing for the individual and for the institution, but our main mission was teaching. There was no question about that. Naturally you begin to hire more and more faculty. What do you look at when you hire faculty? To judge their background and qualifications? This was even before the days that student rating teachers has come much into vogue, so you couldn't even look into that. So how do you know if somebody is a good teacher? Well, of course you get comments from supervisors, colleagues, and there is word of mouth. But quantitatively

speaking, how do you judge the faculty? Well, you judge them on things that you can attach numbers to like publications and how much grant money they have got. So we began to attract faculty whose major accomplishments were more and more and more in the area of scholarship and research and many of them were excellent teachers as well. But I think you can see where this leads. Ultimately, you are going to get a large group of highly educated people, faculty, and their interests. They have been brought in because they have published this in the paper and they got this much money. They aren't going to quit doing that, and they certainly don't want to no matter what they are told by their dean. So a sort of an ambivalent situation. I don't want to make it appear that we had a lot of bad, lousy teachers that were interested only in research. It was amazing in those early years. A lot of research was done with undergraduate students because it's all we had. I know in Chemistry a lot of undergraduates published. They would do work and publish before their graduation. That is far less likely now with a graduate program. But we were very fortunate. A lot of very good teachers also were available from this faculty. I think that was the basic reason that it was just sort of a built-in self-destruct mechanism that was in process as you hire more and more. As I said we were growing so rapidly in those days. I know in Chemistry it was virtually the same, and we had to begin to add faculty quite rapidly. I was number five in 1962 and I really can't tell you the number of full-time faculty. It was a fairly large department.

St. Julien: How did the administration change their view from Dr. Allen to Dr. Mackey

to Dr. Dean? We have had several presidents since you have been here.

Whitaker: There were differences without a doubt. Of course, Harris Dean was here in the Allen time. He was not so much of a change in outlook. He only served for only a year or so. Dr. Mackey was quite a change. I think he had much more of the outlook that his duty was to administrate the place rather than try to put in place with any sort of fixed educational goals. I think in the Allen administration the idea was that administration had to be done, but their basic purpose was to institute the educational goals or see that they were carried out. One of these very strong ones was that basic education should be emphasized very strongly. For various reasons problems developed around this and the College of Basic Studies had its problems. Of course, by the time Mackey came, his attitude was that if we were having problems with something he would get rid of it. So he was much the administrator. He had a background in Washington in the Transportation Department and his idea was to get in and move people around, eliminate them if necessary, or eliminate colleges if necessary, and let's get this administration where we will have a well-oiled administrative machine.

St. Julien: Did it work in your opinion?

Whitaker: I don't want to bad mouth Cecil Mackey. I'm not sure that it's possible to really effectively administrate any place the size of South Florida or any of our state universities that have gotten so large. It [is] such a diverse animal with every different area of the University pulling for its own little empire. It's probably an impossible situation. It's a diversity of interests and you

hope that the whole thing won't crash somewhere down the road. I did have a lot of personal conflicts with Cecil Mackey because it turned out that during his tenure the effort to organize the faculty and have collective bargaining all took place. I was very much involved in that area. So naturally, no administrator wants another group of people they have to fight with. He was very much opposed to this as the Board or Regents was. So I found myself, in the early '70's, much in conflict with him. I don't think that all the problems of USF certainly by any means stems from the actions of anyone. It's built into the system. It's just too big in my estimate.

St. Julien: You said that you were involved in the formation of the union. Tell us something about that. What were some of the incentives to getting a union established? How was it received by the faculty? I can see how it wasn't received by the administration.

Whitaker: They didn't like it. Many of the faculty felt highly alienated and felt the need for a collective voice to express some of our concerns. A lot of it was for basic security. Of course, the tenure was in place, but there were little rules and regulations or even guidelines to follow and how promotions were to take place, who was to be granted tenure, or on what basis would they even be considered. I remember back in those years, you had to be considered for a promotion. I think that is the basic reason. It was just a sort of a feeling by the faculty that they needed to band together because something was going wrong. We wanted to have the knowledge that our efforts wouldn't go totally unnoticed, at least it would be considered. I was one of about 15 people who

met around Thanksgiving break in 1971 in Gainesville, and we had representatives from each of the state universities at that time. Basically what happened was that we started the mechanism going to make the AFT chapter at the University of Florida or the AFT local at the University of Florida where they had had one for several years, a state-wide local and established chapters on each of the state universities, which is of course the present set-up now, although we are no longer affiliated with AFT. It's basically still the same set-up. I was part of that. In the early years and then in 1974, I was president of the USF chapter. For a number of years after that I was very involved with the handling of grievances. That was another thing, to have a mechanism for handling grievances other than just hoping that the dean or the vice president or somebody would speak to you if you had a problem.

St. Julien: Did they basically work with you when you would take a grievance in or did you meet a lot of resistance?

Whitaker: At first they tried to ignore me. They made it like we weren't here. I think that was in order all the time. We were just ignored. It was hard in the beginning, but after awhile I think a few administrators got the idea that not everybody that was involved with the union was totally wild in their outlook. They were reasonable people, that some of the things that we were asking them to review really might have some merit. So little by little we were able to accomplish a good bit in the area of grievances. As a matter of fact, my own personal feeling is now and I'm not nearly as active as I was then, our greatest accomplishments probably were in this area of being able to work

out some really bad situations involving individuals who had really been treated badly for various reasons. Yet some alleviation of this . . . I don't think the union has led to high salaries and total happiness among the faculty by any means.

St. Julien: I don't think that has happened any place, but at least they are trying.

Whitaker: I think in the area of grievances, we have been able to accomplish some positive things for individuals.

St. Julien: What kind of membership did they have?

Whitaker: It is interesting. When I became president we had about 35 members in the USF chapter and that was the year of real activity. 1974 was the year that we put on the drive to get the cards signed so that we could have an election over the state laws. We had to do that, of course, before we could even be recognized. The card campaign was very successful on this campus. We got about 550 signatures on this campus as I recall. I think from the interest generated by that a lot of people were willing to give it a try and join. As I recall after that year, 1974 or 1975, our membership had gone from about 35 to about 150. In the next year, and I wasn't president, it had essentially doubled again. So we had around 350 after about two years of effort. Then the election was held in 1976 and we won. Of course at that point I felt that the membership would go almost to 80 or 90%, and I was very upset that it didn't. That has been one of my big disappointments. The faculty essentially were never really willing to put their money where their hopes were. They voted the union in, they continuously voted down efforts to do

away with it, and yet we run about 35% membership of eligible faculty.

St. Julien: Wasn't that the year that they were putting freezes on state salaries?

Whitaker: Yes, it certainly was. That was a great help in terms of getting people interested in some sort of collective effort.

St. Julien: There is one other question I would like to ask you about the community. Are you aware of any debates over the location of the University and especially with the breweries coming in this area?

Whitaker: I vaguely remember something about it, but I can't recall anything. There is a vague recollection of some question . . . It seems strange now that would even be a question, but I guess in the '50's it was. I'm not aware of how important that was.

St. Julien: What kind of debates were there over the sports programs?

Whitaker: President Allen was very negative on any sort of intercollegiate sports. He definitely didn't want to get involved with football and basketball in an intercollegiate situation. Intramurals were fine. He didn't have any objection to that. Among the student body, during the Allen days from time to time and through the newspapers, there would be efforts made questioning the existence of a football team. I remember they had little tags one year saying "Why not football at USF?" or something like this. I think probably some of the legislators asked the same question because there always seems to be money available for athletics. I think it was definitely Allen's opposition to intercollegiate athletics. He had been vice president at the University of Florida and had maybe felt that it was more of a problem from

his standpoint. He just thought that USF had other things that had to be first before he could even think about athletics. He wouldn't hear of it.

St. Julien: How much influence do you think . . . You talked about your brother and that he was a representative and Sam Gibbons and I'm sure probably that people from Pinellas would have been supportive in the legislature. What about all those powerful politicians from west Florida and north Florida? What kind of competition was there between that area and getting anything here? Money for anything?

Whitaker: Well, the porkchop situation was certainly in effect then. The state legislature essentially was heavily weighted to the rural areas as so many state legislatures were before some important Supreme Court decisions. Anything that South Florida wanted to do was immediately suspect by the so called "porkchop" which were those people from the panhandle and north Florida. I suppose in that light it is even a greater accomplishment that we got USF at all in the '50's. The "porkchop" situation wasn't broken up until some time much later in the '60's. Of course, nothing ever happens immediately. It happened in the late '60's. I don't really believe maybe that if you were speaking of intercollegiate athletics I don't think that probably was as important as Allen's absolute saying "I will under no circumstances entertain the idea."

St. Julien: So it wouldn't have even been brought up?

Whitaker: Right. No legislature is going to absolutely cram some program down a president's mouth. Certainly if they felt that strongly they would try and get

rid of the president and then get the program in.

St. Julien: When did the basketball program come in?

Whitaker: That was under Mackey.

St. Julien: So he was more supportive?

Whitaker: Yes. Absolutely. He had no problem in principle the way Allen did. I think

Mackey's question was whether we could fit it in or could we get funding.

We started with a freshman basketball team and then expanded from there.

St. Julien: What kind of cooperation did you receive from Florida State or the

University of Florida in your department between . . . ?

Whitaker: There is contact. I know a number of the . . . Of course, I haven't been here

as long as I have. There is no continuing strong interaction, but there are

groups that from time to time will get together. There is a group I think

started by some of the organic and inorganic chemists at the University of

Florida. From time to time they draw together chemists from all over the

state and not just the state universities. They meet from time to time and

discuss matters. There is no continuing mechanisms for interaction with the

other state universities as far as I know. There are various accomplishments

from time to time which were thrown together.

St. Julien: There is not a great deal of cooperation, it was just sort of haphazard?

Whitaker: Not a great deal. I would say more incidental than continuous.

St. Julien: Have you ever taught at any of the branch campuses?

Whitaker: Once in the summer of '83 I taught at the Sarasota campus. I had a course

down there just during the summer. This is my only experience off the

Tampa campus.

St. Julien: What was your impression of that branch campus?

Whitaker: That branch of course is . . . I enjoyed it. I didn't particularly enjoy the ride down there. I had to go down there twice a week and it was a long ride. Of course the interstate still isn't complete all the way down there. That was only a seven week period, and I think it was a very small class so I really didn't get that much into the branch campus. In handling grievances for a number of people from the St. Petersburg campus, I know that they have some special problems if that is what you are getting at. I'm very well aware of those things. They are almost in the same situation that a lot of us in the beginning were with the joint appointments in that they are members and come under the administration of that branch campus, but they also have to answer to the departments on the Tampa campus. Everybody acknowledges that in many instances their missions and goals are quite different, say on St. Pete, than they might be in a department over here. So basically they have to serve two masters and make everybody happy. I think it is a very unfair situation.

St. Julien: I think their students are older and just commuters whereas this campus has some residents so it would be different.

Whitaker: It is a bad situation and attempts have been made administratively to clear it up, but it's a continual thing. I have my own solution, but I don't think that administration is interested in it. Those branches ultimately are going to have to be essentially autonomous in terms of their administration,

programs, and faculty. I think most of the problems will clear up.

St. Julien: You may not want to answer this, but I am going to ask you anyway. You talked about the Allen administration and the Mackey administration. Would you say that Brown is a combination of Allen and Mackey in administrating and teaching?

Whitaker: My basic view compared with the other permanent presidents, and he is only the third permanent president, that he is practically unknown to the average faculty. That is quite different because Allen was certainly known. Well, there was so few of us that he was just there. The faculty certainly knew who Cecil Mackey was. He had a very high profile. And everything that happened on campus we blamed on Cecil Mackey. With Brown, when something happens in an area that the faculty don't like, in the area of academics, they'll blame Greg O'Brien before they will blame John Brown because maybe they see more of Greg O'Brien. In some other area they'll blame some other subordinate. I know that when Steve Wenzel was here as the chief council and head of personnel, he was blamed for alot of things that some faculty didn't like. Brown somehow has really seemed to escape getting credit for what is going on one way or another. Probably the main reason is that the place is so big now, and of course with the medical complex going, so much money being pumped in, and so much building going on that I would characterize the presidency of John Brown as just trying to make the University grow in any possible way. Any ways under the sun that can attract a dollar, do it. That's my own feeling. And don't pay much attention to

how any particular program gets carried out. Just get the books and be sure that there is a continuing flow of money and let those other people handle it.

St. Julien: Do you recall anything about the Johns Committee?

Whitaker: I came right after the Johns Committee had held their hearings. So my knowledge is gained from what other people have said about it. There was also a lot in the newspapers and I read a lot in that summer of '62 of the investigation. That probably was, in the sense of outside forces coming in, a very bad time for the University of South Florida and might reflect, something that we talked a moment ago, part of the fear on some of the rural legislators that . . . "We better not let these South Florida people get out of hand or they will wind up with all the money." That might have been part of it too because that committee was just the worst part of the McCarthy type era still hanging on in the rest of the country. It was beginning to get over McCarthyism by that time. So here we are in the '60's in Florida and involved in that sort of thing. University came through in fair shape, but the worst scars were that some people were essentially fired or just had to leave. It was definitely the closest we have ever come to a total denial of academic freedom.

St. Julien: Was that committee supported by the community?

Whitaker: It was divided. I think you would find quite a divided opinion. Yes, unfortunately some members of the community probably would say that we have to root out those convicts and those perverted people and this sort of thing. They had what the University would view as a very bad and very

narrow view as to what higher education is all about in the sense that they might be afraid that, well, “ I don’t want my child to go out there and be exposed to all of this nasty stuff.” I think that a large part of the community did not support it in the sense that this was a good thing, that they were roaming around here more or less . . . Well, doing exactly what McCarthy was doing, destroying characters.

St. Julien: If you had to sum up the best or the worst developments that you have seen over your tenure here at the University, what would you describe [as] some of the best or the worst?

Whitaker: I think among the best developments certainly was simply [that] finally the State of Florida did put a University where the people were, and I think it gave alot of young people in this area the chance for higher education where probably they wouldn’t have had it, certainly not with ease. I think basically USF has done a pretty fair job overall in the education process. I think that the worst aspect probably is what I was talking about earlier. Maybe it is inevitable, I don’t know. I think a university at some point more or less gets out of control and is just a great monster and anything that can be done will be done. Any program that can be started will be started. Very little, if any, coordination about where you are going and what your purpose is and you just empire build. I’m afraid that is where we are now.

St. Julien: Thank you for taking this time out for the interview.

