

5-11-2004

# John Greer oral history interview by Andrew Huse, May 11, 2004

John C. Greer (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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## Scholar Commons Citation

Greer, John C. (Interviewee) and Huse, Andrew T. (Interviewer), "John Greer oral history interview by Andrew Huse, May 11, 2004" (2004). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 105.  
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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
USF 50<sup>th</sup> History Anniversary Project

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Current Position: Board of the USF  
Foundation  
Date of Interview: May 11, 2004  
Editor: Mary E. Yeary  
Date of Edit: Oct. 19, 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Huse  
Location of Interview: Tampa  
Campus Library  
Abstractor: Daniel Bertwell  
Abstract Completed: Sept. 13, 2004  
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Arrival at USF*

Mr. Greer arrived at USF in 1967 as a student. USF was a new school when he was in high school considering the future. Mr. Greer's older sister attended USF at about the same time that Interstate 4 opened, connecting Winter Park with Tampa. The new highway made it easy for him to get home from campus, and because he was familiar with the campus it was a good choice for him.

*Academic*

Initially, Mr. Greer didn't have a real defined academic plan. He knew that he was expected to go to college, but didn't have a "focus on academics" when he began his studies.

*Initial Impressions of the Campus*

Mr. Greer came to the campus many times when his sister was here. His first impression of the campus was that it was "stark." The buildings were separated by a lot of space and defined by cold war era "bomb shelter architecture." There was some activity around the dorms, particularly Alpha, Beta, and Gamma because they were older and more traditional in the way in which they divided students. Mr. Greer was interested in the theatre and there was an active theater group at USF. There was a political science and public administration course of study that interested Mr. Greer. He was interested in this because his father had worked in administration and it offered the prospect of going to law school after graduation.

*The theater sub-culture*

In Mr. Greer's freshman year he tried out for Theater USF and was cast to be in Twelfth Night. It was the event that immersed him into the theater sub-culture at school. The people he met there were "engaging, creative, artistic people" and were "fun to be around." There was a "coffeehouse culture" among these people with shared musical tastes and theater interests.

*Political Science*

His first course in Political Science was a class with Dr. Roger Nichols. The course met at 8:00 am and Mr. Greer believes that he only made it to three classes in the term. Mr.

Greer failed the course and re-took it at a different time. They were on the quarter system at the time and took ten-week quarters rather than the sixteen-week semesters that the school has now.

#### *Political Activity on campus in the late 1960s*

The political activity on campus seemed to come at around the same time that Mr. Greer arrived as a student. The campus had been quiet for much of the 1960s and the administrators felt that they needed to act as parental figures in the students' lives. Meanwhile, the students wanted to assert control over their own lives. The war in Vietnam was becoming more and more of an issue. If you didn't stay in school you were subject to the draft – something that a lot of people worried about. As the anti-war movement became more and more prominent, the University got more involved. USF was less involved than other schools because this was a commuter school and people weren't as political as at other campuses around the country.

At one point in 1970 or 1971 the Hillsborough County Sheriff's department broke up a relatively mild rally. Someone cut the power to the band's amplifiers and another person cast a threat to those who pulled the plug. Within minutes there were a lot of deputies to break up the rally. It was less political at USF, but still political at times.

#### *Kent State*

Kent State was a "significant turning point for people who were lukewarm in their protest of the war." There was "general disbelief" at first, and then "outrage" over the shooting of students by National Guardsmen. This shocked a lot of students and faculty. This was a "galvanizing moment." At USF there was a movement to close down campuses (this was a movement around the nation and around the state). UF and FSU did close their campuses. USF faculty were able to moderate the outrage because they argued that universities were the places that should not be closed because it was a place where people could discuss issues. Students were satisfied with that, but there were still symbolic strikes that lasted about a week, causing students to stay out of classes. There was no effort to shut down the school; USF just responded in a different way.

#### *Sunshine Mike*

An alleged drug pusher named Sunshine Mike (Roy Retig) was killed off campus by police. This occurred at the "crazy corner" by Nebraska Avenue. This wasn't really related to the campus because he wasn't a student, but he had a lot of contact with students. Mr. Greer doesn't remember if this really enflamed the campus, but some people would latch on to anything to rabble rouse.

#### *Running for SG President*

Between his junior and senior year, Mr. Greer decided to run for President. He had lived on campus for his first two years, and campus life was really a part of his life. He married between his sophomore and junior years. Kathy and Mr. Greer had dated in high school and decided to get married while they were at USF. She finished her studies in 1996. They have been married for more than thirty-five years now.

### *Dorm Life*

Moving into the dorms, Mr. Greer saw a lot of demand for student housing and there was little to go around. They lived in a small room in the Alpha Dorm, the rooms were built for two and they had to squeeze in three. The living situation was a little cramped. Everything was a little better in sophomore year. He lived with someone from New York and someone from Ohio and they were all very different but got along well. They lived in a triple bunk bed. People lived anywhere a bed could go. Food service was available in the Andros or Argos complex. Ray King was in charge of student housing at the time. He had to serve a group of people that were twice as large as the facilities were built for. They didn't have the off-campus dining options available, but everyone did the best they could with what they had. Housing and food was a point of discussion for many of the students.

### *Student Government*

Mr. Greer had been involved in the SG for a year before he ran for president. A good friend of his who was in the same fraternity had been president the previous year. Many people considering careers in law or government saw SG as "good practice" for their future careers. Toward the end of the 1960s, SG seemed to get some power on campus. It seemed like the things happening on campus were having a broader impact and this made involvement interesting and exciting.

Mr. Greer was in the inter-resident hall council his freshman year. Each dorm elected people to represent their particular halls. Representatives met with Ray King to discuss the food and living situations. They wondered if they could get more chairs in the lounge. These were "the burning issues" for the residence hall council.

Steve Anderson, the SG president, invited Mr. Greer to serve as a member of the cabinet. He served in this capacity for the year and developed enough interest to run for president the following year.

### *Fraternity*

He became interested in joining the fraternity during rush. He decided to pledge and there was "a moderate amount" of hazing, but nothing dangerous. A lot of the senior members of his fraternity didn't want the group to be too involved with hazing. They conducted social functions and had an annual ball.

More than any hazing, he remembers the pledge class having to do things like a university-wide treasure hunt. The treasure hunt ended at the University Restaurant.

### *The University Restaurant*

The restaurant was open until 2:00 am, and this made it one of the few choices that late at night. There was also a "grown-up" atmosphere there. The restaurant was close to campus and people went there and "held court." The Scaglione brothers owned the restaurant and they specialized in Italian food.

### *Presidency of SG and USF*

Steve Anderson had a successful presidency. He was “the last president to enjoy a peaceful tenure for quite some time.” The campaign was in the spring and there were a lot of other candidates. Mr. Greer was probably the “most radical of the moderates, as opposed to the most moderate of the radicals.” The race began with around six candidates and ended up going to a run-off. The run-off was “hotly contested” with “allegations of improprieties in voting.” The student court heard the case and Mr. Greer won.

### *Presidency of USF*

At the time, the presidency of the school was also shifting. John Allen retired. Mr. Greer believes that Dr. Allen didn't want to be forced to retire, and he retired of his own volition. Mr. Greer saw one of his responsibilities as SG President to make sure that Dr. Allen could retire without any real large protests demanding his retirement. Everyone knew that the school would be getting a new president soon, but wanted to give Allen a chance to retire of his own volition. Dr. Allen was at the end of a long career and he was the person who built the University of South Florida. The campus and enrollment were growing and the faculty was becoming more and more distinguished. It seemed that Dr. Allen's job was done and it was time to get a new person to move the school forward. Dr. Allen was “very sincere” in his desire for academics to be paramount, “to the point that he didn't appreciate some of the other things that other people, both students and faculty, felt should be a part of university life and experience.”

### *Impressions of Dean Harris Dean*

Dean was the vice president of Academic Affairs and took over as interim president when Allen retired. Dean was respected by both students and faculty. Mr. Greer's only criticism of Dean was that “he seemed to consider it his obligation to continue in Dr. Allen's plan” when he took over the post. Other people involved in the campus believed that a change would be good. Dean may have felt trapped between his loyalty to Allen and the movement for change.

### *Cecil Mackey*

While Mr. Greer was president, a search was conducted for a new USF President. The search committee consisted of faculty members, students, members of the administrative staff, and people from the community. Many people were interested in the position. Dr. Mackey was chosen as the second president and he “immediately brought a change of focus to the University.” Mackey changed direction because he viewed what the school had done as a starting point. He planned on a larger scale for the future than previous administrators. He planned expansion for graduate programs and a second wave of construction. There was a honeymoon period between Mackey and the faculty/students. He could focus on things that would move the school forward.

### *Running for SG President*

Mr. Greer doesn't really remember his platform and his vision for his presidency. Events seemed to occur outside of his control. He spent much of his time reacting to issues as

they arose. Mr. Greer had been an advocate of making the school a stronger resident school. He wanted to get a stronger intercollegiate athletic program.

### *Basketball*

Frank Nichols, a previous SG President, set the stage for inter-collegiate basketball, and they opened their first season as a team under Mr. Greer. This helped people get an interest in the program. The first game was against the University of Florida and a lot of people came to see UF because they were fans. The game took place in Curtis Hixon Hall because there was no other place to play.

### *Married student housing*

Married student housing was another priority. There were people returning from Vietnam and these students were a little older and they needed a place to live. Mr. Greer was married at the time and lived off-campus. A few years later they had married-student housing off-campus.

### *Voting-Drinking-Draft Age*

USF had been enabled by a legislative act that established a zoning district around the school. The legislature had prohibited alcohol from being inside this zone. Having alcohol in the dorms was a grave offense and a freshman may have been expelled if caught with the substance. When the draft became more and more of an issue there were a lot of laws people examined in regard to age. The argument revolved around the issue of whether or not it was fair to consider someone old enough to be drafted, but not old enough to vote or drink. Voting age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen, as was the drinking age. The new law went into effect about three weeks before Mr. Greer's twenty-first birthday. Campuses now saw a revival of Rathskellers where people were able to drink. USF was still prohibited from having alcohol on campus and the overturning of this act was one of Mr. Greer's initiatives as SG President. Shortly after the end of his tenure as President, they opened the Empty Keg on campus.

### *Graduation and After*

Mr. Greer graduated in 1972, so he had about a year between finishing as SG President and graduation. He had left campus and was in Tallahassee because he joined the staff of Dr. Roger Nichols, the political science professor who had failed him freshman year. Nichols hired Mr. Greer as a staff member on the House Education Committee. He worked there for a year. After that he worked for Louis de la Parte and Terrell Sessums, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and the chairman of the House Education Committee, respectively. While student body president, Mr. Greer took a three-week sabbatical and traveled with Lawton Chiles, who was a State Senator at the time and was running for U.S. Senate. Mr. Greer drove the campaign camper on its route from Tallahassee to Tampa. Mr. Greer met some very interesting people during this time. There was also a group of people that he spent time with at USF that became involved in the same causes. These were all tremendous experiences and the people he worked with were "wonderful people" and "tremendous public servants." The press was sometimes very cynical and merciless towards them. After about three years working in this environment, he decided that what they did was "not sufficiently rewarding for me

for the price that they paid.” He also decided against a career in law because he didn’t care for it.

#### *Working in home construction*

Mr. Greer preferred working in home construction with a small contractor in his hometown. This was work that he did over the summer during college and it felt very productive. From this he got into housing and became successful. After his return from Tallahassee, Mr. Greer took a position with the local homebuilder’s association. This allowed him to use some of his legislative experience to help them while meeting people in the business. He learned the craft and identified what he wanted to do. This allowed him to do sub-contracting work and then study for the contractor’s exam, pass it, and begin building homes. The political science networking was very helpful because it allowed him to develop relationships with people. He would recommend that prospective contractors not take construction or engineering in school, but political science, because “if you want to be at the top of the business, your tools are not a hammer and a saw and a measuring tape, your tools are a codebook, a set of zoning regulations, a county commission meeting agenda, staying on top of new concepts in urban planning and design,” and understanding the demographics of the area. A major in government and a minor in business are very good for people who want to go into building. Tampa is a great place because the area has added jobs and people over time.

#### *Business responsibilities*

As more and more people occupy the same spaces, it becomes important that designs meet these needs while not encroaching on others. Tampa is only so big, but there is more and more demand for space. The public must have some responsibility. We get a lot of land to be held publicly and this land is either preserved or used for the public. Hillsborough County has a lot of land in public ownership. There is also more planning before zoning and more specific zoning. Things have changed considerably over time in regards to community planning.

In the past few years, Mr. Greer has shifted his focus from building houses to developing communities. He felt it was “time to move from retail to wholesale.”

#### *Impressions of Dr. John Allen*

President Allen had taken the school from its inception to the late 1960s. Harris Dean was one of the most respected people in Allen’s administration.

#### *Dr. Wunderlich*

Mr. Greer, while in Student Government, spent a lot of time dealing with people in Student Affairs, including Dr. Herbert Wunderlich, the dean of students. Wunderlich was very interesting; he seemed to be conspiring against the students and was viewed as “the evil arm of the administration.” Looking back on it, that probably wasn’t the case. Mr. Greer was talking to Dr. Wunderlich in his office and they discussed his interests outside USF. Dr. Wunderlich loved his home state, Montana, and he had western art in the office. Wunderlich had some paintings that people have recently come around to respecting as great art.

Dean of women, Dr. Maggie Fisher, was a “very, very widely traveled, interesting, intelligent person.” She also seemed to really care whether or not the students thought she was doing a good job in her duties.

#### *University Center*

Mr. Greer remembers Phyllis Marshall, director of the University Center (now the Marshall Center), fondly. Mr. Greer thinks they named it the University Center because they didn’t want students to get the idea that the center was “their place.” He also doesn’t believe that administration wanted the students to think that the University was “their place.” He understands this more and more today because there are so many other people involved in the school, from faculty to alumni.

#### *Carl Riggs*

Dr. Carl Riggs took over for Harris Dean as vice president of Academic Affairs and he may have been “one of the best things that happened to this University over that time frame.” Dr. Riggs was “thoughtful,” held in high regard by the faculty and the community, and an “absolutely brilliant man.” He understood that the university must have a good standing in academic organizations. He never achieved his goal of establishing a Phi Beta Kappa chapter at USF. He was “a really solid influence on this University.”

#### *Edgar Kopp*

Edgar Kopp, Dean of Engineering, was someone that Mr. Greer spent a lot of time with discussing issues because he was interested in campus issues. A lot of faculty may have regarded Kopp with suspicion because he did not have a Ph.D. Using Dean Kopp as an example leads Mr. Greer to the conclusion that maybe a Ph.D. is not a necessity.

#### *Betty Castor*

Betty Castor was president of the school without a Ph.D. She was a classmate of Mr. Greer. They took a graduate course in Public Administration together. Shortly after that she ran for county commission. As county commissioner, Castor got a lot of support from homebuilders and her arguments against unregulated growth made a lot of sense to them. She wasn’t viewed as a threat, but someone with well thought out positions.

#### *Other administrators/professors at USF*

Mr. Greer also remembers Ray King, the head of housing, very well. Dick Bowers was athletic director at the time and is still affiliated with the school. Mr. Bowers was at one point the “Burma Open Golf Champion,” which he won while in the military.

There were great professors in the Political Science Department, including Professor Barber. He was well educated and very bright and turned out to be a “calming influence” during “times of strife” on campus.

### *Becoming engaged with the University again*

Mr. Greer's friend Steve Anderson became president of the Alumni Association in the early 1980s and encouraged Mr. Greer to get involved. He wanted to get alumni involved in the "Name Scholars Program," which encouraged people and business to fund a scholarship for a period of years. Mr. Greer and his wife decided to get involved in this program. At around the same time the school was moving forward in basketball and doing very well. While attending these games he ran into many people that he had known and had kept in touch with, mainly people who were in the fraternity with him. They kept in touch through business and had a mutual interest in USF. In the mid-1980s Greer and his friends got involved when there was a prospect of getting fraternity housing on campus. It took twenty years for the buildings to finally be built. Mr. Greer feels that the school was genuinely interested in having the buildings on campus prior to that.

### *Funding campaign for Alumni Center*

Mr. Greer became involved in the campaign for the Alumni Center because they started discussing the issue about the time he was getting out of the scholarship program. Joe Tomaino ran Alumni Affairs and he thought that maybe Mr. Greer would be interested in participating in the funding drive for the Gibbons Center. Mr. Greer thinks that it is a great facility and a great place. Mr. Greer is not a fan of the architecture on the Lifesay House, but he thinks that the Gibbons Alumni Center is beautiful.

### *Getting football program*

After doing this, they worked towards getting a football program at USF. One of Mr. Greer's former fraternity brothers was on the committee that recommended going ahead with a football program. The program has been great for the school. Mr. Greer believes that Lee Roy Selmon was instrumental in the program and knows that Selmon is highly regarded in the Tampa community and throughout the entire football community. Selmon and Coach Jim Leavitt were the two most important people in the history of the program. They established an endowment to make sure that the football program would have the necessary funds to pay for whatever was needed.

### *Donations from community*

Mr. Greer served on the University Foundation Board and he knew certain people on the board through business, in particular Jim and Mandell "Hinks" Shimberg. Some people, like the Shimbergs and Gus Stavros, have been instrumental in the school's ability to receive funds and have been very influential in donating to the school. Since Betty Castor's tenure, there has been a "growing connection between the University and the community." Mr. Greer thinks that this might be because the community grew out of the school in many ways.

### *Foundation meetings*

There are a number of different groups. Mr. Greer was initially involved in Student Life, which was involved in Greek Housing and the building of dorms and the new athletic center. They seek out people in the community that can help the school and the community connect. Recently Mr. Greer has been on the audit committee and in the next year he is not sure what kind of role he will play. At every meeting, you hear from the

different groups and sometimes Mr. Greer is called upon to cast a vote, but the role of the Foundation is mainly to “enhance the mission of the University through attracting the resources from the community.”

The foundation also uses the influence of people in the community to try and affect the legislators because these programs are for the entire community, not just the school itself.

#### *Community views of the University*

There is a certain amount of distrust of the University in the community. This existed in the 1960s when Tampa was a very conservative town. Even just a year ago, the Sami Al-Arian situation raised issues that separate the school, the community, and the educators. According to Mr. Greer, there are few people that are “more liberal about your business and more conservative about his than a university professor,” especially on the subject of academic freedom. There will always be some friction and suspicion among the school and the community, but the school affects more and more people. Right now in the Tampa Bay area, one of four people that hold a college degree got it from USF. So overall, everything is going well for the school.

The school contributes a lot to the community and Greer believes this is why so many people that own businesses in Tampa contribute to USF. They see the effect of the school on the range of available recruits. Mr. Greer had a lot of employees that he recruited from the school. There are a lot of ways an affiliation with USF helps in business, including that it creates a connection with a lot of people in the area.

#### *Greer reflects on his time at USF*

His time at school, while not always fun, and not “carefree,” was “stimulating” and allowed him to mature. Mr. Greer refers to this time as “truly interesting.”

#### *Advice for an aspiring student today*

“If you’re inclined to pursue your academic interest” that is wonderful. “If you’ve got other things to do, this can wait, but don’t give it up because the times spent here include not only lessons in the classroom, but can include very valuable lessons in life. It’s a wonderful opportunity, if you do come straight from high school to the university, to enter a world that’s filled with so many different things than you’ve experienced up to that point. You can expand very rapidly.”

#### *End of Interview*