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James D. Ray (Interviewee)

Nancy A. Hewitt (Interviewer)

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DR. JAMES RAY

Hewitt: I am speaking this morning with Dr. James Ray, Professor Emeritus of Biology and Dean Emeritus of the College of Natural Sciences, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Let me ask you first Dr. Ray, what was your first contact with USF and why did you decide to come here to work?

Ray: My first contact was in the fall of 1957 when I came down to visit the University which then consisted of John Allen, the head librarian Elliot Hardaway, and President Allen's secretary, in an office in the Hillsborough County Building. I came down at the invitation of John Allen to see about my interest in the University. This reflects a friendship that I had with George Coolie, retired investment banker, who became a botanist and an associate of Harvard University. He was interested in the flora of the southeastern states. We had previously met in Mississippi earlier and botanized and had done some work there. Apparently when the University of South Florida was established by the legislature and John Allen was subsequently named president, George, a friend of Allen's, encouraged me to apply and I did. When I came down in December of '57 I visited first Jim Seager and I remember I nearly froze to death because there was a cold spell. I slept in my bathrobe under a small rug and a few other things. It was awfully cold. Anyway, I subsequently returned in the summer of '58 as I recall. My family and I visited the area. Then in August of '59, I was officially appointed and started work at Chinsegut Hill.

Hewitt: You were the first faculty member ... ?
Ray: Yes, I was the first faculty appointment. I came down then and started working with the botanical collections which were housed at Chinsegut Hill and were donated to the University by George Coolie. We botanized around the area and the state and these collections were added to the then growing hibernium which was established at Chinsegut. Chinsegut was a very nice place to work in. There was plenty of room and few distractions other than the glory of the place, its history, and the surroundings.

Hewitt: Was Chinsegut actually apart of USF at that point?

Ray: At that time, no. The University of Florida had a use permit because it's a property of the federal government and had been under the administration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and was a regional experiment station as a part of the University of Florida. The University of Florida operated a small branch library, the nucleus of which were the collections of Raymond Robins. That's where I first met Elliot Hardaway, who was the librarian. He came down from the University of Florida and had done some work in the collections of Chinsegut. That is where I started. My family lived in Brooksville the first year and then we moved down in September of '60.

Hewitt: On September of '60 when USF officially opened, did you move to the Tampa campus and teach here?

Ray: No. I moved to the Tampa campus and had my first office in the Ed. building and moved the plant collection down in the Ed. building in the summer of '60.

Hewitt: Do you remember your first impressions when you actually saw the campus or what was going to be the campus?
Ray: I think my first impressions were in December of '57. It was a cold, windy day for Florida. I visited then what was to be the campus and there was a big billboard that said, "The Future Site of the University of South Florida." I remember standing on the south side of that billboard to get out of the north wind.

Hewitt: When you actually started teaching in 1960, were you part of the College of Basic Studies?

Ray: I had a joint appointment in the College of Basic Studies and the College of Liberal Arts.

Hewitt: And the Natural Sciences were in the College of Liberal Arts at that time?

Ray: The Natural Sciences along with Fine Arts, Social and Behavioral Sciences, English, and Humanities. They were all in Liberal Arts. They were divisions of Liberal Arts.

Hewitt: So the concept at that time of Liberal Arts was obviously a broad one?

Ray: Yes.

Hewitt: Because it contains all of these various divisions?

Ray: Yes.

Hewitt: Were you at all involved in developing the early curriculum at USF with its emphasis on interdisciplinary education and broad basic studies?
Ray: I was not involved in the initial planning. That was done basically by the chairman who came down in '59. I got involved in planning the initial courses in botany that were offered in the College of Liberal Arts. I was also involved in the planning of the Biological Sciences program that was offered in the College of Basic Studies. In a sense I was a part of it, yes.

Hewitt: I know that you are the head of this committee to develop a new core curriculum or to look at a new core curriculum for the University. Are there any links between that and what we had here as a basic studies curriculum?

Ray: Historically, yes, and perhaps philosophically. That is, I think that the present effort to revise the liberal education for our students, not only our liberal arts students, but our professional students as well. It is an outgrowth of the old basic college. This is not peculiar to South Florida. A number of institutions over the country have in recent years made very extensive revisions in their curriculum. What we originally had as part of the basic studies was subsequently replaced by the so called general distribution requirements. This was a trend that we found all over the country. It's not unique in South Florida. I think the recent revisions in curriculum over the country now ... that we are simply a part of it here. I was asked by Greg O'Brien before I retired if I would, subsequent to partial retirement, chair the Council of Liberal Arts Deans, that is, the dean of Arts and Letters, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Fine Arts, and Natural Sciences. One of the functions of that council was to look at the general distribution requirements and make suggestions for revisions. So that is what I am working on now as well as ... I divide my time between the College of Natural Sciences and advising pre-professional students.
Hewitt: You mentioned that having a committee to look at core curriculum was pretty much following in the footsteps of several other universities in the country. Initially, at least according to the early catalogues of USF, the purpose of developing this campus was in part to provide a new and innovative kind of education for undergraduates. Do you think that the ideas of the original curriculum development really did reflect a more innovative sense and character than the kinds of changes that were made to general distribution later and now back to a core curriculum?

Ray: I don't know. I was not a student of general or liberal education when I came because I was trained academically as a professional botanist and had never taught in general education courses. When I became involved in it here, I found it to be a very exciting experience and very rewarding. I think that our years in the classroom here in general education in biological science were very rewarding years. I guess that experience was the interest that I've developed now in revision of the general distribution requirements. I don't know that what we originally had was so innovative. It was the brainchild of Sid French and he had done this sort of thing at other universities. Sid was an outstanding student and academician of general education and was well known for it. I think what we had here was a general education curriculum in the purest sense. Maybe that was the innovative part. Plus the fact that it was put into place in a brand new university. The combination of that, I think, was... It's very seldom, as John Allen said, that you get to establish the first state university from scratch in a century. When you go back and look at the number of universities which had been created from scratch at that time, that didn't evolve from a community college or a teacher's college or something like
that, there were very few. I think that was the innovation. It was very new.

Hewitt: It started right from the ground floor?

Ray: Right from the ground floor.

Hewitt: How much impact or influence did faculty actually have in shaping the educational policies of the University?

Ray: I look at it this way. The principals and policies of the University were established by the early administrators and the course chairman; and the faculty, in an individualistic way, put them into practice. As the University grew, new curriculum, faculty and programs were added and there was a natural dilution factor and growth factor to what we originally had. We grew out of what we originally had until what we have now. I don't know that it was intent or if it was just a natural factor of growth.

Hewitt: In those early years, how would you characterize the relationship between faculty, staff, and administrators? Now we are obviously a huge university and there are all kinds of levels of bureaucracy. When it was a much smaller place were there . . . ?

Ray: I was impressed by the fact that all doors were open. You really didn't have to follow the chain of command in order to go see someone. Everyone was willing to listen to your problem and it didn't make any difference whether he was in the physical plant or in the business office or what have you. I think that was a very pleasant situation. I enjoyed it very much and I guess I spent more time talking with the president. John Allen was more accessible than any other president I have ever talked with and I think
it was a reflection of that open door policy more than anything else. The early days were great in a sense. Everyone knew everyone else. The president went off on a tangent, and he created a very idealistic All-University Senate, which was composed of almost equal representation as I recall between faculty, staff, and administrators, although no students. They had soon developed the All University Senate with a faculty block and a staff block. I think that it was natural because the faculty wanted a faculty senate and the staff and administrators wanted an equal voice in this sort of thing. I was the first president of the All University Senate and presided for two years. I could easily see the division between the faculty and the staff, and I don't think it was based on anything other than just a natural division of turf. That is, it wasn't an intense rivalry or anything like that, but it was there and I think that a Faculty Senate as we now have it is a much more natural situation as is the Career Service Senate.

Hewitt: So some of the idealism did a lot for the open door policy and fit with things like that. Also it was probably unrealistic in terms of long-term development?

Ray: In a sense, yes, because a lot of practices of babyhood are shed by the wayside for the simple reason that later on they are impractical and a lot of things of adolescence that we are quick to put aside. I think that I often wonder what would have happened if the University had maintained some of the principals and philosophies of the "all university approach." What with the size that we have now, it would be impossible. I think more than anything else was the rate of growth. I don't think that anyone was prepared for the rate of growth that we had. It was not necessarily the numbers, but it was just the rate. We grew so quickly. There are a number of factors that
contribute to why we grew so fast. I don't think that it was humanly possible for us to keep up with it and to maintain the status quo of the University. I think that is true of almost any educational university. Evolution is a way of life and it changes. Some things you discard and some things you hold on to. Sometimes the things that are discarded are discarded not because they are not good but because they are impractical. In a large organization there is a necessary chain of command that you have to follow. I remember in the early days it was awfully easy and I didn't create any hard feelings by walking into the director of the Physical Plant and complaining without going to see my dean. It is something that I greatly enjoyed.

Hewitt: Do you remember what the students were like in those first couple of years? Were they substantially different than students now? I assume in dress and haircuts that they were different.

Ray: I think that our student body here has always been on the conservative side and just a little bit behind whatever the national norm at the moment happens to be. That is, if short skirts were the theme, we would come along in short skirts a couple of years later. I think it is just the fact that there is a time lag between the north and the northeast and the south. It is true in almost any aspect of life. The student problems of the sixties were a little late in coming here. Our problems with integration were a little late, but so far as I recall, our problems with student integration were practically none. I think that we had the first black student on campus for a number of weeks before I was ever aware of it and I don't know that it created any problems. I think that we had twenty or thirty black students on campus before anyone was ever really aware of it. It didn't
create any problems. We eased into that very well. Why? I don't know. I think our student body has always been a little more conservative than other parts of the country. I think that the very early students were carrying a little missionary zeal of being all a part of the first. In two or three years that was lost in part plus the fact that there were twelve hundred students the first year. It is easy for twelve hundred students to feel that they know each other. By the time you reach three or four thousand, then you lose it. And twenty thousand is something else.

Hewitt: Yes. And it seems like they are all parked on campus today!

Ray: One thing that I noticed is that there seemed to be a much heavier influx of students on campus today than on Monday. What happened, I don't know. Last year on the first day of classes the campus was just a mess.

Hewitt: On the very first day of classes in 1960 I understand that there was a convocation in the morning and then the students went right to class?

Ray: Right to classes because the convocation was at nine and the class bell was sounded at ten o'clock and we went straight to the ten o'clock classes.

Hewitt: Were there parking problems in those days?

Ray: No because along with the first four buildings, the parking lots were built at the same time. So parking problems arose because people expected a parking space just outside the classroom or the office. Parking, to my mind, has never been a problem on this campus. I always reflect and think about other campuses that I have visited and our problems are negligible here.
Hewitt: They really did plan the parking lots early then?

Ray: Yes. Parking lots were on the periphery and then buildings and then the mall in the center with no cross traffic. Traffic was peripheral.

Hewitt: The other event of the first couple of years that I wanted to ask you about was the Johns Committee. What kind of impact do you think it had on the growth or stature of USF?

Ray: When I first visited back in the late '50s, I felt that Tampa really was not excited about the University of South Florida. The people that normally you would expect to be interested in a university, whether it is a day old or a thousand years old, were more interested in schools elsewhere. They were not particularly excited about this University on the north side. As a matter of fact, I found a greater interest in the University from the clerks in the stores than I did from the managers or the management people of Tampa. I think early on there was great disinterest, which later became manifested as a town-gown situation, and to me the Johns Committee simply widened a gap that was there. It took a very long time for the effect of that to be diminished because what it did was to emphasize in the minds of the general public of the area that there were some "bad apples" out here on campus among the faculty and they should be "punished" and all that sort of thing. I don't think that the faculty, the so called "bad apples," were any departures from the mixture that you would find on any other campus or any other social group. It's just a natural range of variations of behavior of people, types, and so on. The Johns Committee seemed to center its investigations more on the University of South Florida than in any other area or aspect of that state government. I cannot say why, but I know that for a young university, it was a difficult thing to handle. The University had an
"All University Book" and, as I recall, maybe one or two of these books may have been involved in it, I'm not sure. I don't think that contributed to the demise of the "All University Book" approach. The Johns Committee was pretty bad and then subsequently I served on one or two faculty committees that looked into faculty against which charges had been brought somewhat unrelated to the Johns Committee. It was easy to see the prejudices that the Johns Committee was based on.

Hewitt: Do you think that it had a significant impact on the morale of the faculty at USF to have something like this occur so early in the school's history?

Ray: I think in a sense, yes. I think it tended to reflect, be it right or wrong, the attitudes of the area and the state on higher education and academic skill.

Hewitt: The College of Basic Studies sometime in the late '60s began to be dismantled. Do you think that was an inevitable result of growth or was there a real shift in the vision of what education at USF should be? What was the process by which that change occurred?

Ray: In the sense that the general education program here was an innovative program in the eyes of many of the new faculty—that is, not the chairman or the deans, but the faculty. Some had experience elsewhere in general education, some did not. I think that what happened was a natural effect of growth and time. Faculty were initially involved in these programs, and then as the University grew the faculty had other interests or they became tired of teaching in the program. The replacements were not quite as interested as the originators. So, it too was a natural evolutionary
process which is true in all the new programs. You start an interdisciplinary course and usually it is a good course as long as the instructors are very interested in it. But then they tire of it or they go on to other assignments and new people come in. If the new people are not as innately interested as the originators there are going to be some changes. I think that is what happened in the College of Basic Studies. As the University grew the faculty had more interest and responsibilities. That was the dilution factor. Then, too, there was a tendency to change to general distribution, to a smorgasbord of requirements, rather than definite courses. Then the logistics of offering the same course to six hundred students changes as you have a thousand or two thousand students taking the same course. That is a factor as well.

Hewitt: Do you think that the effects on the Natural Sciences was particularly great when Basic Studies was dismantled? Did that really change the focus of the Natural Science Program or were they already developed for the long run?

Ray: I think that we had the Natural Sciences and the College of Basic Studies and I think those two entities worked very well together because you had, in Natural Sciences, the departments of Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Astronomy, Math, and Geology. You had essentially those same subjects taught to some degree in the Physical Science and the Biological Sciences for the Basic Studies. Those two entities worked very well together. I think probably better than some of the parallel faculties in the other areas. We had some very strong courses, particularly in Biological Sciences. With the demise of the Basic College, I don't think there was a sudden spurt in activities in Natural Science. I think that it was there all the time.
Hewitt: Several people have talked about not only the demise of the College of Basic Studies, but that this was part of a more general shift away from a heavy emphasis on teaching and towards a greater emphasis on research and publication.

Ray: That is to be expected because you have undergraduate teaching and then you have research and with research invariably comes graduate programs. Many of the faculty who came here, especially in Natural Sciences, were research oriented. Of course, as the students matured into juniors and seniors, they naturally began to involve them in their faculty researches one way or another. Then too, these faculty were research-oriented faculty who wanted graduate programs. And we had graduate programs established rather early, I thought, in the Natural Sciences and it reflected the capabilities and interests of the faculty. To say that undergraduate studies suffered at the expense of research and graduate programs at that time may not be true. I think, if anything, the graduate programs suffered because they were formed with inadequate budgetary support and they got off to a weak start. It is true that they may have taken money out of the undergraduate instructional budget, but many of the graduate programs were established and there was not an influx of money to take care of them. I think they did better than what was to be expected.

Hewitt: Was there a sense among the faculty in the Natural Sciences who you worked with that research was an essential part of having a good undergraduate program? Did you need teachers that were also researchers?

Ray: I think it is a reflection of individual faculty thinking. Some faculty who are good researchers and good teachers feel that you can't have good undergraduate teaching without graduate teaching as well as research. On the
other hand, there are good teachers who are not good researchers. As long as those good teachers do an adequate job of keeping up with their field, it's alright. But if those good teachers do not keep up with their field, what they are teaching is yesterday's science. They may be good teachers, but they are not providing the knowledge of today and science is not a set of unchanging facts. The teacher who doesn't keep up tends to fall into that. I think you have three categories of teaching. You have good teachers who are just good teachers. Hopefully, those good teachers keep up with their field. The better of them will. Then you have good teachers who are good researchers. Of the two, nothing is better than a good teacher who is a good researcher and nothing is worst then a poor teacher who is a good researcher or a good teacher who doesn't keep up with his field. You have a mixture of those in any science faculty, and I think it is the majority that influence the way in which the college goes.

Hewitt: How early did the graduate program start in Biology?

Ray: Don't ask me for the date Nancy.

Hewitt: Was it by the mid-'60s that there were graduate students?

Ray: I can't say for sure. It must have been ... Let me put it this way. The University of South Florida was a Johnny-come-lately so far as federal funding for research is concerned. In other words, when we started our graduate programs there was a great deal of federal money going into our Natural Science Foundation and other research foundations and alot of money went to universities. But at that time, we were not an established university. We did not have faculty with outstanding reputations doing alot of research. We were doing teaching. We started our research program, but we
could not get much federal funding and therefore we suffered because at the very time that there was an abundance of funding, we didn't have a reputation and we didn't have established laboratories and so we missed the cream of federal funding for research. If we had been established ten or fifteen years earlier, we probably would have had established labs and established faculty could have pulled in hundreds and thousands and maybe millions of dollars in research. We sort of came along lately in that and the rash of federal spending came fifteen years later. We would have profited much more than we did.

Hewitt: You are now the advisor for pre-professional programs including the pre-med program. Did the establishment of a medical college at USF have a significant impact on the undergraduate and graduate programs in the Natural Sciences?

Ray: Not as much as you might think. That is my reaction. With the establishment of the College of Medicine and its recruiting of faculty and its actual coming on campus, there was some ill feeling among the faculty in Natural Sciences because they saw that as another budget entity that would take money from the legislature and so it was a rival. That was especially true in the minds of many because we gave up space in the Science Center for classroom and office space and labs. So the natural competition between the sciences and the medical school was very keenly felt here because it was felt physically as well as budgetarily. In that sense my reaction was mixed as to the effect that it had on research. I do know that naturally the pre-professional programs picked up a little bit just because there was a med school across the way and a place that our pre-med students could expect to apply and be admitted. The pre-professional programs had been very
successful here at South Florida, and we have around two thousand students who are interested in the pre-professional sciences. Most of them, the majority of them are in Biology and the majority of those are pre-meds, pre-dents, and pre-vets. So whether you like it or not, most of the programs, especially biology and chemistry, are slanted towards the education or the dealing with the education of pre-professional students.

Hewitt: Since you have been here you seem to have served on not only a large number of committees and associations, but certainly some extremely significant ones like the All University Senate, the College of Liberal Arts Deans, and the Core Curriculum Committee. Do you think that there has been any change in faculty's sense of service to the University? Is there as much of a commitment now as there was in the early years to being on committees and trying to develop policy and have input into academic changes and transformations on campus?

Ray: I think that there is a certain block of faculty who feel that the University is not interested in the faculty and what it has, thinks, and says. I don't know if that block of faculty is any more or less than you would find at any other university. I think that there are some faculty who, with the demise of the Basic College and with the very rapid growth of the University, have sort of let the world go by. But again, I don't think that that group is disproportionate in a university population. I think that because of the age of the University, and we are still quite young, that that segment might be a little more evident than you would find in a large university. Proportionately the numbers might be the same, but I can't say that it is more vocal because such a group usually is not vocal. It is usually evident by their attitude that--come what may . . . I think that we
could have a much more active senate and I think in a sense many faculty
members shy away from the senate because they feel that it's a do-nothing
body. I feel that the present administration is most anxious to have a
vital and functioning senate, and I wish that more active faculty really
became interested in the senate. I think that is the weakness in the
faculty here at the University, is not wanting to expend the effort to, over
a period of time, become an active and vital body. I think that the oppor-
tunity for service to the University is as great as it has always been.

Hewitt: When you think back over the 26 years that you have been here, what do you
think are the most important developments that have occurred, either posi-
tive or negative ones?

Ray: I think one of the most significant things in the life of the University was
not necessarily the formation of the branch campuses at St. Petersburg. I
think in a sense that was inevitable because the two communities, Tampa and
St. Petersburg, fought for the location of the University. Tampa won and
St. Pete lost. St. Pete had some people there that never gave up on that
and so the necessity early on of a branch campus, and we had classes over
there very early in the life of the University. The success of the St. Pete
campus I think encouraged the formation of branch campuses elsewhere and
with the growth of the branch campuses to Sarasota and especially to Ft.
Myers and on came at a very opportune time and may have saved the Universi-
ty. This growth and advancement of the branch campuses and the development
of the fifteen-county service area came at a time in which an urban block
became a significant power in the legislature and that block was formed in
rebellion to the old panhandle politics. It was the country versus the
city. It was formed in the block of urban legislators from Tampa, Sarasota,
St. Pete, Miami, Jacksonville, and that block was still a factor in the legislature when there was an effort to curtail the mission of the University of South Florida and perhaps reduce it to a two-year institution or maybe a strictly undergraduate institution, and it was the urban coalition that saved it. I think the relation of the urban coalition to the branch campuses is that you had all of the southwestern part of Florida interested in the University of South Florida because it had among its constituency a branch, and so we had that block of supporting legislators and it was a part of the urban coalition. That strength, I think, was responsible for putting down this effort by the established universities of limiting the power and the growth in the mission of the University of South Florida. Had it not been for the branch campus growth, I don't think we would have been able to secure the urban block as we did for support. I may be wrong, but I think it is all because of the branch campuses, especially on down to Ft. Myers when we had the whole southwestern area. It may have not had saved us, but it really pushed back in time, and I think forever, the idea that the University could exist either as a two-year institution or that it should be combined with some of the other new four-year universities or it should be, strictly speaking, an undergraduate institution.

Hewitt: Do you think that USF given its rapid growth is at a stage now where it will stop growing for awhile and try and stabilize and develop the programs that we already have, or are we still in a period where expansion is going to be the emphasis of the future?

Ray: I feel that the University feels that our destiny is to be a comprehensive research-type of university and this is a very expensive sort of university to operate. I don't feel that the state of Florida can and will underwrite
the cost of several comprehensive research-based universities. I don't see how it can underwrite the cost of Florida and FSU and South Florida and others. How extensive that support is and how long it continues is just how long the state of Florida is going to be interested in our education. I think that because of the overall cost of government and the fact that people don't like increments in taxes, we are not going to get the money that we should. I think that this is going to limit us more than anything else. I think that the University sees itself as a comprehensive research-based university; if it doesn't continue to grow in that direction, then it will not achieve its mission. I think that the University of South Florida could have become an outstanding public undergraduate institution. Perhaps that was in the eyes of the original administration and faculty, but we have long grown out of that and I don't think now that we could retreat and become a first rate public undergraduate institution. I think if we do that we will do it through the development of programs which are supported by our stronger graduate programs. I think that we are doing a reasonable job. I think we could do better, but I think that we could have excelled as an undergraduate institution better than as a comprehensive research institution. We have chosen the latter and I don't care to go back and I don't have hard feelings about the former. It's history.

Hewitt: It sounds like it is going to be a tough 25 years ahead of us and I hope we are all here to see it. Thank you very much.