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Carol Williams oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 16, 2003

Carol A. Williams (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival
Dr. Williams came to USF in 1968 with a dual appointment as both an assistant professor in the astronomy department and half time in the mathematics department.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Williams to USF
She came for an interview in March of 1968. The astronomy department at USF had been established a few years before. A former colleague of hers, Ike Horn, became the chairman of USF's astronomy department. He invited her down to be interviewed. The then dean of the college of natural sciences hired her. Due to budgetary concerns the dean persuaded the math department to hire her part-time.

Why did she decide to come to USF?
She came because of the astronomy department chairman, Ike Horn. She worked with him as an undergraduate in Connecticut. He was a professor and needed math students to help one summer with a project. He arranged for her to go to graduate school at Yale University and study astronomy. He believed that she was really talented and wanted to make sure that she furthered her career in astronomy. When she graduated from Yale, he called her and asked her to come for an interview at USF. "I came because of him," states Dr. Williams.

What did the campus and the surrounding area look like in 1968
Fowler Avenue was a dirt road. She took the road to the main entrance of the university. She says it was so dusty. "The campus was barren; there were hardly any trees. The buildings were ugly yellow brick buildings, flat and low. I said this does not look like a university campus at all," she states.

First woman hired in the College of Natural Sciences
She believes she was the first woman hired in the College of Natural Sciences. Dr. Williams says there were women scientists on campus, but they were hired in to the Basic Studies College.

Any problems related to being the only woman in the astronomy department?
Dr. Williams says there were some problems in the department at first. Some men tended to grumble. She knew two of the men before she came and got a long fine with them. "Women have to just be sure that they do their job. In the beginning, some men were nervous, but in the long run after a year or so once they got used to me, and saw that I was pulling my weight, there was no problem," she states.

Computer situation in the astronomy department
"The computer situation at USF was abominable and it remained the whole time the astronomy department was here," she says. Dr. Williams says the kind of computers she was used to at Yale were much better than computers at USF. As the department grew, a few small computers were purchased. "We managed to get our work done," she says.

John Allen and astronomy
Dr. Allen was fond of astronomy. Dr. Williams says that he was around the astronomy department a lot. He knew all of the faculty members personally. "If it had not been that John Allen had a master's degree in astronomy, I don't think we would have had an astronomy department here at USF because they can be expensive," states Dr. Williams. She says that Dr. Allen really wanted an astronomy department at USF. He built the observatory and got the department a telescope. "He was very supportive of the department; and gave us as much as the university could afford I think," she states.

Difficulties of building USF's astronomy department
Dr. Williams says that building the astronomy department was tough at first because no astronomer wanted to come to USF to do anything because there was nothing at USF and no money to do anything. There was no observatory and there were no computing facilities. "USF either didn't have the money or it didn't have the know how to put together a good scientific environment," she states. Dr. Williams says that biology and chemistry thrived and had money, but physics and astronomy really struggled for a while.

Astronomy department grows
Dr. Williams says that when Ike Horn came to USF as the department chair for astronomy the department began to thrive. She says that he made some good changes. The department grew in terms of its environment and facilities. The department acquired a telescope.

Observatory location problems
There was a problem with the sky where the observatory was located. "Tampa is not the best place for an observatory anyway, but they put our observatory out in the middle of the golf course. At first we thought this would be great because there were no buildings out there and it would be nice and dark," she says. However, they did have city lights to contend with. "When you looked to the south you couldn't go closer to the horizon than maybe 45 degrees. You could only see half of the sky to the south. The north was a little better. We put up with the seeing problem," she says. Dr. Williams says that USF watered the lawns on the golf course. She says there was ground fog always coming up.

"We were in constant battle with the university to do something about that. We never got out of the observatory what should have come out of it," she says.

Were students allowed to use the observatory?
Dr. Williams says the observatory was used a lot for faculty research. She says graduates students were using it all the time. Some graduate students were not allowed to work the instrument until they passed a certain test, and others who passed it could use it.

Dr. Williams was in the astronomy department from August of 1968 to the summer of 1979.

Where was the astronomy department located in 1968?
In 1968 the astronomy department was located in the psychics building. It was on the third floor and they shared it with the math department.

Population of astronomy students
Dr. Williams says they had a small department. She says there were never more than 10 or fifteen undergraduate majors at one time. When she arrived in 1968 there was one graduate student.

Department of astronomy faculty
There were four other faculty members in the astronomy department when Dr. Williams arrived. They covered a broad range of astronomy. She and one other faculty member were in more classic fields of astronomy, such as astrometry, and celestial mechanics. The other two faculty members were in theoretical and observational astrophysics. When she arrived another astronomer came with her. He was also an observational astronomer. Dr. Williams says that he worked on getting the observatory up and running. The observatory was on the golf course. "The five of us struggled. It was good to be a small department because we were all good friends," she states. The department held faculty meetings every other week.

Research funds available for faculty in the astronomy department
Faculty members in the department had research grants. Dr. Williams says that they could always get money for their research. The faculty members were always supported for anything they had to do. If they wanted to travel they did not use much of the university budget for that kind of research because they all had a lot of research funding. Dr. Williams says that other departments struggled more with research money.

Carl Riggs
He came a few years after she arrived. "He referred to the astronomy department as the jewel of the university because all of us were very active in research, and were putting out good students and getting them good placement. We traveled and were well known, and we brought interesting people to the campus to give talks," Dr. Williams says.

Astronomy department graduate program
Dr. Williams says the graduate program began to grow shortly after she arrived. The department graduated three or four master's students each year. Dr. Williams says the good thing about the department's graduates is that they all got a job after graduating or got in to a graduate school for a Ph.D. elsewhere. USF did not have an astronomy Ph.D. program. She says that every student succeeded.

Examples of successful graduates
One astronomy graduate just retired from the U.S. Naval Observatory. Another graduate did the guide star catalog for the Hubble space telescope.

Involvement with NASA
At one time NASA worked closely with the education system in Florida. NASA became involved with all the university departments that did scientific work.

Involvement with Cape Canaveral
NASA invited USF's astronomy department over to Cape Canaveral on one occasion. The department's graduate students sometimes went to the cape.

The beginning of a joint Ph.D. program between UF and USF
In the mid-1970s the astronomy department wanted to get a Ph.D. program going. Dr. Williams says the faculty members had the academic expertise to do it. They needed to get it approved by the state legislature. Dr. Williams says the legislature's primary argument was that the astronomy department could not begin a Ph.D. program unless the department produces a certain number of master's students. "Our argument was we produce six to eight master's students each year. For six faculty members we thought that was a pretty good number. Every one of our students was getting placed either in a job or a graduate school. We thought that numbers did not matter it was quality that mattered," states Dr. Williams. The astronomy department could not win its battle with the state legislature. The legislature would not support the Ph.D. program. One of the astronomy faculty members knew a man at UF. Gainesville had a physics department and the department had a small group of basic studies people who had master's degrees in physical science. Some of those students were coming back and getting a Ph.D. in astronomy from physics professors. Dr. Williams says that physicists do not know astronomy. She says that a lot of people who received Ph.D.'s in astronomy from physics professors were hired on to the faculty at UF in the Basic Studies curriculum where they taught astronomy for liberal arts. These professors were the only astronomy professors at UF. Dr. Williams says that when UF saw that John Allen was starting an astronomy program at USF, Gainesville hired many prominent astronomers. When USF's astronomy department could not get its Ph.D. program in the mid 1970s it approached UF about having a joint Ph.D. program. The University of South Florida asked UF if USF's master's students could get their Ph.D.'s from UF and still do their research with USF's astronomy department. UF agreed. In the mid-1970s a dean from UF came down and interviewed the astronomy faculty members for jobs at UF. The entire faculty got appointed as adjunct faculty members to UF so that they could supervise Ph.D.

dissertations. Dr. Williams says that was the only way for USF to have a Ph.D. program in astronomy.

UF asks USF faculty members to teach there
Dr. Williams says when the budgets were getting bad there was not money to teach summer school at USF. UF hired the astronomy faculty members at USF to teach astronomy in the summer in Gainesville. "A lot of us would do that. They wanted people that could teach fields they couldn't cover themselves," she says.

Possibility of a joint observatory for UF and USF
Dr. Williams heard that UF was trying to build an observatory. USF's astronomy department could not get support for its observatory. Dr. Williams proposed the idea of USF and UF building a joint observatory. The observatory would be placed at Chinsegut Hill in Brooksville. It would be called the Chinsegut Observatory. Dr. Williams says the astronomy department at USF thought it was a great idea. But, it was too late. UF had already received the money to build an observatory off campus.

USF's observatory is not supported, faculty members decide to go to UF
Dr. Williams says their observatory was not working anymore. The campus was growing and the lights were getting worse. The ground fog was still an issue. The astronomy department could not get enough money to keep it running or to buy equipment. Dr. Williams says the astronomy faculty met and decided to just go to Gainesville. "We decided that if we couldn't get support for our observatory then we would request to be transferred to UF," she states. Carl Riggs arranged for the transfer. Dr. Williams says the five tenured faculty members were scheduled to go to UF.

Dr. Williams decides to stay at USF
One faculty member in the department, Haywood Smith, was not tenured, and therefore would not be transferred to UF. Dr. Williams thought this was unfair. She was worried about him and also some students that she was supervising who were getting their Ph.D's in math. Also, she had just built a house in Palm Harbor. It was a hard decision for her. The astronomers were mad at her. USF was mad too because they had slated her to go. John Lott Brown was USF's president at the time. Dr. Williams approached President Brown and Carl Riggs at a university function. She told the men that she wanted to stay at USF. She told them, "I would like to stay here and send Haywood Smith in my place." President Brown accepted her proposal.

The current astronomy department at USF
There is no astronomy department at USF now. Dr. Williams is the only astronomy professor left. She is now in the Math Department at USF. Dr. Williams says she has tried to get the math department to hire astronomers. She says the department had a chance to hire a good astronomer, but they chose not to because they knew Dr. Williams would be around for a few more years. However, Dr. Williams says that when she retires it will be hard for the math department to find an astronomer who is willing to be part of a math department as opposed to an astronomy department.

Dr. William's final thoughts about her thirty-five years at USF
She has stayed here, but she feels like USF does not know what a university is. "There is no real sense of cohesiveness among the faculty. There is no academic spirit. There is a rush when you have a lot of good minds working together and creating new ideas. It is an incredible high. I have never had that at USF. I have had it elsewhere. USF does not know how to foster that. I don't know what's wrong. The place is not run like an academic institution. It's run like a business. That is the worse thing you can do for academic spirit," she states.

End of Interview