Harris W. Dean oral history interview by Milly St. Julien, August 28, 1985

Harris W. Dean (Interviewee)

Milly St. Julien (Interviewer)

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St. Julien: Today I am speaking with Dr. Harris Dean, former president of the University of South Florida, for the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Dr. Dean, what was your first contact with USF, why did you choose to come here, and what were some of your earliest impressions of the University?

Dean: I was at Florida State University in Tallahasee at the time I first heard about this institution. I made up my mind immediately that I wanted to be a part of it because I knew that this thing would explode. All they had here at the time was the University of Tampa which was a small institution and it hadn't grown much through the years. It still remains about as it was. I knew that we had lots of students coming up to Florida State from down here and I knew that alot of them were going to the University of Florida and I was sure there would be alot of them that would stay at home if the University was there. I also knew President Allen, but not very well. I had some dealings with him. Where I had been for eight years, I was chairman of the Florida Committee of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools which was the accrediting association of the south. In that capacity I led the committee that accredited the Florida high schools and junior high schools. So I had been in every high school in Florida during that period. In traveling about the state I met Dr. Allen several times. He was Vice President of the University of Florida at the time that he was appointed to head this University. So I had confidence in him and I felt that this was going to be a tremendous institution at the time. I never took any action immediately about it, but when they established headquarters down here, which was down at the courthouse and
then later on Plant Avenue, I finally made contact. Since I was in education there, I was head of the Department of Educational Administration which developed school principals, superintendents and junior college presidents. At one time I had ten junior college presidents that had graduated with me. We were scattered around the state. Some of them are still there. The one down in Broward is still there right now. Hugh Adams is the president of Broward Junior College. So I applied to Dean Battle. Dean Battle had been appointed Dean of the College of Education. They started out with four colleges: the College of Basic Studies, the College of Education, the College of Business, and the College of Liberal Arts. So I got an interview and was employed. When you're employed and weren't a dean, you were just a prof. Everybody started that way. So I left a very prominent position at Florida State and came here as a prof because I was sure it was going to go. Early into that period I was appointed right away with President Allen to a planning committee, the purpose of which was to plan where we were going. So almost everything that was developed from then until I retired I had something to do with because, for instance we planned the College of Engineering. That was the first college that was added two or three years later. One of these deans, Dean Francis, who was the Dean of the College of Basic Studies, and President Allen started as his own academic dean and operated during that first year, and he then made Dean French the academic dean and one of the things that he immediately asked me to do was to start a graduate council. So I was the first chairman of the graduate council. We wrote every bit of those requirements, some of which are still there. At that time we hadn't even graduated an undergraduate. But we started planning on it and I was chairman of the committee for a number of years. Dean French then
retired and at that time President Allen made me the academic dean so in all that period we were planning, developing, and creating new programs. One of the most striking things to me was that we employed 200 new faculty every year for about 10 years and I had to interview everyone of them because that was our policy at that time. That probably doesn't happen now. You probably get no further than the dean of the college now. We were insisting that everyone of them had their doctorates. We relaxed the policy in some areas like Fine Arts. That really isn't the highest degree that some people in Fine Arts make. Some come from Juilliard or Eastman or someplace like that. So we had a very fine faculty when we started. They came from all over the country. One humorous aspect that I recall was that we had more people that applied for the job and they almost said this to us, although not in so many words, that they had been up in the cold, wintery north working hard all their lives and now they would like to join us in south Florida and retire. But at any rate that was an attraction. It attracted not only because this was a new university, but this was an elite university. There hadn't been one started from scratch for many decades in the nation. So it was a great experience, although as institutions grow, they become more impersonal. I joined Florida State, for instance, when it had just become coeducational. University of Florida was for men, Florida State was for women, and Florida A & M was for blacks. I came in 1948 and just after the war they went coeducational. And so Florida State had about 3500 students when I joined them. When I left them they had 10 thousand or more. So I went through that growth there and then came down here and went through an amazing growth here. It's just fantastic and hardly believable that we are celebrating our 75th thousand graduate here now in this very short period.
St. Julien: What was your earliest impression of the physical appearance of the University and the area that it was in?

Dean: It was a bunch of scrub trees and sand out here.

St. Julien: That didn't discourage you?

Dean: No. Dean Battle was taking us out to see the construction and we got stuck in the sand. We had to have a bulldozer push the car out. In fact the bulldozer was always ready to do that because most everybody got stuck. In the early days we had two sidewalks. The Student Center, which is still the Student Center, and then there was a sidewalk to the Administration building. The other building was the building that I was in. That was the Chemistry building which was to the left of the Administration building. The library wasn't completed yet. The first library was in the ballroom of the Student Center. The sand would go across the sidewalks so it looked like you belonged to the French Foreign Legion or something. You had to sweep the sand off as you went from one building to another.

St. Julien: Did they have air conditioning in the buildings?

Dean: Yes, right from the start. That was pleasant, but the surroundings were very bare. Of course they started immediately to try and get grass, but that was a slow process.

St. Julien: I heard a story about deciding on the mascot. Some of the suggestions were the "desert rats" and the "camels." Do you recall that?
Dean: I don't recall much of the detail. I remember they finally decided on the Brahmins. We didn't call ourselves bulls in those days. That is something that the press would have done.

St. Julien: When they started talking about the founding of the University, do you know why the University was put so far out instead of being located closer to the bay?

Dean: You know in Florida, yet today, the state of Florida would spend no money for a site. They would say that if we wanted it in Tampa, someone would have to donate the site. So the Hillsborough County Commission purchased this land and gave it to the University of South Florida. I know they considered a number of sites, but it was somewhat a matter of availability. We have 1800 acres here and that is a big space. You can't find that right next to the river or right next to the bay. I know that I reacted, as many did, regarding the reasons we couldn't be located on the gulf. But this is the way it turned out and this is the site they had.

St. Julien: How much influence did Sam Gibbons have?

Dean: Oh he was the real father of this institution. In many ways he was behind the movement in the Florida legislature from the very start. He had great influence locally with the County Commission and the other powers that were involved. He has always been a friend of this institution and still is. We owe a lot to Sam Gibbons.

St. Julien: What difficulties do you recall in obtaining funds for the University or getting legislative support?

Dean: We had some real problems. I was familiar with them. We had the same problems at Florida State when I was there. You see, we were in an
emerging institution and although I don't think that the top administration perhaps at the University of Florida was always out opposing us, nevertheless, the University of Florida didn't like this competition and they had a lot of support in the legislature. So every time we made a move up there at Florida State or when I got down here and we would be promoting a new program level, it was always the statement, "Well, we got one over at the University of Florida." For instance, early we started on a medical school and that was a real battle and a very touchy problem because you had to get the support of local doctors to start with. They are all members of the AMA. You have to get the approval of the AMA and there were actions within the local medical profession here. Many of them got their medical degrees at Florida, and they didn't think we needed another medical school. So we had to get the right people and ultimately work to have virtual unanimous support which wasn't easy. We didn't get it. In Engineering, we had good support right away. So we had an engineering school about two or three years later. One of the things that I did early was that I started the Center for Research and Development. One of the reasons I did that was that we had a division of Sponsored Research which went out to get research grants and so on. There were new programs that we would like to start. We would get interested, but we couldn't find a dean in any of the colleges that would be interested. So I thought they ought to be starting these things so we established this center for research and development and all of these were started there and may now begin in colleges. For instance there was Aging, Marine Science, Exceptional Children and Adults, Speech Pathology, Audiology, and Rehabilitation.
St. Julien: I think those are in the different colleges now.

Dean: Yes. Most of them now are in colleges. Anytime that we wanted to go into a direction and couldn't get faculty or deans interested to join, we started it within the office of the vice president of the Office of Academic Affairs. Then when we got going there was no trouble to get a dean to take it over once it got underway.

St. Julien: A lot of these came from research grants?

Dean: Yes.

St. Julien: What happened once the state had to start to funding them?

Dean: Well, you know, we started the Marine Science Program while we were at Bayboro and that started about 1965 when we acquired the center there. That was an old marine building used for various purposes. It sort of had become a white elephant I think. There were people in St. Petersburg who were demoting our use of it and I know when the morning when we thought we had, we went over there to see what we had. I found out through Laughton, who later was my associate dean. He had been with the Veterans Administration in St. Petersburg for many years and he was working on Aging at that time. He did some experimental work. He had an office there in this building. We got acquainted with him and, of course, he was an MD and we were working on trying to start a medical school, so we got him over here. He was the first dean of the medical school, although I believe that probably officially Dean Smith was really our first dean. The ground work was all paperwork at that time. This, of course, was more ideal than the place over there, so we started Marine Biology. That is the reason we got into it. But we had a time on that.
were fighting us on that. As it turns out, it's now joined with all three of them are in on it.

St. Julien: It's grown.

Dean: Oh yes, it's quite a big place. Harold Humm, who is the top man we got in Florida State, is still over there.

St. Julien: I think he has just retired or he is semi-retired. Why a medical school in this area? With University of Florida having a medical school, why was it decided that this area would also have one?

Dean: Well, several things happened. The Veterans Administration wanted to build a new hospital here. I guess that plus some nudging by the local doctors started thinking about it. So we were able to get get to Sam Gibbons--Sam Gibbons was a friend to us--that is why there is a VA Hospital right across the street from the medical school today. We started with the fifth floor. At least one floor of that building was for the University of South Florida. It still is, I believe, used by the medical school although, that I'm not too sure about since I have been out of the picture. But the thing that has resulted is miraculous the way it has developed into a medical center.

St. Julien: How do you think the funds that are being channeled into the medical center affects the rest of the University? Does it take money away from other colleges or is it separate?

Dean: I would hope not. We must admit that at the outset it was easier to get funds for medical school than they did for the business school and engineering. It is more difficult to get money for Fine Arts, Language-Literature, History, and basic Liberal Arts. It is more
difficult to get funds there because there's not so much glamour and not such a close relationship to the working world out there.

St. Julien: Why isn't there a law school? Is it because of Stetson?

Dean: We almost acquired Stetson once. We were very close to it and I'm sorry that it didn't happen. Stetson wasn't very much interested. You know where Stetson is. There isn't very much land and it's a long way off. It was hard to get funds to support it and I don't know why that fell through. Again, I think there was strong opposition from the Florida University Law School. But we did the same thing at Florida State and Florida State got a law school. I tell you, if you are university in the capital city of the state, you have great advantage because you get to know the legislature. They are the lawyers who get to know the Supreme Court justices, and they want a law school so it wasn't so difficult to get a law school at Florida State. I think it might still be possible that we get a law school someday.

St. Julien: Did you have any zoning problems considering there were breweries so close?

Dean: Oh yes. Lets see. I don't know if I can recall the exact provisions, but we had a provision (I think 1/4 mile) that there could be no liquor store within a certain distance from the University. It has had some violations. Now since then they applied for exceptions, although I think that probably they were inside that original zone. Incidentally, the only thing on Fowler was the University Restaurant. Have you heard of the University Restaurant?
St. Julien: I've heard of it.

Dean: Well, it's down about a mile or so down the street. It started the same time. We would gather down there. They had a bar and place to eat. Every afternoon, about 4:00, there would be quite a gathering of faculty down there because there was no other place to go near here. It had a great deal of influence on us. I know that about the second or third year we were here they wouldn't admit negroes into the restaurant. So we had a boycott. Everybody here, including the faculty and the students. Within a few weeks they started admitting blacks and that was all over. That was one of the neighborhood problems that we had at that time. The Holiday Inn came in pretty early because we needed someplace like that. There was also another motel on that corner. It's not there anymore. It must have been somewhere near the University Bank.

St. Julien: There is one other thing that I want to ask you before I forget. I understand that when this University started the emphasis was on teaching rather than research. How did the faculty members' schedule differ from what it is today? Was it more like the public school system?

Dean: The emphasis was a ... I spoke on this ... I made some marks ... but this is in the original bulletin called "Accent on Learning." Of course research was in here but you know, an undergraduate institution doesn't do research. We had freshman only when we started. One of the headings was "Emphasis on Fine Teaching." The faculty would be assembled from all parts of the country and would be selected carefully for strength, confidence, and the ability to teach. "The faculty will be encouraged to carry on creative work and significant research and provide opportunities for students to learn the meaning of ..." So it was
there, but it just can't be until you get graduate programs and then you can get research money. We didn't get much research money until we got into graduate work. We started, I believe, in Science and Education. That is where we started our first masters and doctorate programs. Of course that has expanded greatly as the years have gone along. But teaching was emphasized. Of course most people, in those early days, taught what the common definition of a load was, which was probably 12 hours at that time. Then as you got into graduate work that would be reduced or you had some other kind of responsibilities.

St. Julien: So that would be 12 hours a week?

Dean: Yes, usually four classes, three hours each. That was the usual thing. We went through all of the varieties of . . . We went from semester, quarter, trimester, quarter, and then back to semester. Usually this was . . . We were nudged by somebody in the legislature to try something different and somebody will come up with some ideas how to save alot of money. I never noticed that we saved any money.

St. Julien: Did you ever have to lobby for the University?

Dean: No, not directly. The president had to in that day. This was the acceptable way. A president might go to Tallahassee and meet with the Education Committee or whoever was considering some of our programs. But in more recent years, of course, what had been the Board of Control, which it was called at that time, it came to Florida at the University of Florida, Florida State, and A & M. That is how it would work. And they were in the building that I had an office in Tallahassee. The Board of Control was in the basement of that building. They were about 5 people there. Now
there must be 200 in the Office of the Board of Regents which came along some years later. The Board of Regents now has its own lobby. I'm not sure how much, and President Brown can tell us about whether he gets opportunities for lobbying or not. I think there is a movement on right now, however, to de-emphasize the Board of Controls. In my opinion it's the tail that wags the dog today, that the university president gets the rug pulled out from under him all the time by the chancellor. I think that is wrong and I think that the basic control operation is in the University and with the president, and I think the legislature is beginning to look at it that way also. There is one thing that I would like to take credit for. When I became acting president, President Allen decided this rather suddenly, and he told me on a Friday night that he was resigning and that it was all mine. That was it. And so in that period of (Dec. 1970) the '70s, there was great student movements. We had constant groups of students at the mall. There was always someone there trying to get a gang together to do something or other. President Allen was a Quaker and against violence. He doesn't even raise his voice in an argument. We had a period there where if you went in to see President Allen you had to step over the students. They were picketing you know, lying there on the floor. And so that and President Allen . . .

St. Julien: This was mainly for administration? Were they upset about the administration?

Dean: All kinds of things. It was mainly . . . . This was a very small group, but the great influence at Harvard, Cornell, and any places they occupied the administration building. They threw the furniture out the windows and that sort of thing.
St. Julien: But here, they were just laying on the floors?

Dean: Well, here they were trying to take down the flag. I don't know why that was. Our police were trying to protect the flag. So this is what I inherited. I'm not a Quaker. I learned to figure that business out in a hurry. I did, but I also established what they called the hotline and what that was . . . I said that I would meet with students. We scheduled, like next week we'll meet Tuesdays and so and so in the Engineering Building at 11 o'clock. So I would be there and the students would be there with their grievances. So all during the time I was actually president I had those meetings regularly. I don't know how much good they did, but at least there was an opportunity to exchange things and I've been called all kinds of things at those meetings too.

St. Julien: I think in that period they weren't very shy about . . .

Dean: That was an interesting time. We also . . .

St. Julien: Did it help curb the picketing? Did that seem to . . .?

Dean: Well, I don't know. We had a peace rally every October and that was always very nice. They had a march with candles after dark on the streets of the University. This particular October I had the president of Jacksonville University call me. He said he had heard about the rally we were having. I asked him how he learned about it and he said it was from a placard on the bulletin board over there. The bulletin said "Come one, come all to the University of South Florida on this date. Bring shovels to dig latreens and there will be an OD dance." We found out then that this was at Florida State and all around. We couldn't find the students
where they were coming from. They were coming from our campus. So there had been legislation. You remember after Woodstock and... Woodstock went very well, but some later ones were very terrible. So municipalities began to adopt certain rules that you had to have portable toilets for every fifty people and you had to have certain requirements and so on to get permission. What happened was our Hillsborough County Commission had adopted one of those so I got Dan Walbolt, who is now Vice President for Student Affairs. Dan was in that office, but he had a law degree and at that time we didn't have a lawyer. Now we have a whole bunch of lawyers. So I got Dan to start investigating this to see if we could make some regulations for that night. We still didn't know what was going to happen, but we knew at least what kind of reaction it was going to bring. So we finally thought of a way to identify three students. So we warned them in advance that we were holding them responsible if anything happened that night. They all, incidentally, all three of those students, were brand new on our campus and we learned that they had been at Oberlin the summer before when some of this was nationally planned and in their little publications. We had read this. It said "It looks like the University of South Florida, in Tampa, is right for development." So anyway we made preparations for that. We said that we would close this peace rally at midnight and the rally, I knew that they were in trouble because it was far bigger than it ever had been. So I had worked with the chair of this group. We had just had Kent State and so I was shocked by no matter what happened. But we asked for assistance - I didn't know what these people were up to. So we ordered that it would be closed at midnight. Well at midnight there was still about 400 there. I had a lot of volunteers from the students and faculty to help get them to go home. Our Vice President
of Student Affairs wanted to go out there and several of the deans to try and persuade them. As that group got smaller, that group was pretty well gone with alcohol and drugs. They were hard to persuade. Finally I went home. I said to let them go on till about 1 o'clock. They called me to let me know they were still there. We had a pretty good campus. Then the sheriffs trouped in. So they came in and cleared the field and arrested 53 people. Only 19 of them were our students. And that really put an end to the whole deal. From then on we had quiet around there and incidentally I got good support from the Oracle in the editorial reports. But I think I believe that 97% of our students want to come here and get an education, and I think it is our responsibility to provide a place where that can go on. I got alot of opposition. Some faculty member was scared that it would be another Kent State, but it survived and we got through it all right.

St. Julien: How long were you interim president?

Dean: Not very long. About a full year. Then I . . . Mackey was Vice President of Florida State and I had intended to resign, really I had wanted to . . . I didn't want to continue. My father retired when he was 63 and he had ten great years before he died. So I thought I'm going to suffer a little too. But when President Allen went I felt that I couldn't go right then. So I stayed. Then when Mackey came in he asked me to stay and I stayed as Consultant to the President for one semester. I agreed to take two semesters but I decided to quit after the one semester. That was in January of '72.

St. Julien: In your opinion, what were the differences between the views of Dr. Mackey and Dr. Allen?
Dean: Mackey was less personal I would say. It became less personal with the administration... Of course there were things happening with the system and that was because we were getting big. He had been in Washington, D.C., and I think he was more used to a sort of bureaucracy which was created. Now he asked me to make this study of the business. Somewhere you will find the document with my recommendation. And we went, I believe, to about what we have today. And that isn't really what I believed in, necessarily, but it looked like the best thing to do at the time. I didn't create these colleges like Social Science and Natural Science and Arts and Letters, but we had the vision when we started with those. That really wasn't working out too well. So for whatever reasons I had them all gathered up - at that time and that is what we went to. Dr. Mackey was not popular and ultimately he got another job. He and I are good friends. We still see each other now and then.

St. Julien: You said that you started at about the same time basketball got under way. Would you tell us something about that?

Dean: There was a movement, of course there is always a movement at various times, and this was underway and they had some pretty firm work. Dr. Bowers was the athletic director at the time, who is still at the University. He is in the business of raising money, primarily, so when they came with the proposal, I was for it. I believe that kids need something to rally around. That it is not necessarily bad to have an intercollegiate athletic program. So we played the University of Florida for the first game. We played the freshmen. Of course we were just beginning. I invited the president to come over and we jumped center to get things
started. I was an athlete at Illinois State. I'm in the Athletic Hall of Fame up there. I was captain of the basketball team and so on. In those days we played every season. Now you can only play one sport per season. We opened down at Curtis Hixon. That is where we played our games. I've got a picture of that somewhere. We started that game off when we beat the University of Florida that night. Of course we were a four year institution and playing freshmen, but we had a lot of enthusiasm for basketball.

St. Julien: Was that the only basketball team in this area? Did the University of Tampa have a basketball team?

Dean: At that time I believe not. They had a very good team, good to watch. Of course we never played in the big time; that has come more recently. But we got some good enthusiasm from the students which I was looking for because you know they didn't have much to rally around. I thought maybe that might have contributed to some of the unrest.

St. Julien: When the branch campuses started in St. Petersburg in 1968, did they really threaten to start their own university unless some help came from this campus?

Dean: Well, there were those that wanted St. Petersburg Junior College to move to the University. Nelson Poynter, who was the editor of the St. Petersburg paper, was strong on our developing something. I believe we had a library named after him called the Poynter Library. He was a fine and influential man. So he really supported the... We never went as far as he wanted us to go. I don't know how they're feeling over there, I presume there's a good feeling over there for this branch now. There is one, in
looking this over (list of faculty and staff) Brames. He is still over there. He was in at the start. I believe there's another man that was there from the start. Mr. Bodie was his name I believe.

St. Julien: I understand that when people speak of the early years of the University there is always a soft spot for the relationship between the faculty and the . . .

Dean: It was because we were small. We knew each other and no matter what we have to think about large institutions, then we are going to have them. There is no doubt about that. But students today, students here, miss something, basically undergraduate schools that they got then. They would go away knowing a least a dozen faculty members well. Today if a kid goes away from here knowing one faculty member that they could even speak to a year later, that's doing pretty well, I imagine. But that need not be true. Graduate students work more closely with a smaller part of the University. We started with 1900 freshman. Everybody taught freshmen including President Allen. Even so, there were few enough faculty that we got friendly with each other. I guess that is probably why there was that feeling of nostalgia. Of course there is a natural nostalgia for a group starting something new. It was a new experience for all of us.

St. Julien: Over the years, what were some of the best or some of the worst developments that you have seen come through the University?

Dean: I should say that the best is the accent on learning. I think the University still stands for that. I think the worst thing is the impersonal kind of development that we are getting into. The feeling that you are just a number and, of course, that is not necessarily just our University, that is happening in our society. We have been computerized so much.
Incidentally, that computer business . . . The first computer we had occupied . . . It weighed tons and tons. We needed the air conditioning to keep it cool. Every year we employed a new man to go . . . Now we got to get somebody that knows something about this business, so we would employ somebody. We would have him for a year and then he would come to us and say that we need to get somebody that knows something about it. Then we would get another and he would say that we needed to get someone else. Finally then the computer began to get smaller and we had more software for it and so on. That was an interesting experience.

St. Julien: Well I would like to thank you for speaking with us today.