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Gerald Robinson oral history interview by Andrew Huse, November 12, 2003

Gerald G. Robinson (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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TRANSCRIPTION

H: Today we will be interviewing Dr. Gerald Robinson who came to USF in 1960 as a professor and currently he is teaching in the Honors College at the University of South Florida. Good afternoon, Dr. Robinson.

R: Good afternoon.

H: It's great to have you here and thanks for coming. First, let's just get started by, how did you hear about the University of South Florida? When did you first apply?

R: I heard about the university because my major professor at the University of Minnesota where I was finishing up my doctorate at that time knew Dr. Russell Cooper who was coming down to be the dean of the Liberal Arts College at that time. Russell Cooper had a good reputation at [the University of] Minnesota. He was an associate dean there. A lot of people heard about him coming down here and our initial faculty there were ten people who had doctorates from the University of Minnesota who were on the faculty at that time. I don't remember exactly what time I applied, but I remember that I was interviewed in April of 1960 down here. We started, of course, with our faculty meetings, our introductory meetings, so we could get acquainted with what was going on here on September 1, 1960.

H: Tell us about that first meeting. What were people talking about? What was going on?

R: Everybody had to explain how the things were going to run here because there was no precedence for anything. The heads of the various groups were given time to explain what was going on, how they were going to handle things. This included, well we had a brand new library, or a start of a library. Really, we started with the College of Basic Studies, as it was called then. Most of our people, when we started, were incoming freshmen. There were a few people that had some credits prior to coming here, but not many. The eight areas of the College of Basic Studies were the ones that were explained.

There was also a lot of stuff about the state of Florida, being a faculty member in the state of Florida and what that meant. What kind of benefits there were and all that kind of explanation that was needed. We also had a hurricane right in the middle of the mist because [hurricane] Donna came through, actually went just south of us. It looked like it was going to come right through Tampa for a while. It came in south of us and went across the state. We had a little interlude thanks to Donna. There were a few days when we couldn't get anyplace because of downed trees and downed wires and things.

H: Describe the campus, briefly, for us when you first arrived.

R: There were three buildings. One of them was the administration building. One was what is now the chemistry building, or it was the chemistry building then also. One was part of what is now the Marshall Center. It's been added on to since then. The interesting thing was that the fourth floor of the University Center was the women's dorm. Phyllis Marshall was the resident assistant in the women's dorm. We had exactly three buildings. People had either offices, for instance, I remember the English offices were over in the University Center on the second floor. We were in the chemistry building on

the third floor along with physical science people. I think there were some behavioral science people there. We were in different places. The library was on the second floor of the east end of the University Center, which illustrates, we were starting small.

H: When you were hired, which department were you hired to work in? Was this basic studies in the beginning?

R: We were all given dual appointments, initially. I was hired in the biology area of Basic Studies but also for biological sciences, I think it was called. Also, in biology in the College of Liberal Arts.

H: Describe your first office.

R: My first office was on the third floor of the chemistry building. It was in room 304. I actually had a window in it. At that time there was a central area out and then four offices around the small central area so if you came in 304, there were four of us that shared that central area. All the biologists were close to each other along that side. Some of them were down toward the far end. Glenn Woolfenden, for example, had an office and a lab down toward the far end of that same side of the chem. building, but he was still on the third floor up there.

H: Tell us about some of your first classes then. You were teaching basic studies courses.

R: [I was] teaching basic studies courses. I had three 8:00 classes a week. That is something that they have never done to me again since. In the years since, I have one other 8:00 class. Especially during the laboratory things I was here at 8:00. [I had] no problem being here at 8:00, it was whether my brain was here at 8:00. I would come too long about 8:20 or 8:25 and look, wondering what had been going on in the class in the meantime and notice that some of my students were still not even wondering what was

going on. They still hadn't awakened. It was always cold in there, and the desks were cold. It was something to behold. Also, interestingly, I had a pair of twins in one of my first classes, and later on, when I was in the hospital at the time, when one of my sons was born, one of those twins was giving birth to twins in that same hospital at the same time. We ran across each other, an interesting coincidence.

H: You mentioned a lot of the students were understandably sleepy at the beginning of the day. Describe your students over the years. Maybe not just that first semester.

[Adjusting microphone]

H: Describe your students. What did you expect and how did your students compare?

R: Really, if you look at any group of students, you're going to find a tremendous diversity. I found some students who were great disappointments to me, and some students who were a wonder; you were in awe, almost, of them. I think during the very first year, most of the students' first year, most of the students were pretty much what I had expected. Obviously, some were better than others, but they were pretty much within the mix. I had very few real disappointments, in that regard. As you got larger populations of students, then you got more spread in what the students were like. Some of them, you wondered, why on earth are you here? Others you thought to yourself, boy am I ever glad you're here, at the other end. I wonder why you're here, but I'm sure glad you're here. There were really some gems along the way.

H: Your first classes, being in basic studies, what then, were some of the other classes, as the years went on. What department were you teaching in?

R: I've taught all of them in biology. I taught the beginning courses, especially the more cellular beginning courses for biology majors. I taught physiology. I taught anatomy and

physiology; that's not really a big biology major's course. That's a service course for others. I taught animal physiology for majors. I taught medical botany. A lot of things, a great variety of kinds of courses. Mostly centered around the either the cellular ones at the freshman level or something physiologically-related courses.

H: When you first arrived, when you looked around here at your colleagues in your department, what did you think? You assessed the students, but what did you think about the colleagues that had been hired, that were teaching in similar subjects?

R: I don't know that I should say what I thought of a couple of them. Most of them, I thought, these are good colleagues. These are people that you would expect to have at a university. There are a couple that turned out to be something other than that as time showed. For instance, two of the people I came in with, Glenn Woolfenden and Frank Friedl; Glenn Woolfenden came in the same time I did. He had just finished his doctorate at Florida. He and I were here for a long time together, many years together. Same with Frank Friedl, except that I had known Frank Friedl at the University of Minnesota before coming here. Actually, Frank Friedl was a T.A. for me at [the University of] Minnesota and then I had shared a graduate student office with him just before he finished his doctorate. It was a great surprise to find him here. In general, we had a good crew of people. Again, in a faculty you find variations and you find people that you get along with very well and you find people that you don't get along with so well. That's personality situations, usually.

H: You were pretty much a newly minted Ph.D.?

R: I was a newly minted Ph.D. That was an interesting summer. I defended my doctoral dissertation, handed it in, I think July 20. I packed up my stuff and moved down here

where my wife-to-be had already bought a house for us in Seminole Heights. She and I were married August 13. [We] went on our honeymoon. I came back and started teaching the introductory sessions, to get acquainted with the place September 1. [I] started teaching at the end of September. That was an eventful couple of months.

H: How did it feel being a new Ph.D. going to a brand new institution?

R: I think a lot of new Ph.D.'s think they're ready to tackle the world. I felt I was ready to go. I probably feel less certain of myself now than I did then. There are probably people who knew me here then and say, I'm glad to hear that.

H: Probably the voice of wisdom more than anything else speaking. Would you consider it a competitive department over the years?

R: If you consider departments in biology; there aren't a lot of departments in biology around anymore. A lot of them have been divided up. That's kind of a hard thing to say, now. If you take the general areas that we're talking about, there are obvious groups that we do not compete with. We do not compete with UC Berkeley. We do not compete with the University of Michigan. It ain't our department. We don't expect to. That's unreasonable. I think for the vast majority of the universities, we probably give a good education for most of our people. There are some areas that I think we are very good, and some areas in which we are not good. That's true of every place you go. I think that the people that are in our biology honors program have been in our biology honors program in the last ten years since it was instigated; I think it has gotten really, generally a first-class education. Those people, that's a pretty small group, I think have done very well for themselves. Of course, I have something to do with the biology honors program, so I'm probably advertising for myself. I really think we did much better for those

people.

H: I definitely want to get into that, too, when the time comes. How has the department changed since you first arrived?

R: When I first came, the department was devoted to excellence in teaching and to doing some research. We had some people who started out doing some pretty good research right off. Dr. Glenn Woolfenden, again I would list as one of those people. Over the years, we went more and more towards excellence in research. Finally, to being able to get grants, constantly get competitive grants to support your research, and less and less value on excellence on teaching. I think that in the last few years there's come to be some redress of that latter problem, but it's pretty hard to do when you are hiring everybody because they do good research and will get grants. In biology, if you get grants for doing research and you're doing good research, you haven't got a lot of time to do teaching. You teach maybe one course each semester. That means you've got to have somebody doing the teaching. Then we hire people just to teach, but most of them are hired on short-term contracts; two years, three years, something like that. There's no consistency. There are problems with the situation. I understand that we don't get enough money from the state. I don't know of any university that does, to do a first-class research university. That's a problem.

H: For the most part, you obviously are a career veteran here at USF. What about your colleagues? Did many of them stick around for a long time? Was there a transient member?

R: I think probably, we held people for a longer time than a lot of places did. I do remember one time, it would have been 1997, Frank Friedl and I happened to be in the biology

office and Glenn Woolfenden walked in and he looked at us and said, hmm, there are 111 years of teaching at this university represented here. The three of us did stay a long, long time. One other person that started in the department as a lab assistant, working in the laboratories, making sure the labs worked correctly, and then became a lecturer and taught, and then became an advisor. Then [he] took over the College of Arts and Sciences advising area. Al Latina is also here for, it must have been for thirty-seven, thirty-eight years, something like that. He was another one, he came right at the beginning in 1960. He was here for a very long time.

H: When you arrived at the department, and over the years, up until the present, were there any world-renown scholars?

R: I don't think there were any in biology when we arrived here. Why would a world-renown scholar come to a brand-new university with 1,997 students that we had at that time? Where they would be doing mostly teaching. I think that some of the people became quite well known in their areas. Woolfenden certainly did. Clint Dawes certainly did, and by the way, Clint Dawes came fairly early after from 1964-1967, some time in there, and he's still around, kind of retired. He certainly became well known. People like that. John Lawrence, probably also. I think he came in '64.

H: Describe the building that you first worked in. I know we kind of touched on the office, and the office areas, but what was the building like?

R: The building was what the chem building is today, until they started tacking on stuff on the north side. [It] was three floors, and, of course, there were offices or labs on each side of a central corridor on each of those floors, running east-west. Partway down, at east-west, there was the central stairway that broke the two parts into an east two-thirds and a

west third. [The] west thirds were mostly labs. For instance, in the beginning, my lab met down in the first-floor lab, which is really streamlined. It was going to be the chem. building. Fall [of] 1961, the life sciences building opened. We moved there. They knew we weren't going to be in the chem. building very long. [The] central openness of that building had some interesting aspects. If it was raining and there was a good wind, there were no dry spots to find. If you happened to be standing out at the top of the stairwell and the lightning hit close-at-hand, it was an interesting feeling. I was standing at the top of the third floor stairs, in the hallway right near the top of the stairwell, when lightning hit, not right at the building, but up at the next junction up on the sidewalk, which is maybe thirty yards away. That will curl your hair for you. It was cold. Oh, were those hallways cold. The wind blew through there. That aspect of the building was not a nice idea. Of course, when we got over into the life sciences, what did we have? Open hallways. Same thing, all over again.

H: What about your office there? Was it an improvement? Was it about the same?

R: No window. To this day, I have never had a window in an office again. The only year was 1960 to 1961 when I was on the third floor of the chem. building.

H: For those who don't know, there are badges of honor for anyone who has one.

R: Just about. Or luck. Some of them in the science center almost have windows in their offices. They have a hallway outside, they have a window in their office to the hallway. The other side of the hallway has windows. There are an awful lot of offices that just have no windows at all. I don't know, otherwise, whether this office was bigger or smaller. I really don't remember. I've been in enough offices around, I really don't recall how they were.

H: What was interaction among the faculty members like in your department? Obviously you had meetings and things like that. Was there much opportunity for any kind of social events within or outside of your department?

R: We had some. Again, if you're talking about 1960, 1961, I really don't remember very well. There were attempts at it, I know. There were attempts at getting some kind of "culture" on campus. I remember a Greek tragedy put on in the chemistry auditorium that many of us went to. My wife and I attended. It tells you how much I remember of it by the fact that I can't remember the name any more. I really don't remember a whole lot of social events. Maybe my wife and I were out of it farther than most people. I really don't know. I know that over the years we have not had a whole lot of social events with other faculty.

H: You mentioned, you biked here today for the interview?

R: Oh yes.

H: You mentioned you've been a constant avid biker over the years. Tell us a little bit about your commute. I know that there's been some changes; you drove for a little while. Briefly cover that.

R: When the first place we lived in was down in the northern part of Seminole Heights. All the time I lived there, five years, plus a few months, I drove to the university. Once we moved to Temple Terrace, we lived about four and a half miles from the building then. I started to do a little bit of biking, probably 1966 or 1967 would be more accurate. Then, in 1972 and 1973 we lived in Mexico. They biked all over the place in the little town we lived in. When we came back, I started biking a lot. Since 1973 I have biked every single day I could possibly bike. First from Temple Terrace up until 1996. Then we

moved out to Tampa Palms, north of the university here, which is about three and a half miles from my building in the university. The days I come in, I bike if I possibly can. If I've got something heavy, I drive. I have never purchased a sticker for my car.

H: That is a badge of honor.

R: Knowing that I'm a Scot by nature also comes into it. Because I was going to essentially bike all the time, why buy a sticker for the car? For a while they told me, if I wasn't coming in more than three or four times a semester, just get a pass for those days and don't bother. Now of course, I pay for those passes. Still, for instance, a year ago, this semester, I taught. It's hard to tell, [but] I retired in 1994. Then I went on what is called phased retirement, so I taught one semester each academic year. I finished my last classes, I finished teaching in December, 1998. I taught no classes until the fall of 2002. I was doing work on bilingual dictionaries in Mexico, helping with the plant and animal parks. Bilingual in the sense of between indigenous languages in Spanish. I had a lot of stuff to do here. In the library and things like that. I was coming in a lot on the bike during those years. Then I got to thinking, I'd kind of like to teach in the honors program. I taught last fall. Last fall, I drove four days. Now, what sense is there in buying a sticker for four days? I paid \$10, because it was \$2.50 a day last fall, instead of \$68 or whatever it was. Then, of course, when I wasn't teaching anymore, I automatically get my retired hangtag again. If I have to drive, then I use my retired hangtag. I preferentially ride. I'm seventy years old, and I think this is one of the reasons I'm in as good of shape as I am. I ride that bicycle and I enjoy it. It saves money. What else can you ask for?

H: Absolutely, I could not agree more. Let's talk about how you got involved in the honors

college. When did you hear about it? What peaked your interest? Obviously, you were on the way out. You're retiring and everything. What made you reconsider and say, hey, this looks interesting?

R: When we started to grow much more towards research than towards teaching, I became concerned because I was teaching a lot of undergraduate classes. I became concerned with a lot of the stories I was hearing about what was going on in some of the undergraduate classes. I became concerned that some of our undergraduate students were not getting very good educations. Some of these were very bright students. That really bothered me. I started to fuss. Those in the department that know me know that I do fuss. I started to fuss about what was going on. There came a point then when, every so often, chairmen change. The man who took over as chairman was also interested in quality undergraduate education and was concerned with what was happening to our really good undergraduates. He asked me if I would design an honors program for biology. Oh yeah, to put it in Minnesota terms where I came from, yeah sure, ya betcha. That was, oh boy! I worked on this for a little while. I don't remember exactly the year we started it. I think we started offering classes in 1992 maybe, but that's a supposition on my part. Right now, I do not remember. When we started, the first classes that I taught, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. To have a group of students who were all really bright, all really interested and willing to work was, really... what more could you ever dream of getting? That's the only place I ever taught a laboratory where I said, okay now, we've got just about five minutes before we need to be out of here, so you need to start getting your stuff put away and get the response, oh no! I haven't covered everything I wanted to cover yet! I haven't learned all I wanted to cover! [The] only

time I've ever had that happen was with that kind of group. I had quite a bit to do with that program. I directed that program until I retired, then kind of along as I was here in my phased retirement times. I would teach classes that would have a lot to do with it. When the bilingual dictionary material in Mexico started to die down a little bit, I decided, sounds like the University Honors Program has really been improving in quality, and I would like to help it along. I went and talked to Steve Silver. I said, what is there that I can do to help this program? He said, I have just the thing for you. He gave me the chance to teach in the natural sciences course in the honors college. I was given the opportunity, I said, what do you want taught? He said, your kind of biology. I have never had that kind of breadth of opportunity in my life. That was really wild. I taught that course last fall. I'm teaching it again this fall. I'm teaching another course in the honors college. I'm also teaching part of the biology honors seminar this fall. I'm having a great time.

H: It sounds like you're more happy in the honors college than in retirement.

R: I enjoy teaching, I enjoy honors students. If you mean, then in retirement, with little to do with students, that's for sure. That is a very true statement. I love to teach.

H: Paraphrase for us, then. What is your kind of biology?

R: I had an awful time figuring that out. Really what I had to do, of course, was to figure out, what is it that these students can handle and what is it that I can find a book that's useful for, that I can teach in the time period? What I chose, was medicinal plants.

Medicinal plants because a lot of people are interested now in medicinal plants. You go to the store and you see all this stuff, Ginkgo Biloba and St. John's Wort, ephedra, go up down the line. It's hard to tell what you won't find. There are real questions, of course,

if you're a scientist. How good is the information? Do they really do what they say they do? Where do you go to get this information? Part of my purpose was to try to give the students an idea of how biologists work. How is it possible for them to find out what the information [is]? Is there good information about this? Where can you find it? How can I understand it? What things do we really know? Are there some of these medicinal plants that are really good, that really hold promise? Are there some diseases where we are actively looking for medicinal plants, and why? Those are really the kinds of questions we try to answer for them in that time period. I was able to find a relatively inexpensive book for a textbook, \$25, that does a pretty good job of what I want it to do as a basis. I have them go look at actual professional journal articles. [I] try to give them a pattern of looking at them. They're not going to be able to understand them. At least give them a pattern of looking at them to say, what this says, they found, is probably reliable. Or, there's some real reasons for doubt about this thing. Without ever being able to understand the whole article as a whole. I think that later on in life they're going to have to do that anyway with some things. They might as well try to get a pattern for doing that now.

H: Plus, as you say, is that great angle of medicinal plants. It's a hook.

R: It's that interest.

H: Just from what we know from doing the interviews and what I know from talking to colleagues, the honors college is really just taking off. It sounds like a really exciting place to be.

R: Initially, I had great doubts about the honors college, about the quality. I think some of my colleagues had more than great doubts. They were more certain about the low quality

than I was. In recent years it seems to have changed considerably. You are going to get in that group. People that I say are really honors students, and then you have honors students, and then you have people, what are you doing here? Most of them fall in the upper two groups, obviously. There's a fair number in that top group. At the end of the time that I have the students, I tell some students, you need to keep cracking, really working. You have the capability to become a real scholar. Keep going. Don't blow it. Don't waste your mind. I can't say that for probably half the students. For a few at the bottom, they don't belong here at all. They don't know what's going on. I don't know how they got there. Fortunately, that's one or two in class.

H: Were your doubts based upon the quality of the students then? Or education?

R: [It] was based upon the quality of the work that the students were doing in those classes. Or maybe I should say, were asked to do in those classes. Now it seems to me that they're asked to do considerably more. They're doing it. I think we have, though, a much better quality of students coming in. I think that our standards for getting in, they're not high, but they're much more reasonable for an honors college, than they used to be.

H: Let's say we stepped back thirty or thirty-five years. Did you ever suspect that you would be teaching at the honors college at the University of South Florida?

R: Thirty-five years ago I never even considered the idea of an honors college. At the University of Minnesota, where I came from, there was the opportunity for a person that had really high grade points, to design their own program. I looked at the possibility of doing that at one time and then decided, shoot, I'm not doing much better doing than I am just going through the program I'm already in. I didn't try because I knew that they were

very picky about doing it. I didn't know an honors college per se. Then we got here at the university, this special new college that was kind of an honors college in a sense. It was a different sort than what we're doing now. I think that probably did a good job for a lot of those students. There were a lot of kinds of students that it wouldn't have done anything for. This gives real opportunity for. I had a couple of engineering students last year that were cracker jacks in there. In spite of the fact that they said, what I was teaching had nothing to do with engineering. Those kids would not have been able to do anything in new college. I think this is a great idea. I'm really glad they have it. I hope they keep pushing it. I'm sure they could improve it more. That doesn't mean I've got ideas on how they could improve it more. It's still relatively new.

H: It seems like we went from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. In the interim, obviously there was a lot going on. You were teaching and all these things. I'm just going to hold up a photo for the camera very briefly of our man, Dr. Gerald Robinson. Who's feeding whom? There is a scrub jay in the picture, taking a nut from our professor's mouth. Tell us briefly about that project. It's such a memorable photograph.

R: It was really memorable because I got copies of it sent from Germany and from Thailand and from places like that because I was in Stars and Stripes. I was down at the biological station where that was taken. I was doing a movie on natural communities of Florida. I had gotten a grant for doing this from the, I don't even know what the cabinet post is now up there in Washington anyway. What is it, education or something or the other. For our non-majors course we were teaching at that time, one of the things we were doing was trying to teach them about Florida environments. We had absolutely no good way of doing it. I went around the state and picked out six major natural communities around

the state. [I] went around and filmed them, sixteen millimeter film. This came out to be a sixty-six minute movie; two reels. It was really quite a production, getting it done. There was a lot of help from what we called the educational resources at that time. We finished it about 1970, as I recall. To my great disappointment, this fall, I found out it had not been used much in recent years. Last spring they threw it out. They were transferring everything that had been used much to video. It hadn't been used much and they threw it out.

H: So it's just gone?

R: It's gone. There's no way of recalling it, no way of reclaiming it. I was really below sick about that. About not having it. I wish they had asked me. I would have thought somebody, I suppose it was such a long time ago that nobody even remembered that it had any connection with being made here. Bill Buxton, who used to be head of the cinema area over there, man, if it hadn't have been for that guy, I couldn't have made it. I don't remember the man's name now that was there in cinema before Bill came. He was an older man. He died while he was here from a heart attack. He was a real old cinematographer and knew his stuff. I would have never been able to do the cinema part, to do the filming, if it hadn't been for his guidance. Actually, the same woman who took this photo that you showed, was doing the early part. We were down at Archbold. She was there, she was also a still photographer, and, of course, she had her Nikon with her. She took that photograph while were shooting some cinema, some sixteen-millimeter footage for the natural communities of Florida in that area. That appeared in the local paper here; it was just everywhere.

H: It's just one of those photographs that really leaves an impression.

R: Let me just say, I've got to get this in. I was asked whether that who was feeding whom. Someone that I knew had cut that out at the church I attended and had written under it and posted it, Elijah the Tishbite? Elijah was fed by the ravens for a while.

H: Tell us about some of the other projects that you worked on. That certainly sounded fascinating. It's a shame, I would liked to have seen that film. What were some of the other things that you've done. We still have some time here. I know that's probably way too much to ask.

R: For a while I worked on a toxin of a seed, which I picked up in Mexico, which was noted for very peculiar toxic properties. The reports of it, of people there, were that if an omnivorous animal, a cow or a goat, ate the seed, nothing happened to them. If a carnivore, coyote, ate either the seed or the animal that had eaten the seed, they would go into convulsions and would often die. They were very spectacular convulsions. I was very interested in, what on earth, kind of toxin could this possibly be. I got a permit from the USDA to bring back a quantity of these seeds from Mexico. When I came back across the border, of course, they ask you, do you have any plant materials? I said, yes, I have these plant materials. I told him, I have a permit for this. It says that they have to be dried. I showed him also that they had been fumigated so that there would have been no insect pests left in them. In order to check to make sure they were dried, he put his hand down in this batch of seeds and fished around down in there to make sure they were dried. I felt that I needed to tell the man, if I were you, when you get done here, I would wash my hands thoroughly. We know that there is a toxin in these seeds, but we don't know very much about its characteristics yet. Just to be safe, I'd wash my hands. He did not look at one other thing in our car. Not one other thing. He was off for the restroom

to get his hands washed. We didn't have anything that he needed to look at. I thought that was funny. I brought them back and it took me some little time to try and figure out what on earth this thing was. I finally identified it as a modified amino acid. I found out a very interesting thing. This effect had been known for a long time, since 1940 or so, because back at that time, they were treating graying products in a certain way and then putting them in dog food. The dogs that ate that were undergoing convulsions. They found out that it was the changing of that amino acid into this methylomine to methylomine sulfoxine. They found out that that change was the cause in the problem. We already really knew all about the toxin. The question that was left was, of course, why this business about why the carnivores verses the herbivores? That question has never been completely answered, but there was some stuff that came out not long after that, that said the answer is probably already there. There was some material done that was in connection with Alzheimer's research and a bunch of those kinds of things. What kind of damage is done to the nerve cells; what causes the damage. They were worrying about all the changes and things. One of the things they were looking at was some of the changes in amino acids. As soon as I looked at that, I thought, there, we got it. We know that the liver of certain animals who can change have a much higher rate at which they do these changes. If the rate at which they do that is going to affect the brain, then we've got an answer to the problem without really ever going on through it. We know pretty well what the answer is. The thing on the dog is really spectacular. I've seen them down there where they've eaten a bird that had eaten the seeds. They have them tied up. The dog will just sit there and shiver. All of a sudden it jumps up and dashes until it hits the end of the rope. Clunk, to the ground. Then it jumps up and dashes another direction

until the rope stops it. Clunk, to the ground. Jumps up and dashes again. Clunk, to the ground. Then it sits there and shivers. If it didn't get too heavy a dose, given a day or so, it's okay. It's pretty spectacular to see that. You don't often see them turn around like that.

R: The group I was with, the Lacadon Indians at that time, treasured their dogs greatly. They were very interested in knowing. I told them there isn't a thing you can do for them except give them plenty of water during the time they can manage to drink it. Support them and feed their habitat too much they'll make it.

H: Have we missed anything?

R: These are some very good stories.

H: We can always continue.

R: One of my treasured stories is back when the hurricane was coming in 1960. Elliot Hardaway was the head of the library. I forget the woman's name who was his secretary.

H: Mary Lou?

R: No, his secretary. Anne something, I can't remember her name. The people were telling us, here are the things a lot of people do in Florida. Here are the things you should do to get ready for the hurricane. All of a sudden Elliot, with his southern drawl, gets in and he says, my secretary miss so-and-so says that the thing to do is to dig in with a bottle of gin. She said, I never said anything like that. That was one of my favorite stories. That was Elliot Hardaway all the way.

H: That doesn't sound like the worst thing you could do during a hurricane.

R: That's true, but you'd better do some things before that. Then another hurricane story in 1964 or 1965, I don't remember. We had a hurricane coming across the Atlantic.

Hillsborough Avenue is twenty-eight degrees north. It was coming right across twenty-eight degrees north. It was going straight west. It was not varying at all. It got to be fairly late, like 10:00 or 11:00 the night before and Dr. Allen had to make a decision. He said, the university is closed tomorrow. What does the hurricane do? It makes a right-hand turn and goes north. The next day, no university classes or anything. [It was a] gorgeous day [and] sunny. Then, it makes a left-hand turn and goes across the state north of us. Across Gainesville, more or less. We were close enough that we were still getting fair winds and we were getting rain. The following day we had classes. It was rainy and windy and miserable, but we had classes.

H: That's the way it works with hurricanes.

R: Hurricanes you cannot challenge.

[interrupted by changing tapes]

H: We're rejoining Dr. Robinson and we're here now to pick his brain for some colorful stories. What else do you have for us Dr. Robinson?

R: We had a dean of basic studies, Ed Martin. Ed Martin, what a character, in a lot of ways. [A] good dean, in many, many ways. Martin smoked a pipe, and if we got in a meeting we always knew when Martin got upset. He would puff so hard on his pipe that when he reached for the bowl, it would be too hot and he'd drop it on the table and we knew Martin was upset at that point. Another one, Charlie Micarelli was the head of foreign languages here. He went over, then, to the University of Central Florida somewhere along the line. We were discussing whether foreign language ought to be a part of the College of Basic Studies since it really didn't fit the mold in a lot of ways. Everybody agreed that foreign language was a part of a good education. I was recommending that

they put it outside of the college of basic studies and just keep it as a recommendation. Micarelli, of course, being the good Italian; one day I opened my mail and here was a yellow sheet of paper with a black hand on it. Glenn Woolfenden and I got together and we decided that a good thing to do would be to send it back to him with a thing, we have scientifically analyzed this palm print. We warn you that the lifeline does not look very long. You need to be aware of that. [We] put it in an envelope and sent it back to Micarelli. When I got over to the College of Basic Studies meeting and came in, here was Micarelli and he looks at me and his eyes get really big and he says, [gasp] you weren't supposed to be able to get here today! There was a lot of clowning around that went on. Have you interviewed Charlie Arnade?

H: No, but I plan on it soon.

R: Oh, man, get him. He probably can tell you some good stories too. Let me rack my brain here and see if I can think some other stories. I can think of some stories but those you do not want on tape. Some unpleasant things that occurred. There were some unpleasant times here.

H: Tell us. This is a complete history.

R: These do not reflect necessarily on individuals so much as what was necessary to be done. In 1970, I am not sure the exact time, John Allen retired from being president. A man came in who later was, by some people, called 'Mack the Knife.' I do not remember what his real name was.

H: Cecil Mackey.

R: Cecil Mackey. Yes, that's right. I remember it now. He and some of his deans decided to do away with the College of Basic Studies. This was extremely unpopular with some

of us. I thought they were making a mistake, because I thought the College of Basic Studies had some real value. Not necessarily to the kind of extent that the college was before, but I thought it had some real value. That period of time, there was some real, bad blood on campus. Deans like Irving Deer were real opponents of any part remaining of the College of Basic Studies. Anything like it. I think that was also a time when people decided that all the faculty should do advising, which was an utter disaster. All the faculty did not understand what was needed to be done. What were the requirements? What was legal? A lot of things. You don't bring in new people and give them no training and then tell them, you've got to do advising. That series of years, in the early 1970s, were really a bad period of time because of some radical changes that were made. Some of them, I think, made inappropriately, and some of them, I think, made in a way which was not, probably, the best way. If we were ever going to get to be a research university, we needed to do something different. We didn't need to do it with the ax, as it looked like some of that was being done. I could go on.

H: You're certainly not the first to bring up these issues.

R: There have been other times, along the way, some of the 1980s were not a very good time, either. I'm sure every university goes through things like that. We have had presidents who, when they first came in, did a very good job, things that needed to be done. Then, later, they didn't do such a hot job anymore. You could say the same thing about John Allen. John Allen, in setting up this university, did a superb job. But John Allen had the peculiarity that he needed to know every individual. When you've got as many faculty as we had by 1967 he couldn't possibly do that. He made some errors because of that. Past that point, he wasn't doing such a good job anymore. I think

there's a lot of that. People are brought in, they're brought in for a purpose. They do a good job for the reason they're brought in. Then they get passed that point and now, what on earth do they do? They need to resign and go someplace else where they can do a good job again. Harris Dean is a man that ought to be mentioned. Harris Dean, early on, was the academic dean sort of. Harris Dean was a real gentleman. Harris Dean did a good job of maintaining relationships with people and getting his job done. That's an unusual combination of characteristics. Harris Dean was acting president twice, or something like that. Yet, he had a sense of humor that was very self-denigrating. I can remember him saying to me, when he was Dean Dean. I was needling him a little bit about being Dean Dean and he says, oh, my daughter thinks I need another one. You know, Dean Dean. Somebody that would come up with that about themselves, I think has got a lot to say for themselves. I really respect Harris Dean a great deal. I do not know of anything that Harris Dean screwed up. I really respect that man very highly. I think he ought to be given a marked place.

H: This is fun. Tell us about some other personalities.

R: Jim Ray was one of the very first employees of the university. He came, actually, to set up the arboretum here, because here they were going to do some kind of a joint- forum of the southeastern United States, which was too much of a job for anybody to possibly do. He started in 1959 here. There were very few people here at that time. When I arrived on the scene, Jim Ray was already here. He was the director of the arboretum for a while, when it was set up. I think he was also the one who set the arboretum on fire, one time, when it was still over at the administration building, probably early 1961. Then, he became chairman on the basic studies biological science. Then he became dean of the

College of Natural Sciences. Jim contributed a lot to this university. He was a long, long-time employee of this university and probably has gone largely unnoticed over the years. I think he set up the first of pre-professional sciences advising offices, if I remember correctly. I had my scrapes with Jim. I didn't always agree with him, but I think he contributed an awful lot to this university.

H: Was there a lot of work going on? You were talking about the arboretum. Was there a lot of samples being taken at Chinsegut Hill?

R: Chinsegut Hill was where they first started out. That's where he was working out. Actually, Chinsegut Hill is quite the place now. They have the capability of having groups up there now. My wife and I stopped by there, just to see what on earth was left of Chinsegut Hill. We were surprised at what a place it is now. The last time we had been there, it looked like it might be on its last legs. We held biological sciences retreats up there in the very early years, and it was a nice place to do that. It has some very interesting history. That's where Jim started. Now the arboretum has something like 245,000 specimens.

H: Where is it housed at?

R: It's in the life sciences building on the first floor. They just recently were able to finally get space for more specimens. Really, finally get space for the specimens they had. They got a grant to put, I don't know what they call it. They move the cases back and forth so you can jam cases right up against each other; just have the space open that you need. That multiplied, I think it doubled the space that we had. Now it looks to me like they're getting to the place where they, not very far in the future, be needing to do something else entirely. Maybe take over what remains of the first floor. That is really

quite a collection. Since I had part in the Mexican part of that collection. There's a lot of stuff there. Most people don't realize how much stuff there is available there. Let me think of other people around here. Of course, everybody knows Phyllis Marshall. No need to talk about Phyllis Marshall.

H: Unless you have any special stories.

R: Except that she was the R.A. for that girls' floor on the fourth floor of the University Center the first year. She was really a very important person in students' lives here for a long time. She was a good friend to me. Margaret Chapman, too, was a good friend to me. So was Mary Lou Harkness. I had a lot of good friends here. You can't work if you don't have...

H: I'll just throw a few names at you. If you don't know anything, or don't have anything nice to say, you can just say pass. Carl Riggs?

R: Carl Riggs, I did not get to know very well until after he retired from being the provost. Carl Riggs I found to be a teachable man. I had some really interesting discussions with him and found him to have a lot more depth of person than I thought from little that I had seen from him. He was a good zoologist, but boy, he was a good man. I respected him very highly. In the latter years when I really got to know him, I respected him very highly.

H: Before you got to know him, what was your impression?

R: Didn't know. He was off there in the administration where you don't know what's going on anyway. At least that's what it seems like.

H: John Lott Brown?

R: [I] didn't really know him. [I] don't really have a great deal of impression of what he did

here.

H: Russell Cooper?

R: Russell Cooper was an interesting man. Russell Cooper was a good scholar. Russell Cooper in some ways was a good dean. Russell Cooper thought that there was no evil in any man, and that's where he and I differed markedly. I really think Russell Cooper did a lot of good things for us. I was on a committee for making a claim on that Cooper Hall over there. I am pleased to have known Russell Cooper. We had our disagreements, but that part of the game.

H: What about Margaret Chapman? You mentioned her before.

R: Margaret Chapman. We didn't have so much an academic thing as just friendship. I just enjoyed talking to her because she had a lot to talk about. There were a lot of things we could talk about, and that was fun. I often, when I was sick and tired of reading in the library, would go down to Special Collections and talk to Margaret Chapman. That was far better than continuing to read.

H: Was it a similar relationship with Mary Lou Harkness?

R: Mary Lou I knew for a much longer period of time. Mary Lou I knew from almost the opening of the university. Probably not quite, but in the very early years. I knew her when she was cataloging whatever it was she was doing over in the other building. It was really a situation of, if I had not had my first cup of coffee, do not talk to me. It really was. I played bridge with Mary Lou. I talked to Mary Lou. We talked about a lot of things about the university and about the library. There was more university related stuff with Mary Lou. I enjoyed Mary Lou as a person. There was a lot of things there. I knew her when she was director of the library. I knew her after she was director of the library,

after she retired. I had a good time playing bridge with Mary Lou, too.

H: Margaret Fisher?

R: Margaret Fisher, yeah, I knew her, of course, because she was here at the very beginning.

She was often an enigma to me. Margaret Fisher was a very bright gal. She was dean of women. Was she just dean of women or was she dean of students at the very beginning?

H: I think it was dean of women at the beginning and it kept morphing into other roles. But, usually students or women.

R: I talked to her about an awful lot of things, including disagreements we had about students. I can remember her interceding on behalf of a student who was in my class. I gave way to her; I didn't believe the excuse, but okay, it was plausible, you think it's true. I thought she was too easy on the student. I had a lot of enjoyable times with her, over a lot of years. I don't remember the last time I saw her, it's been a few years. From 1960 until the late 1990s anyway.

H: Francis Borkowski?

R: One thing I liked that he did was he had these things for the faculty and, I guess maybe staff, too, over in the thing there. He had music there. The first year, he had music that in my mind, was too loud. The second year, he got a string quartet. That was lovely. It was a good time to get together and talk to a lot of people. I very rarely saw her. I enjoyed talking to her when I saw her. I think it was just two times that I was there. Both times, that I remember anyway, I ran into her while I was over there. You saw a lot of people that way. Clark, what was his name? He was the head of physical sciences first. I ran into him over there and he was retired long since that time. You run into people that you just wouldn't normally see on those kinds of days. That, I thought, was a

very good thing. Otherwise, in terms of what he did for the university, I really don't know.

H: As long as we're on presidents, Betty Castor?

R: I thought Betty Castor did quite well for us initially. I thought she fell down at the end.

Again, she came in to do some specific things, I think, and I thought she did them well.

Everybody is going to screw up sooner or later. I suppose I should say that if she actually is running for senator and she gets to the final, since I am an independent, I probably will vote for Betty Castor, regardless of who is running against her. You can cut that out.

H: That's okay. We're all-inclusive here. As long as we're not editing, would you care to comment on President Genshaft?

R: I think she has done some very good things, and she has done some very stupid things in my mind. I cannot understand how changing the logo for the football team has shown the seriousness of our becoming a great university. Yet, she was quoted as saying that. She came out with something later that was similar about an athletic thing. To me, I belong back in the bunch with Elliot Hardaway, who said, if we want to have a football team here in Tampa, let's make it a pro team and hire whoever the guy was that was coaching at Florida A&M that was so successful at the time for a coach. I came from Minnesota and UC Berkeley, and I saw, at Minnesota, especially, because I was there longer, what kind of pressures are put on faculty members on behalf of athletes. I also know how they cook the books to make it look like it's not costing the university anything. What they do is to say, this coach is paid from contributions and ticket sales. He's also a professor of physics, and he's paid by the university for that, and all he does is to coach football. You get all these kinds of things, and I do not like that. You have to interpret my statement about

her things in terms of athletics. I just do not think much of athletics as a big deal on university campuses.

H: What have we missed? We've covered a lot of ground. We talked about a lot of personalities. Have we missed any important landmarks in your life? Have we missed any colorful personalities?

R: We've certainly missed some colorful personalities. I'm not sure who I can call to mind in this. We've missed some crooks; I can remember one or two on campus. We had, in the early years, who said he had a Ph.D. from some university in Europe. It turned out that his Ph.D. was from a place where you buy your Ph.D. We've had our share of crooks here. We've had some good people. We've had some crackerjack teachers. A lot of them have gone unrewarded. I do not like the way they do their outstanding teacher awards. I think they are focusing too much on things other than actual teaching. If they allow you to do your teaching and your laboratory, then your research is part of your teaching. You could go on and on and on about things. What difference does it make whether you follow up your students? How many of your students? The ones you follow up are the ones you most likely had in your laboratory doing research for you because they weren't honored doing research elsewhere. There's a whole bunch of things that just are slanted toward those who are doing research. I think we have done injustice to some really good teachers. Some of them have done very well for themselves anyway. Graham Solomons being one of them. His textbook did so well that he quit teaching and went to be a doctor. We had, around here, as a dean for a while of undergraduate studies that I thought was good. It should be mentioned, Bill Scheurle. He's gone back, now, to teaching again. I think Bill Scheurle has students' interests at heart. I think that's the

best thing that could be said about him, about anybody in that position. He really had student interests at heart. Bill Scheurle, I would mention as one of those. Of course, he's a fairly old-timer. He was not very late coming on the scene. I think that's about it. I've rambled on long enough there. A lot of people I sort-of remember. I could tell you about some good Bridge players.

H: I know Mary Lou could, too. Let's just wrap up now, with a couple questions. The first one being, what are you most proud of when you look back on your career at USF?

R: I do not think I have ever given a student a raw deal in teaching, in how I taught, or in how I graded them. I think I have always done at least a good job. Sometimes I came in and taught even though I had a migraine headache; I'm not sure I did my best. I think I at least did a good job. I never let personalities enter into grading in any way. I had some people that infuriated me, and they got the same grade anyway. I got some people that I thought very highly of that they got the same grade anyway. I guess that's one thing. I guess the fact that I have been able to do the work in Mexico that I've done on those bilingual dictionaries, a number of which are here in the library now. Nobody knows this, very few people anyway. I started to work on them anyway, linguists who were doing this work. Linguists are lousy botanists, and they're not much better zoologists. I said, I can try to help. I started doing this, and it blossomed. I asked them, what are you doing? Why are you going to Mexico so often? I told them, oh, and they said, in that case, I think part of your duty should be to do this, because that's good work. I was actually assigned to do that. I have taken part in about twenty different bilingual dictionaries between different indigenous languages in Spanish. That's not many out of the some two hundred there are still in use in Mexico. Some, at any rate.

H: The last question that I like to ask people is, if you had advice, words of wisdom, for upcoming students, for young people today, perhaps people interested in biology, what would you say to them? What would you pass on?

R: I know for any student who is really getting good grades and is not working very hard at it, don't make the same mistake I did. Start spending your time finding out more about things you don't need to do. Finding out more about what's going on in biology.

Finding out more about what's known in biology, because it's going to be to your benefit when you get through your undergraduate career. I guess the second thing I would say is, I would not worry so much at the undergraduate level to exactly what institution you're going to, as long as they're doing a decent job. It's at the graduate level that it's really important. At the graduate level, you need to find the institutions that have that specialty done very well. If you can use your time well here, you can get a really good education. Don't worry so much about that aspect of it.

H: Once again, I'd just like to thank you, Dr. Robinson, for spending this time with us here today.

R: You're welcome.

H: I think it's been a great contribution to the fiftieth anniversary history.

R: I hope so.

H: Thanks again.

End of Interview