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## Bill Buxton oral history interview by Andrew Huse, September 16, 2003

Bill Buxton (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
USF 50<sup>th</sup> History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Bill Buxton

Current Position: Station Manager, WUSF-TV,  
Retired, 2003

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Campus Library

Abstractor: Daniel Bertwell

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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Mr. Buxton came to USF in 1969 as an administrator and filmmaker.*

### *Coming to USF*

Mr. Buxton had been working at a portrait studio in Daytona Beach and heard that there was an opening at USF. He decided to apply. He interviewed and was offered a position as a cinematographer. He worked for the Department of Education Resources.

### *Physical appearance of USF*

He had seen the campus years before, when it was mainly sand dunes. There were no businesses on Fowler Avenue, and at the time it was a shortcut to the other coast. The school was really “out in the sticks.” When he drove in for his interview he was really impressed with the progress. Mr. Buxton got the impression that this was going to be a place where he would stay for a while.

### *Job duties*

Mr. Buxton was hired as a cinematographer, but his main job was faculty support, not WUSF-TV. His first project was with Dr. Lou Bowers in the school of physical education. They filmed children’s movement patterns during activities. This was edited and shown to students so they could better understand the ways in which children should and should not move.

He also produced promotional materials for USF, including a film for recruiting and one for the basketball team. Their main focuses were promotional materials and educational content.

He ran the department, which was eventually expanded to Cinema Productions after the advent of video. The TV station was included in the new department.

### *Departmental Organization*

It was a small department. (“It was a one person department and it operated out of a closet.”) The department moved many times, first taking over a conference room and

then a room in the media center at the College of Education. They eventually came back to the SVC building, which was the library at the time. The department continued to grow with the switch to video in (probably) the end of the 1980s.

#### *Changes in the department*

Changes happened in the department with a connection to the TV station. The department wasn't taken in by the TV station but Mr. Buxton was. He became a producer, and the film and videos eventually became full programs airing on the television station. Cinema productions split off and became more of a classroom supported program and Mr. Buxton became a full-time television worker. The transition to TV was very exciting for him, he had begun his career in TV in high school and his mother produced a TV program. This was something he was comfortable with, so it was nice to come back to it.

He didn't feel limited by the photography and the cinematography because there were so many interesting things at his disposal, but it was nice to get back to television.

Working in film he worked alone much of the time and television was more collaborative. It was good to work with other people.

They did a series for the Florida Symphony Orchestra; they did the History of Tampa with Tony Pizzo, both of which were a lot of fun

#### *Faculty Members he worked with*

He worked with Nancy Cole in theater and all of the members of the fine arts department. They did regular programs with different departments and fine arts had a weekly program so they got to work with most faculty in that college. There was a weekly program with the College of Medicine called "MedNews." There was also a series on international studies.

#### *Works with scholars who became famous*

There was a young man named Agamemnon Adrianos who did sound work for them. He was from Tarpon Springs, and didn't have much money so he stayed at Mr. Buxton's house from time to time. He eventually went on to work with Steven Spielberg and is in charge of audio production. Mark Orr recently did a series called Friday Report, George Lowe was an interviewer on the show and he is now living in Atlanta as one of the top animation voices in the world. He even did a special animation clip for Mr. Buxton's retirement party.

#### *Was there diversity in the station?*

"Absolutely." Collaboration with students was an "entertaining" experience. They worked with the School of Mass Communications in different ways at different points throughout. The relationship with the School of MassComm was "almost adversarial" for a time. This occurred when the student run radio station left the "Underground Railroad" (Rock and Roll) philosophy and moved towards classical music. This led to

tensions. But students were always prevalent at the station and this made his job very fun.

Tensions also occurred on a philosophical level. While mass communications departments run broadcasting facilities at many universities, this was not true at USF. Mass Communications came in and taught in the facility on Fridays. This worked for a while but eventually they got their own facilities and that has been great for them. Recently they have opened (about a year ago) a course taught at the station for students who want to broadcast professionally. They want to work with professionals and get experience, so this program allows students to do their own television program from casting and scripting to programming. Mass Comm is at a place where they have their own facilities but at the end of a college experience students can get into a real state of the art facility and get more hands-on experience. Mass Communications offers the course, the TV station designs the course with the professor and it is a difficult course to take. The graduates in the school of Mass Communications are very well regarded and are well prepared for the job market.

#### *First office on campus*

Mr. Buxton's office was in the basement of the Student Services Building, which was the library at the time. It was a bomb shelter and there were leftover supplies down there. It was cramped and had been the bookbindery. There was a lot of "clutter and dust" in this "very small room." He had just enough room for a desk.

#### *Interdisciplinary projects with faculty*

Projects tended towards individual departments. They would do a course on anthropology for instance. Faculty members must work on scripts and content. From this point it becomes interdisciplinary in that students must come in from fine arts to work play roles and portray characters. They did a similar series with the Chemistry Department.

The Department would occasionally do contract productions which helped them pay their own way through the years. There was an "educational component that we could make money at and this helped pay the bills, helped defray the cost of operation."

A chemistry series that someone wanted to market is a good example. They wanted to do a "chemistry in the kitchen" idea, so there was a kitchen set built and a teacher did experiments in the kitchen. This video was marketed to school districts nation-wide.

#### *Presidents of the University*

The President at the time he arrived was John Allen. Mr. Buxton worked under Director of Educational Resources Gerhart Eicholds who ran the broadcasting stations. The library, the chemistry building, the administration building, the College of Education and a few more buildings were the only buildings on campus when Mr. Buxton arrived.

### *Interaction with Presidents*

Mr. Buxton had a lot of interaction with the presidents over the years. He became fairly good friends with President John Lott Brown. President Brown appreciated what they were trying to do and he was supportive of the program. There was a film made of the basketball team that included a “picture within a picture” effect, which was rare at the time. President Brown was impressed with this and he would tap Mr. Buxton to do presentations for the BOR and things of this nature.

President Mackey was “very savvy about media” and used them often. They were used to produce a program concerning growth in Florida. This was difficult because they needed to create a one-hour program, funded by the speaker of the house, before a deadline. Mr. Buxton replied that it could be done with the assistance of a Jet Ranger, because this needed to be worked on statewide. They could provide that and they would provide the funding for an extra half hour. In the end there was funding for three additional hours on top of the initial one. The project was big and called “Growth, Who Pays?” It won a lot of awards. John Denver did the music for it.

Mr. Buxton believes that, “We’ve been very fortunate to have a lot of wonderful presidents here at USF, all very accessible.”

### *Major accomplishments of administrations*

President Mackey’s decision to make the radio station classical was a “significant decision,” and now the Bay area has access to one of the best classical stations in the country. This was not a popular decision at the time, but it has worked out very well for everyone.

President Castor was “very instrumental in getting funding” for the TV station. She had been Commissioner of Education (this is the department that provides funding) and she knew a lot of the people at the Department of Education. This was really a big step forward for the University. Mr. Buxton feels that this was the “culmination” of his career and the “final piece in putting together a high end public broadcasting organization for this University that will be available forever.” They now have a state of the art and digital facility that is no longer limited to just one channel.

### *Faculty social interaction*

There have been many retirement parties and faculty celebrations through the years. The President would have a faculty get together every September when the students returned to school.

### *Differences with other jobs*

Mr. Buxton had been in the commercial sector. He had worked for Eastern Airlines in Miami, as a photographer, and for Roger Penske in the racing world. He had been a portrait photographer, so the academic life at USF was a lot more bureaucracy than he was used to. It was very different but there were great people and an exciting sense of making this a learning environment that Mr. Buxton enjoyed being a part of. He is very

happy and considers himself lucky that he got to spend thirty-four years in this environment.

Throughout his time here he had a real sense that they were making a change. In some instances he felt like they were pointing out problems and possible solutions to those problems. He did a project with the school of physical education called “How to Blow up a Playground.” The playgrounds around the country were very unsafe and they were interested in illuminating ways in which playgrounds could be safer for children. This was a guide to making playgrounds accessible to everyone, especially handicapped children. They decided to do the program based on an interview with Richard Dattner, the gentleman that designed the playgrounds in Central Park. Attner described kids that hated their playground so much that they blew it up with dynamite (hence the title). They went to Central Park Village in Downtown Tampa, met with the residents, had a party and showed them movies playgrounds and got an idea of what they wanted at their playground. The Army corps of engineers came in and demolished the old playground and community groups came in to make a new playground. Throughout the process the city and county planners were involved. They hired Richard Dattner and he built the riverfront park, so the whole process resulted in the creation of many spaces for children to play. It also allowed leaders and the parks department learn of more possibilities. This process really affected the parks throughout Tampa, making that particular project very rewarding.

This whole concept came out of Canada’s National Film Board. Their project was called Challenge for Change and they utilized film in order to facilitate social change.

#### *Mr. Buxton’s trip to work every day*

He drove just about every day, although there was a short time he rode a bicycle. It was a long drive - Mr. Buxton commuted from Hunter’s Green for a time - but now he is in Westchase. His wife teaches in Pinellas County so they decided to move somewhere in between the two schools.

#### *Changes at USF*

Watching the growth of the University has been exciting. Feeling like this is “your university, you’ve contributed to this and you’re a part of it” makes the growth process exciting to watch over time. To have friends around campus that he sees regularly is great. Being part of creating something new and helping to educate a lot of young people is “very gratifying.”

#### *Proudest Moments*

Mr. Buxton is personally most proud of the new building and the new technology inside it. “It’s a facility that will serve the University well for many years.” They have top of the line technology in the new building and they made many good decisions when putting that building together. They have great plans for the future to “get into the court system, to create revenue streams that will help plan and fund the station at a level that it has never seen before.” The University has done quite a bit without much financial backing.

The series with the Florida Symphony Orchestra was “really outstanding, it was fun to be a part of that.” He is also very proud of a golf series that they did with different teachers from all over the area. This was foreshadowing of the Golf channel on TV now.

### *Final Thoughts*

“Save some of what you’re doing.” Mr. Buxton would be interested to see how much of the material they have produced still exists. By the end of a project the creator is so sick of the project that they just want to get rid of it. That is why it is nice that “Tony Pizzo’s Tampa” is in the archives. They also tried to get presidential addresses and other important speeches into the library. “Save some of what you’re doing so other people can enjoy it and learn from it.”

Some of the most recent projects are very successful nationally, which is a difficult amount of success to achieve. To get enough programs aired nationally that when you come up with something new it is automatically accepted is difficult and exciting. He is proud of that. They received Emmys for “Superbugs,” on the search for killer viruses. This program was produced before SARs and West Nile and predicted all those things. CDC (The Center for Disease Control) stated that this was the best program they had ever seen on that topic. This aired on PBS and was distributed to all the member stations to be re-released. The “Search for the USS Maine” also received an Emmy. This was a collaborative effort with Canadians, Cubans, New Zealanders and Americans. It was a complex project and they were the first to find and see the Maine. The Science Adventures series really highlighted research by faculty and students at USF and this helped USF’s reputation in the research field reach a national audience. This was probably a highlight in terms of production because it helped the school become better known.

### *The Future*

He is putting together an editing facility at home to do some editing and plans to produce some interactive DVDs. These were projects they did at the station. They created an interactive department, something that he is very interested in. It is probably impossible to let go completely and leaving the new facility was hard because their job is never done. They were designed to broadcast several channels digitally and they are doing this now, but Mr. Buxton really hoped to be around for that.

### *End of Interview*