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## Jorge Fernandez oral history interview by Andrew Huse, November 12, 2003

Jorge Fernandez (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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### TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

#### *First Introduced to the University*

Mr. Fernandez first heard about USF while in high school in Miami. He had no serious plans for going to college, but one of his teachers took a great interest in Mr. Fernandez's future. This teacher helped him get interested in college and USF, which was a new school at the time. He was accepted to begin in the fall of 1964.

#### *First Trip to Campus*

There was a requirement that incoming students had to take a test over the summer, so Mr. Fernandez first came here on an overnight trip in the summer of 1964. He stayed overnight and the following day they had a test for half the day. This was an interesting experience because the school was very modern. His high school didn't have air conditioning, so the air conditioning at USF made a great impression.

Mr. Fernandez came back a few weeks later for financial aid. There was a program for Cuban students. The big difference between then and now was that scholarship recipients had leftover money after they paid tuition and bills. They still had a little left over to spend on other things besides school.

#### *Mr. Fernandez's background*

Mr. Fernandez came to Miami from Cuba in 1962. He finished high school in Miami and then came to Tampa. His parents stayed in Cuba, so he was here by himself. When he moved to USF, it became his home. Every school vacation he had to take everything out and move somewhere else. During Mr. Fernandez's first summer vacation he worked for a construction company in Lakeland, where he found a place to live. The school year may have been shorter then than it was now because they were on trimesters rather than semesters. USF was on a trimester system until 1967, then they moved to the quarter system.

#### *Living at USF*

Mr. Fernandez lived in Alpha Hall. He thought Alpha was the best dorm, because it "had the most light and convenience." They didn't have private bathrooms; there were two per

floor, so if a student had early classes, they would have to get up pretty early to use the bathroom, eat breakfast, and then go to class. Freshman didn't have a lot of choices concerning when their classes were.

There were also very few buildings at the time, and the campus had a lot of open space. Mr. Fernandez thought that was nice in a way, but in the winter it was very cold, and in the summer it was very hot. The Engineering School didn't have a building at the time. Most of Mr. Fernandez's classes were in the basement of the Physics Building. They even had some classes on the second floor of the Administration Building.

#### *Trip from Cuba to Miami*

When he first arrived in Miami, Mr. Fernandez could read English and understand about half of the spoken English he heard. He had a "very difficult time" speaking. USF was overwhelming because very few people spoke Spanish. The people who did were from Tampa and they spoke Spanish at home. In the long run, this helped him master English. Mr. Fernandez feels that he did well the first year he was here and he took the required courses that every freshman must take. He took very few engineering classes.

#### *His first classes*

He took English and American Idea. American Idea was a course generally reserved for second year students and both classes had a very heavy reading load. Mr. Fernandez had to read seven books in each class per trimester. It was a little difficult to read two books a week, but he enjoyed the challenge.

The American Idea class was a combination of U.S. History and discussion of current events. It was a very "unique class" and the professor was South African. Some people were offended by his frankness, but Mr. Fernandez really enjoyed this class.

#### *Other Cubans*

There was only one other person in engineering that was a Cuban refugee. Later on they ended up working together, so the two have kept up a working relationship. They both ended up having their own firms, so they consulted for other people and have done a lot of projects together.

Being Cuban affected the way he viewed his education. Most of the history students had done American history their whole lives and Mr. Fernandez had not, making for an "interesting" learning experience.

#### *Engineering Classes*

The department was small; they had fewer than ten professors. Mr. Fernandez is pretty sure that none of them are still teaching. This was a somewhat strange experience because he was sure they would eventually talk about practical things that engineers needed to know, but they never actually got to that point. Mr. Fernandez does not remember ever designing anything. Everything was taught theoretically. The benefit of this type of education is that it allows people to learn how to solve problems as they arise.

Engineering at USF at the time was “sophisticated and specialized in mathematics and physics, but not at the same level as it was being taught at other schools.”

The classes were usually very small, with only ten or fifteen people. A lot of people left after the first year because the classes were very difficult. There was a heavy workload and everyone had things they needed to do. There was a lot of complicated math and every student had to take calculus and physics and chemistry. Calculus was very hard because it was taught by the Math Department and “there were no concessions for engineers.”

#### *Activities on Campus*

Mr. Fernandez didn't participate in many of the “official” campus activities. He wasn't very interested in sports, which was one of the few things that were around for students to do.

There were several local fraternities, but none of them were on campus until at least the late 1960s. After that they became more associated with national fraternities. Mr. Fernandez did take part in the dances and picnics on campus.

There was a big difference between people who commuted and lived on campus. Commuting was different at the time because it took a lot longer to get to campus. If you lived on campus, “you felt like you were out in another country because there were four busses out here every day.” It took about an hour to get to downtown Tampa. Once you got downtown, you needed to walk everywhere, unless you were lucky enough to have a car, which most did not. Mr. Fernandez did not have a car until his third year of school. Many of the people with cars were nice enough to drive other students somewhere off campus to get food or have some fun. People would go to a sub shop near Busch Gardens to get sandwiches. They also went to Busch Gardens to get free beverages from the hospitality shop. Fowler Avenue was a narrow street back then and the only businesses were a motel on the corner of 30<sup>th</sup> Street and Fowler Avenue and the University Restaurant. There was nothing all the way to Nebraska.

There were dances almost every weekend in 1964-65. At the time, many people got together and played music in local bands. Several students had bands. Mr. Fernandez played in a band called the Answers. They never made money, but they had fun. The Answers played rock and roll and covered songs by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. At the time it was pretty easy to get dances going and get people together because this was some of the only entertainment that people had. There were also a lot of folk singers that associated with different people. The folk singers usually played the University Center. The Answers played two or three dances at the University, but mostly they played fraternity parties.

When Mr. Fernandez came to USF there were very few trees.

### *Other Students*

The student body changed over the course of the 1960s. At the beginning, the big difference between USF and high school was the lack of rules. If someone did not want to go to class, they did not have to. Some students stayed out late and slept through class during the day. This was different than what Mr. Fernandez was used to.

The food on campus was not much of a shock because Mr. Fernandez had been in the public school system. The students, especially the Americans (who made up a high percentage of the student population) complained a lot, but Mr. Fernandez didn't think it was very bad, and the prices were very good.

Mr. Fernandez did not date very much in his first two years at USF. He is not sure why, it may have been because he did not have a car. There was not much to do on campus. He also spent a lot of time studying and he spent much of his free time playing the guitar. There were also no women in the engineering classes, which made it difficult to meet people. The folk scene was more integrated; there were a few women singing in rock and roll bands.

Most of Mr. Fernandez's studying was done in his room. His roommates were good students and they had their own lives so they never bothered each other. He spent a lot of time at the library as well. There was a problem with writing because there were only five small rooms with typewriters, so if someone wanted to use a typewriter to work on a paper, the student would have to go to the rooms at really strange hours. One of his roommates had a typewriter, but Mr. Fernandez used the typewriters in the library often.

### *Professors*

His professor in the American Idea class was very influential. There was a very "dynamic" professor in the engineering department. Mr. Fernandez learned in these classes that "most everything in sciences are related to each other." This was good for his professional career. The American Idea professor was very "independent in his way of thinking." He was South African, descended from the Dutch.

There were many good professors at the time. While many of the things that they tell you are shocking at first, they make sense when you think about it, but being at a university was very different than high school.

### *Parents*

Mr. Fernandez spent a lot of time speaking with his parents back home in Cuba, where they lived for the rest of their lives. They were both teachers and continued their professions over the years. They were very proud of the fact that their son went to college. His father had wanted Mr. Fernandez to study engineering. If he had stayed in Cuba he may have studied architecture. He isn't sure if he chose the right thing because he knows many clients who are architects, so from time to time he is a little envious.

### *Odd memories from USF*

Mr. Fernandez doesn't remember too many pranks. Alpha hall had a basement that was a bomb shelter, which no one was allowed into. The dorm had a first floor with rooms for studying or watching television. One room had a large trash door with a chute that went up to all the floors above. People emptied their trashcans into the chute. Every once in a while people would throw a match down the chute just to get the fire crew over to the dorm. This happened many times, especially early in the morning when people were trying to sleep.

Mr. Fernandez does not remember very many political protests, especially early in his student career. In the late 1960s and early 1970s is when these things started to happen. He got his degree in 1972 and was married in 1969. He had three or four more courses to take after his marriage. At the time he had a good job without the degree and was making enough money, so he took classes part time and did full time work. Mr. Fernandez had started with full-time work and full-time studying, but decided to switch to being a part-time student. He and his wife still had friends here and he was still a student, so they took part in activities and were still involved in the school, but they were no longer in the same age group as a lot of the students.

### *The Quarter System*

Mr. Fernandez is not exactly sure why the quarter system came about, but he thinks that some people wanted to make school more efficient. They decided to change the trimester into a ten-week quarter. This would allow school to run forty weeks a year. Three-hour courses became four-hour courses and five-hour courses became seven-hour courses. Most people took the same number of classes or maybe slightly fewer classes. The problem was that most of work people do in college is work they do on their own. The number of hours in the week and the number of sleep stayed fixed, but the number of class hours increased, which cut into everything else and left less time to do work. Everyone found very quickly that it was difficult to keep up. Many people failed the first time they did the quarter system, so "it was horrible." Everyone complained about the system, but no one could do anything about it. They hoped the system would end, but it did not. Governor [William] Haydon Burns was blamed for this, although Mr. Fernandez is not sure if it was his idea. One story states that the governor's son did not do well under the trimester system.

In the summer time, before the quarter system, a lot of students could go to school for at least one term and try to get finished early. Under the quarter system, students were very "burned out" by the time the summer rolled around, which made everything difficult for everyone.

### *Race Relations at USF*

The student body was integrated, but there were not many African Americans on campus and very few lived in the dorms. To Mr. Fernandez's knowledge there were no official limitations on who could live in the dorms, but there were very few black students. He remembers only one or two.

Mr. Fernandez was not very involved in politics, but it seemed that different departments had different perspectives on life. The Geography department was very conservative and there were “certain things you didn’t do if you were a geography major.” Engineering was also conservative. There were also liberal departments. Some students did not mix very well. Engineering students were viewed as “snobs” because they “kept to themselves.”

#### *After graduation*

Mr. Fernandez already had a good job before he graduated. During his first year here his group played a benefit concert for a civic organization. The people running the organization told him that if he ever needed a job to come and see them. Two of the people from the group went and talked to this man who was president of a construction company. The other guy decided not to do it, but Mr. Fernandez decided to work there. Mr. Fernandez was there for three summers and after this he decided to go into engineering to design buildings because he had been interested in architecture. This was how he got into engineering. He then went to work for a construction engineering company. He worked three or four different offices and got a little more responsibility every time. About twenty years ago he started a company with another person he worked with. His co-owner passed away, so now Mr. Fernandez is in charge of the company. The company is called Cabana and Fernandez Engineering. They did work at USF, including some work on the old library, which is now the Student Services Building. They added a building just north of the library and a covered walkway. He has also done work in the Mental Health Services area.

Mr. Fernandez was “very fortunate to work with some brilliant engineers” when he first started working. He got to work with great professors and people that were very well versed in the practical side of engineering.

Mr. Fernandez would like to stress the differences in Tampa and the university area in the last forty years. “You cannot describe the differences, physically and emotionally.” There was a great separation between things that happened in the University and outside the University. This was an insular world and the outside community looked at it as a “separate group of people” because of the culture. Tampa was “very backwards” at the time. It was an easy place to live because you could get anywhere quickly with a vehicle. There was little to do. There were three movie theatres downtown and a shopping center. There was little in the way of performing arts. Entertainment was different then than now and the University was “out of place” with Tampa. In a way Mr. Fernandez regrets the change because the area surrounding the University was nice. Mr. Fernandez was very sad when they cut down all the trees to build the University Mall.

#### *Advice to Future Scholars*

Mr. Fernandez wants to tell prospective engineers that they can make a “lot more money for a lot less work” in professions such as law or journalism or real estate. Mr. Fernandez cannot complain about his financial situation, but he has had to work very hard for that.

It is important to remember that the time you spend in college are the best years of your life. Your life is happy and the least complicated that it will be. To be in a college is a “unique opportunity.” You do not just learn about the career you choose, but you learn about life and are exposed to different types of people and different ideas.

*End of Interview*