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Robert Simmons oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, January 9, 2003

Robert R. Simmons (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Arrival at USF

In 1957, Mr. Simmons owned a ready-mix concrete company called Bay Concrete Industries. Prior to 1957, the Florida Legislature had voted and passed legislation to create a university in Tampa. In the summer of 1958, construction began at USF. Although the smallest concrete company in Tampa at the time, Bay Concrete, had all new equipment including all six-wheel drive vehicles which were necessary because the university was being built on top of a "very deep sand hill." Closely associated with the Jones-Mahony Company, which was the first general contractor to receive a bid for the administration building, Bay Concrete received the bid to place the concrete. Bay Concrete was the sub-contractor who supplied materials and Jones-Mahony were the general contractors; they were the first general contractors and sub contractors for the administration building. According to Mr. Simmons, Jones-Mahony won the job because they were the lowest bidders. After the administration building, Jones-Mahony contracted several other structures for the university.

Pouring of first concrete

The first yard of concrete to be poured for USF was for the administration building on the footing of the west wall on the south end. At this point, Mr. Simmons notes that he has previously given Special Collections (located in the USF Tampa Campus Library), a picture of the first yard being poured; a Mr. E. Ward Cole, who ran a local newspaper for the city of Temple Terrace, took the picture. "We were very fortunate, as long as we owned our business, no one else ever poured a yard of concrete on the hill out there. We poured all of the material through the first six or seven jobs."

Pouring concrete for additional buildings at USF

Mr. Simmons's company poured the concrete for the administration building and before it was completed, he began work on the Cafetorium building [now called the Marshall Center]. Cooper Construction Company out of Gainesville received the contracting bid for the Cafetorium building. The third building to be constructed was called the Science building, which was west of the administration building and contracted by a company called C.A. Fielding; Mr. Simmons's company also poured the concrete for this building as well. The next building to be erected was the utilities building and was constructed by Jones-Mahoney contractors; they also were responsible for the "donut-ring" foundation

for the original water tower. Cooper Construction received the bid for the fifth structure on the USF campus. In those days, all of the original buildings required a tremendous amount of concrete. Attempting to bid for the fifth building, Cooper Construction called Mr. Simmons and asked him how much would Bay Concrete charge to wrap the underground utilities in concrete. Not thinking about the depth of the project, Mr. Simmons told the construction company to bid the same amount as the previous building figures required. The next day, the general manager of Cooper Construction called Mr. Simmons and told him that his company [Bay Concrete] had won the job. Excited about the prospect of another project on campus, the general manager told Mr. Simmons that the new job was only half as big as the other jobs he had previously completed and that the forty-five hundred yards of concrete would never be seen by the public as it would wrap the utility lines on campus between the original buildings.

Construction of the first library building [present SVC building] and the \$180,000 mistake

After the utilities job, Mr. Simmons's company received the sub contractors bid for the library; J.S. Stevens was given the contracting bid. Prior to initial construction, test floorings were put in and it was quickly determined that at about fifty-six feet, caverns existed. It was necessary to dig down to at least this footage in order to pass the heavy amounts of sand and get to the Lime Rock. Once the caverns were discovered, the Chief Engineer together with the Board of Control decided that the building would have to be constructed on piling; the total cost of the piling was \$180,000. Choosing not to consult with the other contractors, the Chief Engineer felt that the bid for the piling was too much and abandoned this idea completely. Instead, the engineer told Mr. Simmons that the caverns would have to be filled with concrete and entered into a contract with Intrusion Pre-Pak Company, out of Cleveland, Ohio. According to Mr. Simmons, Intrusion Pre-Pak was hired to pump grout into the caverns and seal them up, "this was the theory." Eventually Intrusion Pre-Pak entered into an agreement with Mr. Simmons's company, and helped them to bag cement for a contract on another building on campus; local sand, bagged cement and a product called "Full As Earth" were combined and used to fill these bags. When wet, "Full As Earth" expands and was pumped into the caverns where it would set-up and harden to form a solid base for the library. "Well they started pumping out there and they pumped for about three weeks and one of the local engineers could not believe that they just kept pumping in the same place, so he called for someone to do a test pouring to see and he could not find any concrete." Realizing that there was a major problem, the Chief Engineer attempted to cut off the contract with Intrusion Pre Pak. However, knowing what kind of contract they had, the company continued their job and brought in three additional trucks to continue pumping concrete into the caverns. In total, Mr. Simmons recalls that his company supplied over 15,000 bags of cement, which was used to pump under the building. After many man hours and \$180,000 being spent to pump concrete, it was determined that there was a small river near the underground caverns and that the concrete was not the correct solution for the problem.

Solution to library building problems

Not able to say that he had made a "\$180,000 mistake," the chief engineer designed an alternative plan to construct "one of the first massive foundations pools in the state of

Florida.” A concrete slab five feet thick went under the library with dimensions of 92/93 ft. wide and 200 ft. long with rebar size #11(1 3/8, 1 foot on center, 3 ways). “If the world fell out from under the building would never know it. In addition another 4,700 yards of concrete was poured under the library building. Ultimately the caverns were not completely filled in, and instead a concrete bridge was built over them.

Strong foundation necessary

“The books in a library would not amount to five percent with the weight of the concrete in the building.” The bridge was built to carry the weight of the building and protect it from falling into the caverns. “The first time we poured a truck load of concrete in there it looked like you spit in the Gulf of Mexico to fill it up, it was just this enormous hole.”

Hillsborough-Henderson Airbase sold for \$1.00, future site of USF

Mr. Simmons moved to Temple Terrace in 1955, when there was no Fowler, Fletcher or 30th Street; 46th Street was in existence that came north. USF was built on part of the old Hillsborough-Henderson Airbase that covered 3800 acres. The first 2000 acres were given to the industrial park and the other 1800 were given to the university because after the war, the governor had sold the 3800 total acres to the county for \$1.00. The county did not want to maintain so much land especially for an airbase and so the land was left barren for ten years. Eventually, the Committee of One Hundred was formed in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce (W.C. Gilmore, first working head). The Committee had the idea of turning the acreage into an industrial park and attracted companies such as Schlitz Brewery and Budweiser for example.

Site for future university, Pinellas or Hillsborough County/Origin of Beer Cap University

When the state began looking for property to build a university, the county had 1800 acres left over from Hillsborough-Henderson Airbase, which could be utilized. Of course, Pinellas County wanted the university to be located in their area rather than Hillsborough County. “Pinellas County was after the university real hard.” As an illustration of this point, Mr. Simmons notes that a man by the name of Clyde Keys of St. Petersburg who owned a ranch on Memorial Highway in Pinellas County and wanted to sell it to the state so that it could be used as the site for the university. Interestingly enough, a large portion of Mr. Keys land was made up of wetlands. Eventually the squabbling between Hillsborough and Pinellas got so bad that when Hillsborough got the two beer plants in place, Mr. Keys began to refer to the future university as Beer Cap University. “Mr. Keys was a character to know.”

USF late 1950s, early construction and physical layout

Looking north from the entrance of the university in the late 1950s, “There was a solid sheet of sand...there was not much vegetation out there, there was a few what I call, Black Jack Oaks and a few little pines. None of it [vegetation] fit in with what the university was going to be.” In terms of terrain, it also needed to be change in order to accommodate the needs of the university. In fact, where the library was to be built there was a dip in the landscape, and where the quadrangle [area between administration and university center] was, there was a hill. Thus in order to make plans for construction of buildings for the university any portions of land that were not flat, were leveled. From

Fowler north to the Cafetorium [now called the Marshall Center] the area was to be flattened, the idea was to “cut-and-fill.”

Massive amounts of sand on future site of USF

Between the administration building and the Cafetorium, Mr. Simmons believes that there was about fifty-six feet of sand. One of the reasons why Mr. Simmons’s concrete company received all of the winning bids was because of the sand and the fact that his company had brand new trucks, which were six-wheel drive and could be put in low range. “In those sands, no one else had in town had equipment that would serve it.” In total, Mr. Simmons’s company poured some 48,000 yards of concrete over a period of about fourteen months; this figure includes the first few buildings on campus.

Funny experiences

In front of the Student Union building there was a large hill. In order to get the concrete trucks up the hill, three-foot ditches were constructed. One of Mr. Simmons’s employees got lost in a ditch and as he got out to look where he was, he noticed that his truck was moving slowly behind him. As Mr. Simmons recalls, there were many times when the cement trucks bolted off without the driver. Part of the reason for this was that because of the sand, the vehicles had to be operated on low gear.

Animals on property

In the early days of construction of the university, there were many animals that resided on the property which ran from 30th Street to the Hillsborough River on the east end (swamp land). Mr. Simmons notes that currently the area from where 56th Street hits Fletcher Avenue to the Golf Course has had a lot of raccoons, wild hogs, deer and even some wild turkey. The Hillsborough River is filled with a great amount of wildlife.

Creation of R.R. Simmons

In 1968, Mr. Simmons went into the construction and established a company called R.R. Simmons, now owned by son. His company built most of the buildings in Hidden River.

Summer of 1958

Bay Concrete Industries began pouring concrete at the site of the university in 1958. At the time, Bay Concrete was made up of only three young employees who went up against much larger companies for bids at the future site of USF. “I do not think any of us really that were involved there realized the scope of what was coming. The dream that this would be the largest...today, as I understand, this has the largest enrollment of any of the state universities...that never crossed our mind. We were looking at each individual building and wondered how we were going to get it poured the next day.” As Mr. Simmons remembers, the summer of 1958 was extremely hot and windy and the sand, which was previously part of the old shoreline, would still be all over your body after finishing a hard day’s work (7am-4pm). “When you came home, you brushed your teeth, you gargle and sit down to eat, you would still ground your food because your mouth, your nose, and your ears were just full of sand.” For the entire period that Mr. Simmons and his crew worked at the university he recalls that there was no grass, just miles of sand. In fact, the university remained barren for quite some time until landscaping

projects were placed throughout the campus. Today, Mr. Simmons cannot get over the change in the physical landscape of the university, forty-five years after the initial phase of construction began.

Significance of USF—first university conceived as a university from the beginning

According to Mr. Simmons, USF was the first university in the United States that was considered a full-fledged institution from “the day the first line was drawn on a set of plans.” The majority of higher education institutions that were established through state land grants, were initially colleges that later became universities; USF was conceived differently.

Temple Terrace, Carrollwood, and John Allen

Many professors who came to work at the university lived in Temple Terrace. When John Allen, the first president of USF, decided to live in Carrollwood, many of the residents in Temple Terrace, including Mr. Simmons, were upset that he had chosen to live further away from the university.

Summer of 1958 through September of 1959; Completion of first seven buildings at USF

Bay Concrete Industries worked on university property from the summer of 1958 to September of 1959, and sold off the business once the company completed pouring concrete on the first seven buildings. “We were running hot as a three dollar pistol.” In total, it took about a year-and-a-half to complete work on the seven buildings. All of the buildings had major deadlines and as Mr. Simmons recalls, “It was a hive of activity.” The administration, science, student union [Cafetorium], library and the maintenance buildings were all under construction at the same time, one after another. Before the first year of construction ended, several buildings were being erected simultaneously, which meant that Mr. Simmons’s company was pouring concrete in multiple sites. In light of the scorching temperatures and the possibility of summer rains, workers often began their shifts at six in the morning, often coming to the plant before five. Mr. Simmons was thirty-two years old when he first began the contract at USF. “You had to be young to keep up with it.”

Tornado of 1966

The engineer for the Board of Control was a man by the name of Mr. Crabtree and the inspector was Harry Sharp; they both lived in Temple Terrace. In the spring of 1966, the two men began working on the third student dormitory name Beta (first Alpha, and then another across the street). By this time, Mr. Simmons had sold his mix-concrete company. A tornado had cut across Waters and Carrollwood. In those days, there were no temporary trailers for contractors to set-up on a construction site. Consequently, when a contractor received an offer to begin a job, one of their responsibilities was to build a single office for the engineer of the Board of Control (an 8x12 plywood building). After the tornado, Mr. Sharp called Mr. Simmons and told him that he had lost his building in the storm. Having heard of extensive damage all over the north end of Tampa, Mr. Simmons thought that Mr. Sharp’s entire building had been lost, instead his temporary contacting office had been destroyed. “His building has never been since.”

***Tornado damage to the university*

In terms of damage to the university, the tornado came across the north end of the university barely missing the buildings on that end; it did however come within 150 feet of Beta, but did not do any damage. It tore both the contractors and the Board of Control's temporary offices, which ended up somewhere in the Hillsborough River in a swamp.

Weather conditions affecting construction of USF

As far as major weather problems affecting the university, Mr. Simmons points to heat, sand and wind as the only factors that ever affected construction for the university in the early days. In the spring of 1959, Tampa received a lot of rain yet the sand hills on campus absorbed all of the rain. "It was like a sponge."

Order of first buildings at USF

Administration Building

Student Union

Science Building

Utility Building

Foundation for water tank

Library

Humanities Building Project (three buildings connected)— Located west of the quadrangle.

Although Mr. Simmons had sold his company, Bay Concrete Industries, the new owners continued to pour concrete for the first three dormitories on campus (Alpha, Beta, and one between the Student Union and Fletcher Avenue).

A typical day of pouring concrete at USF—description

The process of placing concrete is "pretty labor intensive;" in other words concrete should be placed in rather than poured. Cement is like flour and goes into the concrete. In the early days, it took many more hours and people to place concrete than it does today. For example, in a large open warehouse with no structures, 10,000 square feet was the maximum amount of floor space that could be poured; today with a fraction of people, 30-40,000 square feet can be poured in a single day. Mr. Simmons's crew typically consisted of twenty-five to thirty men with most of the work being handled with wheelbarrows. There were no concrete pumps used like they do today. Bay Concrete Industries blended the concrete themselves, which was made out of sand, rock, and water; "It is just like making a cake." Once the concrete was mixed together, it was poured and hauled in trucks and then driven to the job. Depending on the location of the job, the concrete was either directly poured from the trucks into fittings, or cranes with buckets were used to pour concrete slabs.

Groundbreaking ceremony at USF

There was a formal ceremony for the groundbreaking of USF, but not for the placing of the first concrete; there were however pictures taken of the first few yards being poured. "Usually when you got around to really doing the work, very few people showed up."

Community growth

In the fall of 1956, Fletcher Avenue did not have any building on it. On the corner of Bruce B. Downs and Fletcher Avenue (present site of University Community Hospital), Mr. Simmons built a tiny structure for a real estate man that was going to try and sell the land. While made out of plywood, the real estate building was one of the first structures in the area. There were also no buildings between 30th street and where the hospital and medical offices are currently today. When 30th street was first constructed, the Cone Brothers built it from Fowler to Fletcher. According to Mr. Simmons, 30th Street was called the “Road to Nowhere,” and was built from Fletcher north to the county line; “The road ran up to a fence on the county line and stopped.”

Three generation relationship with USF/Current contracts at USF

Mr. Simmons’s son worked for his father after he graduated from university. In 1985, Mr. Simmons began turning over his construction business to his son and in 1993, he completely walked away from running the company. Currently his son has received the contract to build the new athletic facility at USF as well as the addition to the Alumni Center. “I figure we have a three generation relationship...my dad was in his eighties when we started pouring concrete out there and he was very interested; he was fifty years my senior old when I was born. He loved to go out there with me and watch what was going on.”

First donation to Special Collections

After the university got started, Mr. Fred Crabtree, who was a zone engineer in the early days, asked Mr. Simmons if he would donate an old set of magazines called *The Land We Loved*, which was published directly after the War between the States by a General D.H. Hill of the Confederate Army (1865). The magazine was a predecessor of what is now the *Charlotte Observer*. After offering to give the magazines to Mr. Crabtree, Elliot Hardaway, the first director of the library, came to visit Mr. Simmons and look through a desk that Mr. Simmons had that was filled with additional old documents. After a thorough examination, Mr. Simmons told Mr. Hardaway that he also had an original land grant from an old homestead in western North Carolina, which was written under the name of Georgia III before the Revolutionary War. Wondering what Mr. Simmons would do with all of his old papers, Mr. Hardaway asked Mr. Simmons if he would donate them to Special Collections so that they could be preserved and used for future research; this was the first collection donated to Special Collections. “We beat LeRoy Collins by about four weeks” [next collection that Special Collections received].

Margaret Chapman, first head of Special Collections

Margaret Chapman was the first head of Special Collections and according to Mr. Simmons had a photographic mind. Several years after donating the materials, Mr. Simmons received letters from other family members who had utilized the collection. Margaret helped Mr. Simmons to decipher many of the donated family papers. Although Mr. Simmons’s collection was from North Carolina, Margaret was excited to work with it because she had been at the University of North Carolina before joining USF.

Suggestions for future oral history interviews

Mrs. Elizabeth Mann, 727-461-9317, widow of Robert Tress Mann, state legislature for fourteen years. There is a plaque on the wall on the administration building with Robert's name as well as many others including Sam Gibbons. Both Robert and Sam were involved in getting through the legislation necessary to establish USF; Robert was the Congressional representative and Sam Gibbons was the Senatorial representative for the state. "Sam got most of the headlines and Mr. Simmons did an awful lot of the work, he was an outstanding legislature."

End of Interview