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# Harrison Covington oral history interview by Yael G. Greenberg, June 18, 2003

Harrison Covington (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

Narrator: Harrison Covington  
Current Position: Retired in 1982; Dean  
Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of the  
College of Fine Arts

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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Year of arrival*

Mr. Covington came to USF in 1961 as an associate professor in the division of fine arts in the College of Liberal Arts.

### *Circumstances that brought Mr. Covington to USF*

Many of the people that started this university came from UF. Mr. Covington was at UF's fine arts department. At the time, Pat Beecher was acting dean of the College of Architecture and Allied Arts at UF. Dr. Allen was vice president of UF. When Dr. Allen came to USF he brought Pat Beecher with him. They were good friends. In 1959, Pat asked Mr. Covington if he would help him formulate plans for the art department at USF. When it came time for USF to hire fine arts faculty, a cap was placed on the number of people that could be hired from UF. Mr. Covington did not come at this time. He was not ready to. After a year, USF had two people in the division of fine arts within the college of liberal arts. The two people saw how much work was ahead and bailed-out. Pat then called Mr. Covington to come down and he was ready at that point. Mr. Covington and another man were the only two in the department. They began working on establishing the art department.

### *What did the USF campus look like in 1961?*

Mr. Covington says the USF campus was a sand hill with a lot of sandspurs. It had been a cow pasture and an airfield. He says there was no growth anywhere on the campus. "It was pretty rough walking across [campus] with the sand blowing," he states.

### *Mr. Covington's story about mischievous students and oak trees on campus*

USF was planting a group of oak trees between the fine arts building and the auditorium. The grounds people came out and put stakes in the ground for the trees. One night students went out to rearrange the stakes in a more casual pattern. Then people came the next day and planted the oak trees where the stakes were. "Now we have that nice natural-looking oak grove between the fine arts building and the auditorium," states Mr. Covington.

### *What programs and ideas did Mr. Covington initiate in the early days?*

The main thing was to get a basic structure going. One thing about the program that worried him was that it was a liberal arts program. He envisioned many diligent and students participating in the program, rather than people who had professional aspirations. This concerned him. However, he soon found out that he was very wrong. USF's students began to win all the prizes and competitions around the state to the point where people were accusing them of bribing the jurors. Mr. Covington also made a change to the catalog by getting rid of the commercial art program. He knew it would be a very popular program for students to the point where it would consume the whole activity. Mr. Covington believed fine arts needed a program that emphasized the basics so that students were educated in the arts before they could go on to a commercial program. At that time all that was necessary to change that philosophy was to strike those courses out of the catalog, which he did.

#### *Courses offered in the division of fine arts in the early days*

The division of fine arts taught basic courses in painting, drawing, ceramics, print making, and sculpture. "We were very limited with what we could do initially because two faculty members can't teach everything," he says. As the division added faculty, it also added courses. The division soon added art history. All of the students were expected to take that from the beginning, but then they added it as a major.

#### *Dr. Allen*

"He was a marvelous man," Mr. Covington says. Mr. Covington says that an accent on learning was the motto of the school, which signified a lot. He says it signified that the goal of the university at the time was for it to be a liberal arts institution. "Dr. Allen and Grace Allen were wonderful people to begin such an institution because they had a wonderful sense of outreach to the community, which resisted us. Dr. Allen referred to fine arts as his football team," he says.

#### *A cultural wasteland in Tampa*

In the early days Mr. Covington felt like Tampa was a cultural wasteland. He says there were not many cultural happenings in the area. There was no real museum. Mr. Covington says Tampa was the largest city in the country that did not have a significant art museum. Now Tampa has an art museum and a symphony. "Our faculty contributes a great deal to these activities," he says.

*Mr. Covington was the first and for a while the only person to receive a Guggenheim while working at USF.*

#### *The importance of bringing in internationally known artists*

Mr. Covington says they brought in an internationally known artist every chance they got. This philosophy and activity led to the establishment of the division's graphic studio. Mr. Covington says they would bring in artists of international repute to produce works, work with the students, and form a bridge to the community. Mr. Covington says many in the community buy those works in support of the program and become collectors of significant artwork, which upgrades the whole atmosphere within the university.

### *Community resistant to USF when it was first established*

Mr. Covington says that many people had firm allegiances to other universities, particularly UF and FSU. “We were sort of the rival to those institutions that they were loyal to. Then of course any number of faculty members participated in local activities that were political or controversial. That didn’t always sit well with the people in the community,” he says. Mr. Covington says that many faculty members represented ideas contrary to some people’s beliefs. Many members of the community contributed to the problem of the Johns Committee.

### *Johns Committee*

Mr. Covington served on a university wide committee that dealt with the issue of the Johns Committee. “It was a pretty grim time. We survived that,” he says. Mr. Covington says that USF had to respond to the committee’s inquiries and gather information and so forth. “It was a bad time,” he says. Mr. Covington says people were accused of subversive activities, such as participating in homosexuality and communism.

### *Faculty and student reaction to the Johns Committee*

Mr. Covington says that both students and faculty resented the Johns Committee. “I’m sure there was support for it, but I don’t think you find much support in the university itself,” he says.

### *Community supports graduate programs at USF*

“When it came time for us to go for graduate programs the community assisted very much. They also understood the importance of this and came to our aid with all kinds of political pressures and so forth,” he says.

### *Where were fine arts classes offered in 1961?*

Classes were offered in the basement of the student union, across the hall from the pool room.

### *The makeup of fine arts students*

They were very eager students who could not have gone to school anywhere else. They were local people. That was why Mr. Covington was so interested in coming to USF, because he is a native of Hillsborough County. He is from Plant City. It was important to him to have a university here that would offer opportunities to people that could not go to school otherwise. He was very enthusiastic about it. A number of those first students have gone on to have very successful professional careers.

### *Why were students interested in taking art courses?*

They were interested in art. They wanted to find out if they could become artists.

### *Fine arts building*

One of the first buildings on campus was the Fine Arts building. Mr. Covington says the fine arts building was there from the beginning along with the administration building, the library, and the science building.

### *Transition of the division of fine arts to the college of fine arts*

When the transition took place Mr. Covington was director of the division of fine arts, which was equivalent to the deanship now. Fine arts was a division within the college of liberal arts. There were about five other divisions within the college of liberal arts. “We felt that we strongly needed a college status because the college of liberal arts tended to be a filter and sometimes a barrier. Issues in fine arts are different in many ways from those in other colleges,” he says. Mr. Covington says that people in other fields do not understand fine arts issues. “It was important to become a college. We fought for that. There was a restructuring going on at the time and we just fit in to that. It took a lot of doing, but we got it done.

### *Mr. Covington becomes a faculty member*

When the College of Arts was formed Mr. Covington believed he had spent a lot of his political capital. “I figured it was time to step down. It had been an exhausting activity,” he says. He moved from the position of director to a position on the faculty after they achieved what they wanted. He stepped down from the director position because not only was it exhausting, but it got to the point where he thought fine arts had accomplished what it could accomplish and all they were doing was filling in potholes and trying to maintain things. He says that is not as interesting as building.

### *Mr. Covington becomes dean of the college of fine arts*

When the dean stepped down, Mr. Covington felt like there was still a job to be done. There were some aspects of a situation that he thought needed real attention. He applied for the dean position. By this time colleges had to do national searches before hiring a dean. After the college did a national search they decided to select Mr. Covington. He became dean of the college of fine arts in 1977. He rejoined administration because there were things he believed needed to be done.

### *Changes in fine arts while Mr. Covington was not in administration*

Mr. Covington says the college of fine arts was much larger when he rejoined administration. Also, the college was able to get funding for the museum on campus and for a graduate studio facility when he was a faculty member. The college of fine arts got the funding and then built while he was not in administration.

### *The priority of funding while dean*

Mr. Covington mainly concentrated on funding. He says that funding had deteriorated. Mr. Covington says the college had the wonderful assistance of President Jack Brown. He says the biggest issue was to get the funding back on a decent level. “When you’re dealing with a university-wide situation, you’re talking to a number of people who really don’t understand why you are here. People say why do we have fine arts at a university,” he states. He says he experienced attitudes ranging from no support to modestly supportive. He says the people who are either supportive or not supportive of fine arts are in charge of funding. “With Jack Brown and the centers for excellence program we were able to take a nice jump back up to a decent level,” he says.

### *Why had funding decreased?*

When he was a faculty member there was a possibility of USF losing forty tenured faculty members. This was when Cecil Mackey was president. USF assembled a group of people to try and figure out what to do. Mr. Covington says it turned out that it was not that bad after all. "We did take a hit," he says.

### *Purpose of a graphic studio*

Mr. Covington says the graphic studio was unique to USF. He says there may have been one other operation in the country. It was not necessary but important. It was extremely important because it brought a number of important artists to the USF campus to produce works. Those works then became available to the general public through a subscription program, which then would fund the program. The graphic studio gave fine arts students an opportunity to work with these artists. He says the concept was wonderful. His problem with it was he did not think the students were as involved with it as he would have liked.

### *Why did artists find it appealing to come and work at the graphic studio?*

Mr. Covington says the artists were given art facilities, which was an appealing aspect for them. Artists would have some idea about something they wanted to try and the graphic studio provided a place where they could try and explore new avenues and concepts. Dr. Covington says the studio was a wonderful laboratory for the artists to be able to do that.

### *USF presidents' support for fine arts*

He says that some presidents were supportive and some were not. The most supportive after Dr. Allen was Jack Brown, who was also a scientist. Frank Borkowski was a wonderful man. He was a musician. Mr. Covington was thrilled to know a musician was going to be president. However, President Borkowski was supportive, but not especially supportive.

### *Painting portraits of USF presidents*

He did a number of portraits at UF. He does not recall why he was chosen to do Dr. Allen's portrait, but he was and he did it. Then as each president has come along he has been asked to do his or her portrait and he has. He painted all the presidents except Dr. Genshaft. He painted the portraits from photographs. All of the presidents were in office when their portrait was painted so they did not have time to pose for long sessions. He collected all the photographs that he could find from the archives at the university. He used the photographs to paint the portraits.

*Mr. Covington did a bronze bust of Dr. Allen.*

### *Library relief*

USF had a design competition where the winner would be able to design a piece of artwork to place on an empty wall on the first floor of the new library building. He says there was an external juror who came in to judge the presentations. Mr. Covington submitted a design and won the competition. He cast the design on resin. His design still hangs in the library on the first floor next to the main stairway. The idea behind his

design is that information is transmitted from generation to generation through books. On the design is a man, who comes from Leonardo da Vinci's *Proportions of a Man*. One side of the design represents the past and the figure on the right represents the future.

*USF mace*

USF asked Mr. Covington if he would be interested in designing a mace for USF. "It was an intriguing process. It involves gold, silver, and wood. Each element is symbolic," he says. One of the things he enjoyed about it was the wooden handle, which he carved himself and the other he designed and made the cuts and then turned it over to a silversmith. He carved the handle so there are gripping grooves in it for the mace bearer to place his or her fingers. He thought added gripping grooves added an interesting visual and a practical aspect to the mace.

*In his twenty one plus years at USF what is Mr. Covington most proud of..*

"Just working with the students, providing as best I could for their development," he says.

*Mr. Covington's last words about USF*

"I think it [USF] has made important use of the resources and energy in this area. It is important that it's here," states Mr. Covington. He thinks USF has made excellent use and will make even better use of its potential in the area because of the energy and resources of a metropolitan area. Describing USF, Mr. Covington says, "It's a real jewel in the making, and I think inevitably it will become the dominant institution in the state. It had a long way to go to check up mainly because the legislature was made up of first UF graduates and then UF and FSU graduates. It was difficult to overcome those barriers," he says. Mr. Covington says that the dominance and control of UF and FSU is gone. USF now has graduates involved with the state legislature.

*End of Interview*