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## Ernest Boger oral history interview by Andrew Huse, December 5, 2003

Ernest P. Boger (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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Narrator: Ernest Boger  
Date of Interview: December 2, 2003  
Current Position: Asst Professor/Director of  
Hospitality Management Program at  
Bethune-Cookman College  
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

Interviewer: Andrew Huse  
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Abstractor: Jared G. Toney  
Editor: Danielle E. Riley  
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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Mr. Boger came to USF as a student in 1961. He was the first black student at the university.*

*What brought him to USF?*

He graduated from Blake High School in Tampa, and came to USF on recommendation of his assistant principal. He had written an editorial in the school paper suggesting that students enroll at USF, though he had not really considered the option for himself, recalling, "Although I said we, I was not thinking of *me*." He never forgot that, noting that the recommendation his assistant principal made to him "changed his whole life."

*Studies*

He began with the intention of studying chemistry and physics, in hopes of becoming a chemical engineer. As he explored the different courses though, particularly behavioral sciences, he began to see himself as "more of a people person," and thus made the switch to psychology. "Then too, I didn't have such a great experience with Mr. Calculus either!" Before taking those early courses, he had never really recognized the study of behavior as a science. Once doing so, however, the transition seemed a more natural one. "It was a marriage made in heaven."

*Location*

It was important for him to be able to stay near home. The financial aspect made the decision that much easier to make, recalling that it was \$112.50 "for all the courses that you could take!" "That's why I went ... strictly economics." The campus was relatively isolated and had few buildings at that point, he comments, in addition to a great deal of wild foliage and "a lot of sand!" "There was a certain freshness about it ... you could feel the university coming alive!" The student population at the time was fairly modest; in fact, Mr. Boger remembers that his student number was 2,000.

*Admission*

At the time, there were separate entrance exams for blacks and whites. Mr. Boger scored nearly perfectly on his exam (492/495), but "nobody was quite sure how to translate the

black exam to the white exam.” Administrators determined that he had sufficiently met the requirements though, and he was admitted to the University. He recalls receiving a significant amount of attention in the media, but more so for being so involved at the University rather than solely because of the color of his skin. “I got a fair amount of coverage just for doing regular things.”

#### *Academic experiences*

More influential than individual teachers, whom he has difficulty recalling, was the approach, which emphasized team learning. He met his requirements and graduated after three and a half years at the university, formally receiving his degree in 1965.

#### *Experiences as the first black student at USF*

He does not recall feeling particularly different in any specific way. He had an active student life, participating fully in college activities, noting that he “basically didn’t think about it.” As he remembers, he experienced very few examples of “ugliness” as a black student at the university, aside from a couple inconsequential instances. “You basically look outward, so you have no idea that you look any different from anybody else ... as long as you are treated ok.” He notes that he was coming to the school because it gave him an “economic advantage,” not because he wanted to make a social statement. The experience was valuable because it gave him “an opportunity to compete in the white world ... giving me kind of a leg up.” He thinks the key to a successful transition was the lack of established tradition at USF during that time, because of which he encountered little resistance. Urban demographics also fostered a community of multiculturalism, and “Tampa has been a melting pot for a long, long time, and that spirit ... flowed over onto the campus.”

#### *Extracurricular activities*

Initially, his love of music drew him into the extracurricular programs here at USF. His involvement in the band helped him to make friends and establish a social link with people of similar interests, “so that made life very very comfortable.” He was here when the school song was written, as well as when the bull was chosen as the school mascot. In the jazz band of which he was a part, they would play classics such as Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, and other big band compositions popular to the time. One of his classmates went on to be the bassist on Roberta Flack’s first album in the late 1960s.

Although John Allen subordinated formal intercollegiate sports to a preferred “accent on learning,” there was still a very active intramural program on campus. Mr. Boger was recruited for the campus basketball team his first year, and his second year he became the team organizer, going on to win the league championship. He was also part of the Russian language club, being compelled by both international politics and the novelty of such a new experience for him. He was actually only one course short of having a Russian teaching minor.

#### *Living arrangements*

He lived on campus during his junior year in order to take advantage of some of the financial aid opportunities that were made available to him. The other years he stayed at

home and made the commute regularly. “Over the years I had six automobiles ... which means that they lasted about a semester each!” In instances where he could not depend on his own transportation, he would “hitch a ride” with one of the USF custodians who happen to live in his neighborhood; “It was an interesting experience in survival, so to speak.”

#### *Resident life at USF*

What he remembers most is the food, depending on the provision of regular meals in order to accommodate his rigorous schedule at the university. He found the dorms to be very convenient, providing him with a regulated environment in which to study. He does recall that while living in the dorms, they used to run comedy tapes across the intercom system, providing residents with a good laugh.

Outside of campus life, he did “as much as any college student could afford,” including occasional concerts and restaurant dining. “The only place black students really felt comfortable were the restaurants in Ybor City,” he recalls. The university restaurant was the preferred place to go among students, a forum that went through the process of racial integration during the 1960s. He recalls a particular night when he went to the restaurant with the band, the manager refused to serve him. One of the students proclaimed, “If they aren’t going to serve Ernie here, we’re not going to eat here,” and they all moved on to another restaurant. The following day students and faculty began to picket the restaurant. Soon the process of integration was enforced, and such forums provided equal access to blacks and whites alike.

#### *After graduation*

Deferred from the draft while at USF, Mr. Boger later went on and served as an officer in the military following his graduation from the university. He was able to utilize his formal academic training while in the military, serving as a personal psychologist and chief mental testing officer. He worked a number of jobs following his discharge from the military, a time during which he returned to school and earned his MBA.

#### *End of Interview*