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## Robert Ashford oral history interview by Andrew Huse, December 29, 2003

Robert Ashford (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
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Narrator: Robert Ashford  
Current Position: USF Alumnus

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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Arrival in Tampa*

His father was hired as the first director of the Natural Sciences Department during the earliest years at USF. In fact, he was the thirteenth person to be hired by the fledgling university. Mr. Ashford was a junior in high school when his father took the job. He recalls that his father was enthusiastic about being part of a brand new university, with the opportunity to build a science department from the ground up.

### *His father's influence*

He recalls having frequent conversations with his family around the dinner table as a child. When either he or his brothers would make an observation or state an opinion, his father would ask: "How do you know?" The question posed by his father, he believes, was the very foundation of science, philosophy, and morality. "He was a great influence on me." While Mr. Ashford really enjoyed the sciences, his father always provided a positive influence, and "convinced him" to pursue those studies. "He believed in the sciences very strongly, [and] felt that was where progress could be made and humankind could be helped most ... so that rubbed off on me."

### *Enrollment at USF*

Though he was accepted to other schools, he recalls choosing to go to USF because the school was just starting-up, and it was "an exciting opportunity." Mr. Ashford began classes at USF in September 1961, taking basic courses such as calculus, literature, humanities, and basic sciences. The campus, he recalls, "was wide open – [there was] a lot of sand." At the time, the campus was extremely isolated, which in part contributed to a sense of community at the university. Because the facilities were so few, he remembers having a calculus course in the administration building. He and his fellow students jokingly referred to USF in the early years as the "brave new university." The accent on learning was taken seriously, however, and he valued the opportunity to work with advanced professors as a member of a small undergraduate student body.

### *Local dining*

There was only one restaurant nearby, and he recalls that students felt restricted by the lack of alternatives. There was also some resistance to the compulsory food plan provided to students who lived in the dormitories. “There was a rebellious spirit among the students.”

### *Campus activities*

The band provided some entertainment for students on campus, and Mr. Ashford became a part of that. In addition, he played the string bass in an on-campus folk group. He also remembers spending time with the “blue room,” a particular group of “pre-hippies [or] post-beatniks” who were named after the room in which they met on campus. As to how he spent most of his time, he comments, “For me it was mostly study,” reserving the weekends for some peripheral entertainment. The English Department held occasional poetry readings that provided the students with some substantive diversions from their studies. “There was a lot of student-faculty interaction ... it was a very close-knit community.”

### *Coursework*

Because his father was a full-time administrator at the time, Mr. Ashford was not able to take any classes with him. He fondly remembers his experiences as a student, however, and still thinks highly of many of the professors with whom he had the opportunity to work. Mr. Ashford also served for a year as the editor of the campus literary magazine, an experience he recalls as a tough yet valuable one. “I’m very grateful for the education I got at USF ... it was a magical time.”

### *Memorable moments on campus*

One memory that stands out in particular is the demonstration that students held against the discriminatory practices at the University Center (See Ernie Bogart interview). The assassination of President Kennedy, too, sent shock waves across the campus.

### *Involvement in student government*

Being a “civic-oriented fellow, want[ing] to do good,” Mr. Ashford became interested in student government and was elected USF student association president (because there were so few students, “to call it government would have been administrative blasphemy”). The problem for student representatives, Ashford recalls, was one of legitimacy, because so few people were actually voting. To better gauge the opinions and perspectives of the student body, Ashford began conducting campus-wide polls, serving as head of the polling committee before he ran for office. While serving as student association president, he published a student directory, established a student book exchange, revised the constitution, “and I think we finally got some reprieve from [food services] at that time ... I think we had a positive effect on student life.”

### *Senior Satire*

Mr. Ashford also launched a “Senior Satire,” the idea for which he got from his high-school experiences. It was a play written on the Faust theme of “existential dilemma among students” in which the devil appears and makes a pact among students, prompting

a revolution among students who try to take over the campus. The play itself was a spoof on all aspects of campus life, from students to faculty to food services, and he recalls, “It got a lot of laughs ... it was done in good spirit.”

*Advice for young students*

He encourages students to take their studies seriously, advising against too much partying or television. “The days at school will seem very ... long, but in retrospect, it’s a little blip, and the more you take advantage of it ... the better off you’ll be.”

*His father, Theodore Ashford*

His father’s name is Theodore Ashford, and he was formally trained as a chemist. He first taught in Chicago and St. Louis before being offered a position at USF. He was an immigrant from Greece, and slept on potato sacks at the restaurant where he was working while he put himself through school. He had a vision for the university very much oriented around the sciences, while appreciating literature and the arts. He accepted the position at USF as an opportunity to build a science program from scratch. “A man of great intellectual honesty ... principles were all-important to him.” “I think he had a great impact on the school,” Ashford says, namely his role in establishing research funding and initiatives as well as the creation of a PhD program in chemistry. He also set up several foundations, including scholarships for faculty members, and fellowships for chemistry students.

Theodore Ashford was a nationally recognized expert in testing, and worked alongside hundreds of professors and teachers in establishing adequate testing programs in the sciences. “There’s an unfinished chapter to this,” Ashford believes, asserting that his father goes as one of the most un-recognized contributors to the development of the university.

“It’s hard in some ways to separate the school from my father, because he was a great part of that education personally.”

*End of Interview*