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Arthur Ebanks oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 12, 2003

Arthur Ebanks (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Arthur Ebanks (E)
Current Position: Senior Utilities Supervisor
in Physical Plant
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Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)
Location of Interview: Tampa Campus
Library
Transcriber: University of Florida
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Monday, May 12, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, staff, students and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Mr. Arthur Ebanks who came to USF in September of 1963 as a trades helper. Currently, he is senior utilities supervisor in physical plant. Good morning, Mr. Ebanks.

E: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

E: I came to Tampa in September of 1955 from the Cayman Islands. My father, like all the men from the Cayman Islands, was in the Merchant Marines and seldom got home. So, if we moved here at least we would be able to at times get short visits when his ship came to Tampa.

G: What brought you to the University of South Florida?

E: I wanted a steady job, one that was challenging, one that I could also have an opportunity

to advance my education in, and that afforded me that opportunity. I did attend night school, took some classes at night. The campus was just new and exciting. There was a lot of challenges that we had to deal with to get the job done. The university was new and the funding was limited.

G: How did you get the job at USF as a trades helper?

E: I put in an application sometime during the early summer of 1963. I was given the job because I was the most experienced one. I had four years prior electrical experience in the Navy. That put me on the top of the list.

G: What does a trades helper do? Can you explain what a trades helper was?

E: Yeah, it was to help the different journeymen and the different trades. However, with my electrical background in the Navy, I worked primarily with the electricians that were on campus. It was pulling three journeymen at the time. I did help one of the journeymen plumber, we only had one, occasionally. There was me and another trades helper to help the two journeymen that worked the day shift and then one of them worked the night shift from 3:00pm to 11:00pm.

G: Can you describe to me the first time you saw the USF campus? What did it look like in September of 1963?

E: Well, the physics building was just being completed. It was very spacious. The mall between the UC and the administration building was just a huge area of grass with some sidewalks in it until it was changed into the MLK Plaza. We had lights out there for security lighting and there were probably 200 what we call area lighting. So that's just [unintelligible] and street lights on campus. We also, like I stated earlier, had some challenges maintaining them. We were not in a position to purchase a bucket truck at

that time, so we used what we called a telescopic lighter, which we hauled around the truck and I slyly unloaded it and set it up. It had regulators on the side to steady it and then you would put the ladder up and you had to climb up the ladder and get the aluminum basket, which the whole lighter was aluminum, and worked, on the actual light fixture if that was where the problem was. Sometimes they had to change them out.

G: So rather than have a bucket that moves you up to work on the light, you guys sort of had to come up with your own system?

E: Right, and that was one of the things that we could afford. We didn't have that in 1963. We got that maybe a few years later.

G: What were some of the other problems, in addition to lighting, that you first encountered in those early days?

E: The electricians commonly, back then and now, used a voltage tester, which costs about \$50 today. They were \$14 back then, but we did not have the money. So, one of the journeymen I worked with, he was a very brilliant man and we became very good friends, he took a fuse and actually made me a voltage tester.

G: Could you hold that up a little bit [Mr. Ebanks holds up a voltage tester to the camera]?

E: I'm sorry for the broken lead. This lead is missing. There were two small light bulbs hooked in series and they would take a maximum of 240 volts.

G: This gentleman made this for you?

E: Yeah, as a matter of fact he made one for the other electricians too. The other thing was we had this Simpson multi-meter [Mr. Ebanks holds up a Simpson multi-meter to the camera] that was kept in the shop. If you needed it you went to the shop and got it and

used it and put it back in its place so somebody else could find it. We did not have any method of communicating between the shop and the person on the field.

G: So how did you guys communicate with each other when you're out at one building and you needed something from another building, what did you do?

E: We'd go to that building if we knew that the person had it, or else we would go back to the shop. If he was there I'd get it from him or I'd say the tool or the material was there. This meter is also a Simpson 260 it is still made today. It has some modifications on it, but it is a very good meter. It's the meter of my preference.

G: So, as you said, there was only one of these meters to test the voltage and there was only one of these meters to go around to the entire [staff].

E: This is what you call a multi-meter. You test voltage, continuity, and it also can read decibels and micro-amps and this kind of stuff, which we seldom went into decibels and micro-amps and ordinary amps.

G: Thank you. Why was there such a lack of funding in those early days?

E: I really cannot say for sure, but I speculate, my guess would be that the funding the university got from the legislature, being a small university and just being the third year of actual classes, was limited. The university had to set a priority for them [funds] and put them in other places so we could give better instruction, better service to our students and the public.

G: You mentioned lighting; you mentioned lack of equipment, poor communication between buildings. Were there any other significant challenges?

E: It wasn't poor communication.

G: There was no communication.

E: Yeah, there was no communication between your supervisor and you unless he came on the job or you went back to the shop. We often started out with a handful of jobs in the morning. When we did them we went back to the shop and got more if there were more. Otherwise, we did preventative maintenance on things such as the emergency generator: tested the area of lighting, [and] checked the main switchyard, the few transformers that we had that were above ground.

G: When you came here in 1963, what did the grounds consists of when you first came here? You mentioned a couple of the buildings.

E: We had the administration building; chemistry; life science; the library, which is now SVC; we had Alpha, Beta, and Gamma as dormitories; we had the Central Plant with the blue smoke stacks; and the building facility that the Plant is now in was actually the Physical Plant Building, that was the offices. There were also three shops for the different trades. We had an area for the electricians and an area for the plumbers, and an area for welding. Also, there was a garage in there. One left garage that they serviced the university vehicles [in]. Our service trucks were very old, green, Civil Service [trucks] that came from Camp Blanding. They were chalky green and in very bad condition. The [unintelligible] was the wooden boxes that we had to put on the side of them for carrying material and tools in. The front end on the one that I drove was about to come off.

G: You've seen a lot of changes in forty years.

E: The end of that is the physics building was actually in the final completion stage, and the

UC was here too. Andros, they just broke ground, when I came, for the Andros Complex.

G: Out of those first few buildings that you just mentioned, were there any buildings that gave you more trouble than other buildings?

E: We had a water problem in Alpha in the fall of 1963. We were working on it when we heard the news that President Kennedy had been shot. That was Friday, about 2:30 in the afternoon. We were all saddened and really astounded. It affected everyone to the point that they sent some of us home. They said you can go home if you just feel overcome with grief.

G: Did you go home?

E: Yes, I did. I watched the funeral all day, the ceremonial things. In addition to working here I was also a Navy reservist. I stayed in the Naval Reserve for twenty-six years. I am now retired from it.

G: Did Kennedy's assassination affect other facilities functioning during that time at USF?

E: I can't say for sure, but I can only guess by the reaction of our people. The Monday, the day of the funeral, was a holiday. We came back Tuesday and I think emotionally it affected everyone.

G: You mentioned water problems in Alpha, can you talk a little bit about what kinds of water problems. Was their flooding going on in the dorms?

E: No, this was a hot-water line which heating in the building at the time, if I remember, was hot water from the Central Plant. This line that had been installed was too small and we had to run a bigger one on the outside. There were pressure problems with the water.

They weren't getting enough pressure. It decreased as you went up to the third floor. I don't know how to describe it other than a pressure problem. They weren't getting an adequate supply because of the reduced size of the pipe had been installed during construction.

G: Obviously, the pipe was too small for the facility?

E: Yeah, that's my recollection of the situation forty years ago.

G: During these forty years, I'm sure you've seen many kinds of natural disasters that have affected the university such as hurricanes or floods. Have there been cases where the natural environment has affected the physical structure of USF?

E: Yes, the tornado in April of 1966. It was about 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning. I was upstairs in the maintenance building, which is now still the planning [building], and all I heard was a sound like freight train coming through. It lasted about ten seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. We looked out and there were cars and vans turned over, boats blown over the place. The Andros Complex had been open for approximately a year-and-a-half and a lot of the roofs were torn off of that. It was like bulldozer with a two hundred yard-wide blade. It went from Carrollwood, Dale Mabry and to 301. There is still one oak tree on campus, which is now one of the most beautiful live oaks that we have, by the Andros cafeteria that was completely [broken]. Limbs were broken off of it in a sense, but it ended up a beautiful tree. It was just a path of devastation that I saw from Dale Mabry to 301.

G: What other buildings were damaged on campus during that tornado?

E: I think just about all the buildings, the exhaust fans on the roof and stuff like that. Some

of those towers were torn off of them. There was probably some damage with all the buildings. I can't recall any specific ones other than I know there was one building, I can't remember which building, that had exhaust fans torn off the roof and the hull of Andros Complex had severe roof damage. We had to use Viscuine© and sand to seal the roof so the water wouldn't be coming in during rain.

G: Were students removed from the dormitories while all this work was going on?

E: Yeah, there was an area where we were working. We had to hire a crane and stuff.

Yeah, we had that area secured. The students were definitely taken off the top floors of the building because their rooms were wet.

G: How long did it take you guys to clean up everything and fix everything that a ten-second tornado was able to do?

E: I would guess about two weeks. The dormitory we made pretty much rain tight that day, but contracts had to be negotiated for putting a new roof back on it and stuff, so it probably took quite a while.

G: In addition to tornados, have there been other natural events that have caused damage to the physical structure of the university?

E: Yeah, I think there's probably been a few broken windows during one hurricane that was a mild one, about eighty-seven to eighty-mile an hour winds, came through about the late 1960s seems like and did some minor damage to most of the buildings. The primary thing there would be light poles knocked down and exhaust fans and supply fans damaged on the roofs of the buildings. Those are easy targets.

G: In terms of the structure of physical plant, you mentioned that there were electrical trades,

plumbing trades, welding trades . . .

E: Cabinet making, carpentry . . .

G: That was all under the auspices or the head of physical plant?

E: Yeah, Mr. Clyde Hill was actually the first director of physical plant.

G: Was physical plant located in the same place that it is today?

E: Yes it was. We just did not have as many buildings as we do today.

G: How long were you a trades helper?

E: About four years, which was the normal time at that time to be a helper.

G: What was your next position?

E: I was an electrician.

G: Being such an open campus in those early days, was lighting a priority to the university, lighting the facilities?

E: Oh yes, we went through each building once a year and I sort of washed the fusers or glass lens in the fixture, changed out the bulbs, because fluorescent bulbs do tend to get dim as they age and so the fixture collects dust and all of this leads to dimmer lighting. I remember in the SVC, counting all the incandescent light bulbs and fluorescents and maybe a few other types, there were over 5,000 bulbs that we used to change. We really had a good lighting maintenance program going.

G: Were there cases of pipes over-flooding, lights bursting because of students or faculty misusing the facilities?

E: Not that I'm aware of. There was a particular case of some vandalism at one time in Alpha Hall where a student actually tore the lights and ceiling tile down on, I think it

was, on the first, second, and third floors; partially on each one.

G: How has the physical landscape of USF changed since you first arrived on campus in 1963?

E: Well, we have a lot more grass. It really upsets me when they tear one of the trees that was a sapling about one inch out that are now beautiful oaks. These trees now are anywhere from fourteen to eighteen inches in diameter, some may be bigger. I do find that upsetting because I'm an outdoor person, but I know that it's a necessary evil too. You have to serve the public and serve the students, and that requires buildings and changes.

G: When you first came here, did the USF administration charge the physical plant with specific responsibilities that they wanted met?

E: It appeared obvious to me like maintaining the buildings and the lighting and keeping the water, air conditioning, and the sewage going. It appears to me like that would have been an obvious thing that would have been the function of having a physical plant or a maintenance department.

G: In terms of diversity and gender in those early days, was physical plant a large department and were there predominantly men working in the physical plant?

E: When I came here there were solo men working in the trades area, but I think there were females and men in the housekeeping areas.

G: Has there been a change in the gender issue among physical plant? For example, are there more women doing more physical kinds of work in physical plant?

E: Yes, there's more women in physical plant. Now, we have one that's an electrician,

another one that works with the air conditioning, and one that actually works at central plant. As a matter of fact a very close friend of mine that's going on her thirty years was actually one of the operators that came here about, I'd say, 1968 or 1969. She was one of the operators for the plant.

G: Was there any outward discrimination towards these women that were doing these more physical kinds of jobs on campus?

E: Well I'm not aware of any, but then they were not in our section of physical plant, I mean the trades' area. There were women in physical plant, custodial, when I came here and the utilities department. The first one I know about is this close friend of mine. I think she came here in about 1969 or somewhere.

G: Were there any major problems in the past forty years that really stick in your mind as to something that happened in a particular building?

E: We've had minor fires in some of the dormitories, but I think the biggest thing was an actual transformer in the basement of life science. The transformer went from the 4160 voltage on a primary down to the 208, three-phase four-wire system. That burned out about fifteen or twenty years ago and had to be replaced. It was difficult to get it up out of the basement, a transformer that weighs probably 4,000 pounds, and get the new one back in.

G: How did you get a 4,000-pound transformer out?

E: We hired some people that specialize in that ability. They had the equipment. It was not logical for us to buy the equipment to do it. These people had the skills to do it also. That was a specialty. Today, we have a fair amount of transformers set all over the

campus that are above ground.

G: I want to move to the 1970s a little bit. In doing my research about the physical plant, I noticed that in 1973, approximately, the physical plant was talked a lot about in the *Oracle*. Particularly, there was an issue of whether physical plant was over billing the university for certain jobs. Do you know anything about these things that occurred in the 1970s?

E: I know there was an article in the paper. Some individual made that allegation, but I don't agree with the allegation because then we had a number for each building and the time that we spent on that building we'd put on that number. I don't think physical plant was billing the university. I think physical plant had a budget and the budget, my conception of it, was actually broken down and there was so much for repairs for each building. The renovations were paid for by the other department.

G: You went from being a trades helper to an electrician. How long were you an electrician for?

E: For about twenty years, and then I became maintenance supervisor. I had electricians, plumbers, and one or two refrigeration people that actually worked for me in the maintenance department. I found taking over that position very challenging and very rewarding. We were having outages almost on a biweekly basis on the ground distribution system because these pipes and wires are on the ground. They have about eighty-five manholes on campus. Condensation is in those pipes and will, just by nature, be there. In time it breaks down the insulation on the cable and these cables short up and buildings go down, but we did some preventative maintenance and actually reduced those

outages from biweekly. I think the first case I had after we did all the preventative maintenance, on weekends including some on Christmas and mostly on long weekends; we actually reduced our outages down to one in thirteen months.

G: When were these outages taking place, at all different times?

E: All different times, at night [and] during the day. They were particularly bad in the fall of the year when the temperature would change.

G: What year was this approximately?

E: This was in the late 1980s to early 1990s.

G: How have your responsibilities changed during these forty years, especially since the university has been going through a tremendous growth of construction?

E: Well, every time there's a new building up there's more electrical, which we're dealing with strictly the primary and some of the secondary voltage for us to maintain. If there's more than that we can't always afford to hire people for it.

G: How long were you maintenance supervisor for?

E: I would say possibly ten years.

G: Your job was to supervise different divisions in physical plant?

E: Well, not different divisions but different [trades]. I had three different trades. I had the electricians, the plumbers, and refrigeration people. That was the actual refrigeration units like coolers, a refrigerator, water fountain, etc.

G: What did you do after you finished working as a maintenance supervisor?

E: Well, the structure of physical plant was changed. The electric shop became part of utilities. They moved into one of the utilities buildings. Our primary responsibilities

then, in addition, were the sub station; the underground distribution system and all it's manholes, eighty-five manholes; the central plant; all of the stations; about I'd say 3,000 street and area lights on campus. I think we have about maybe twenty or thirty emergency generators that belong to us. Maintenance has some too. We have one that's remotely located and that's in Riverview for the TV station.

G: You mentioned this change in the physical plant structure. Why did this change occur?

E: Well, I think the administration, physical plant, and the university wanted to make some changes, and we could serve the public, the students and faculty better, and sort of the university community better.

G: Were there cases of where the physical plant wasn't serving the community or USF?

E: No, there were not any cases of that, but you can always better your service; make it more efficient, make it more available, and increase the service area.

G: With all the recent growth, I myself have been here ten years and have seen the university landscape really change, what kinds of things is physical plant doing to keep up with those changes? Are you able to be successful at keeping up with these changes?

E: Yes, we have installed a new primary voltage electrical system where we have the capability of keeping a building from [losing power] either with one of four feeders in some cases. The minimum we have is at least two.

G: Two?

E: Two feeders, two electrical lines going in, or you could say circuits.

G: In terms of funding, you mentioned during those early days you guys didn't have a lot of funding.

- E: Right, well we didn't have a lot of money for physical plant.
- G: Has that changed?
- E: It has changed as the university has increased, but I don't know. In the last three years I think we've lost some funding and gained some buildings.
- G: Is working in the physical plant a very demanding job?
- E: At times it can be, but it's a very rewarding job.
- G: Why is it so rewarding to you?
- E: Because you're doing things that are helping other people. Electricity, water, air-conditioning is taken for granted. We have to keep those on, those operating.
- G: You mentioned air-conditioning, when you came here in 1963 were all the buildings air-conditioned?
- E: Well, no. The physical plant building was not. The shops were not air-conditioned. There are some that you just can't do air conditioners, I mean there's no way. Some of the office in the physical plant had window units. They were small I think just three offices.
- G: Certainly maintaining air-conditioning in our climate was something that probably was a priority in those early days.
- E: Yes, but that was the utility department then. We have a chilled water system, which the utilities department has maintained and expanded to keep up with the buildings over the years.
- G: You're retiring in a few weeks.
- E: In about a month.

G: You've seen a lot of wonderful things in forty years. What, Mr. Ebanks, are you the most proud of in your service to the University of South Florida?

E: Well, the electrical system. They people that I have that help me; they're an outstanding bunch of people. We have 3,000 lights; we don't allow over twenty of them to be out. I have somebody who comes in every morning an hour early and checks the lights and the banners around campus. We did do get hit at times. Sometimes the lights will be out during the summer when lightening strikes. We'll get part of a circuit up, but sometimes I have to put a full crew out there, which our crew is only about six people.

G: In your part?

E: In utilities and electrical shop, yeah.

G: So six people, approximately, are maintaining all the electrical portions of the university?

E: All the primary electrical and some of the secondary portions of the university. All the lighting, all the traffic signals are central plant. Central plant is operated and they have some maintenance people, but we take care of their electrical.

G: Any funny stories in the past forty years that you might want to put on record for us about the physical structure of the university?

E: Well let me just say one thing in regards to physical plant. I am very proud of the job that my people have done. They've done an outstanding job. The one individual that I hope takes my place, I think the university has a certain hope, but they will not find a candidate like that to fill. His character, his technical skills, and we also have others that are right below him. What puts him above them is his experience. He will do an excellent job.

G: Did you think when you came here in 1963 did you think you were going to be here forty years?

E: I said gee, sixty-five is a long time away. Well, I'm not sixty-five now but I'm leaving because of the job program, there's an opportunity. I'm a steady person, probably a little too steady. I envisioned it, yes, I envisioned it, but I didn't know if I would be. It's really been a great place to work. I'm endowed with some very professional people, some very learned, and very courteous people. The incidents of rudeness and misbehavior, I guess you'd say, has been very, very small.

G: Any funny stories that you can share with us very quickly?

E: Yes, I'll never forget, we were all out here on a Saturday morning. We had a primary power cable blow up feeding the theater the TAR building at that time. THR and FAD were not there. To get the manhole open, which is over two hundred pound lead and hooked the chain up to the trucks and sometimes pull it open, sometimes we were able to do it with a pry bar. We didn't have the communication that we do now; we had, I think, a pager. I was told by my supervisor to stay there. Then he called me over the other place and unknowingly I dragged the manhole across about two hundred yards of grass, which they're still telling me about it today.

G: How have communications changed since you first came here in 1963?

E: Well, we went from isolation and going back to your supervisor or to the shop to communicate with your supervisor or whoever was necessary. We went to pagers, which we would have to call the shop and find, after we were paged, to learn what they wanted us to do. Then, we've gone to radios, which really has been a great help. Most of the

supervisors now have cell phones, including me. This is really allowed us to operate more efficiently and more effectively too.

G: My final question, if there was something that you could leave on tape either to your colleagues at physical plant or to future colleagues, what do you want to tell them about your experiences at the University of South Florida?

E: Well first I want to say we're here because of the students, never forget that. The next thing is do the best you can with what you have. There are times that you have a job but you go a few years without a raise. On the other hand, if you've ever had to work in construction, you may not have a job, or even maintenance in some places. I find that the new system with the universities has much difference; it's hard for I think all of us to get used to but it's something that we have to work with and work together.

G: Mr. Ebanks, thank you very much.

E: Well, thank you. [Long pause] O.K., I realized a few years back that my life had been, a life of service; service to the students here at the university; service to the state, service to the nation and I hope that some of that has spread to the service to the world. I am proud of my career at the university, my contributions. I am also proud to have served in the Armed Forces and have defended this country. We take for granted many things that we have, that others don't and I just ask for someone and all of you to listen to this.

End of Interview