7-23-1985

Gerald G. Robinson oral history interview by Nancy Hewitt, July 23, 1985

Gerald G. Robinson (Interviewee)

Nancy A. Hewitt (Interviewer)
Hewitt: I am speaking this afternoon with Dr. Gerald Robinson, Professor of Biology, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Could you tell me what was your first contact with the University of South Florida and what made you choose to come here?

Robinson: I was finishing up my Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota the year that Russell Cooper came to USF as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Quite a number of people at Minnesota thought a lot of Dean Cooper and so I applied to the University at that time. This was also an area which was in the kind of area that my fiancee at that time, my wife as of the summer of 1960, wanted to come to.

Hewitt: Do you remember what your first impressions of USF were when you actually saw it?

Robinson: Sand. Probably for anybody who saw it in the summer of 1960, it would have been sand. When I first came on campus and drove in along Fowler Avenue and up to where the Administration building is—and that was the only building finished at the time; the Chemistry building and the University Center were constructed all the way up, but not finished; there was a hole in the ground where the old library, the Student Services building, is now—most of it was just sand. There was sand all over the place.

Hewitt: Do you recall how long it took for some trees and grass to appear?

Robinson: No, I don't really. I do remember several times, however, during the first year when we had wind during the day that you had to be very careful driving
your car home because the sand kept getting in the brake drums and that acted just like grease. You had no brakes whatsoever.

Hewitt: Did they build parking lots first then?

Robinson: There were parking lots here, but it was all sand around them. So any wind would blow that in. There was grass down the middle strip and I guess some along both sides of the south mall. When we started the opening ceremonies in front of the Administration building, they had seats set up there and there was grass right in that area. But I really don't think there was a whole lot of grass.

Hewitt: Where was your office originally when you arrived? What building were you in?

Robinson: When I started on the 1st of September, the Chemistry building was not finished, but starting in September it was on the third floor of the Chemistry building. I guess it was 304. We had four faculty offices around the central room at that time.

Hewitt: It was called the Chemistry building, but my understanding from talking to people across campus was that there were faculty in that building from virtually every department.

Robinson: From the Biological Sciences, Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Behavioral Science, and I don't remember what else, but there were some others on the north side of the hall at that time.

Hewitt: When you first arrived what was your actual position at USF?
Robinson: I was the instructor of Biological Sciences or Biology.

Hewitt: Did you teach in both the Liberal Arts College and in Basic Studies?

Robinson: Right. In the beginning I taught only in Basic Studies, but within a couple of years I taught in both Liberal Arts and Basic Studies.

Hewitt: What was your experience in Basic Studies? Many people have mentioned that the concept of a Basic Studies Program was very different from what we now have in the university system. What was it like teaching there and how might it have been different?

Robinson: I don't think for the people taking biology it was very different. It was much like a year long course in biology for non-majors. Something that we did for quite a number of years, up until 1970 at any rate, and then something like we did for a semester into the '80s. The idea was that there were people that didn't need to learn the details that our majors had to learn to start with. If they were not going to take other courses in biology, why should they memorize a bunch of details that they would then never use again. I think in alot of areas there were combinations of courses from areas which we no longer have to gather at all. I think that the biological sciences course, CB 105 at that time, really had material which is very similar to what we have and probably worked considerably better than alot of the courses simply because it was familiar ground for most of us. When you get people teaching things that they aren't really very well acquainted with, as we had in a number of cases in other areas in Basic Studies, I think that is where the real problem showed up.
Hewitt: How different was the biology curriculum and the biology major once the College of Basic Studies was dismantled and Biology became a separate department and moved into Natural Sciences from Liberal Arts?

Robinson: We had from the very beginning a Biology department, at least in theory, at least in Liberal Arts. Within a few years we had in fact a Biology department in Liberal Arts so that the dismantling of Basic Studies did not affect the biology major courses at all. It really did not affect the courses that we have taught for non-majors either. It is just that they shifted their administrative position. I know for a lot of areas it was markedly different, but it was not for us.

Hewitt: So you may have been one of the few departments that escaped a sort of major transformation at that point because you already had the courses in place?

Robinson: Yes. English, foreign languages, and mathematics I think also were not affected at all, not in any great sense at any rate. But areas like American Idea, and one we called Behavioral Sciences, those were markedly affected.

Hewitt: One of the other concepts that seemed to be unique to the University of South Florida in these early years was the "All University Book." Several people from English and the languages have mentioned this to me. As someone from the Natural Sciences, was the "All University Book" anything that you were very connected with in those years?

Robinson: I think it probably varied. I was very closely connected one time with it and sort of tangentially connected in a couple of other cases. One of the ones we talked about was The Devil's Advocate by Morris West. That one I was
connected with considerably because of the immense amount of symbolism that was related to Biblical symbolism. So I had something to do with that. Some of the things on the American presidency were done. Part of this was that I was coordinator of the Team Learning Project from '62 to '65 or something like that. There was a block of students that had their Basic Studies courses together. That is the same group of students that would be in a Biology section and an English section together, that kind of thing. As a result, there were often things which leaked over from other classes and often the "All University Book," well in several instances I should say, the "All University Book" was a part of that. You really couldn't avoid it. Whatever your opinion was on the subject . . .

Hewitt: How did you get involved in developing the Team Learning Program?

Robinson: I don't really remember exactly how we started that. I do remember that it was suppose to be started the first year we were here, but with the mess of everything else getting started up there was not really very good control kept on the sections so that the Team Learning thing in that first year really didn't pan out at all. In order to better match sections, to better control it, and to get information that actually would be defensible in terms of effects on the students performance and things of that sort, I was asked to take charge of that to make sure that things were controlled better. So I guess it was from '61 to '64 maybe, instead of '62 to '65. We wanted to match students on the basis of predictive scores in the sections and out of the sections and then compare their performances. That was the only way you could get any defensible data to use. Interestingly enough, we found that the students liked the courses very well. They really liked this set up, but their overall grades were just about the same. There was more
variance in their performance almost as though . . . this has been my idea and has never been tested beyond that . . . the idea that the students who were good students were reinforced as being good students in three or four of their five classes. Those who were poor students were reinforced as being poor students in the same classes. We really found some tendency for the very good students to do better and the poor students to do worse, but overall we could not find any significant difference in their performance.

Hewitt: How many faculty members were actually involved in working on this program?

Robinson: Well, it varied depending upon the year. My recollection is that there were about 8 - 12 faculty involved with that depending upon the time. We had two different patterns. At that time a student of the seven areas in Basic Studies had to take English and five others. Natural Sciences was one area, and he could choose either biological sciences or physical science. So we had physical science patterns and biological science patterns sometimes and not at other times.

Hewitt: Sounds like this program was sort of modified several times in its short history.

Robinson: Yes, we had more difficulty getting students that wanted to take the physical science pattern, so sometimes there would be two sets in biological science, one in physical science, and then in the last year I think we had none in physical science because of the difficulty in getting students.

Hewitt: Why did the Team Learning Program end?
Robinson: My recommendation to end it was based on the fact that it did cost some effort and we could not, after three years, demonstrate any clear academic benefit to the students. They thought there was a lot of benefit, but I'm not sure that it was academic benefit they were looking at.

Hewitt: You mentioned that the students really liked it. What was their reason for being so enthusiastic about this particular method of learning?

Robinson: That has completely fled my memory. It was something that I wasn't interested in so I kind of ignored it.

Hewitt: Was there any actual team teaching that went on?

Robinson: There was some team teaching. We tried a number of things in this and who knows all that happened. But there were some cases, for example, in which we were dealing with the same kind of thing in two areas, like the link between behavioral sciences and biological sciences, and we would actually meet the class together. We also tried a thing of taking on a project one year. We went over to Tarpon Springs and looked at a bunch of things relating to the Greek area and also the gulf coastal environment and we did that all together.

Hewitt: You actually took students up there?

Robinson: Yes. The Team Learning Program students went over there. That was great fun. We did not do that again. We were in on a Greek-American get together over there in which most everything was in Greek and therefore we understood very little about what was going on. But it was kind of interesting to see some of the things that they did.
Hewitt: Were there any other experiments in teaching, programming, or curriculum then that you can remember? It seems like so many different things were happening in those early years.

Robinson: I don't think that there were very many things that you would really call experimental in the sense of let's look to see, let's compare these, to get data that we could save when the events were ... There were a lot of things that were tried, but I think they were mostly seat-of-the-pants evaluations and that kind of thing. You don't know really what you have got.

Hewitt: In those years the original mission of the University was set out by President Allen and Dean Sidney French as "Accent on Learning." Could you tell me to what extent that was taken seriously as a mission or as a model of the University?

Robinson: I think that the first two or three years it was taken very seriously. We spent a lot of time trying to improve instructional techniques, evaluation techniques, and instructional materials. We modified courses to make up for the places we could see problems, and we really met a good deal of the time. Like the Biology faculty met on work time, to work on a lot of those things together. There was a good deal of the evaluation for raises and promotion in the early years (that related to the University mission). I think that lasted a good five or six, maybe seven years where at least teaching was a very important aspect of it. Really I think that very early, instruction was the major portion of our task. There was just so much to do to get things going, so much that you didn't know at what point did you have the equipment to do this or not.
Hewitt: That must have been more difficult in the Natural Sciences than in most other areas, where you really need lab equipment?

Robinson: We have had a lot of trouble over all the years at the University here in terms of adequate equipment for the laboratories. We still fight that. In the early years we have gotten to the point where we can say, "Well this piece of equipment really doesn't work very well and it's not reliable, but we can limp along with it." Well there wasn't any old equipment to limp along with. We just didn't have a lot of things and it was very hard. Of course the equipment for the first year had to be ordered before any of the faculty were here at all. That was ... Clarence Clark, who was the Chairman of the Physical Sciences, had to try and order that for the Biology area also. We didn't get a lot of things we would have liked to have, but I felt sorry for the poor man. I wouldn't want to try it for Physical Sciences, I'll tell you that.

Hewitt: You mentioned that evaluation of teaching was taken more seriously in terms of your overall performance. Did they have other means of evaluating teaching besides the kinds of student evaluations that we have now? Did people actually watch you teach or ...?

Robinson: Yes, to some extent. That was never done very much, but as long as John Allen was president here we had people actually coming in the classroom. John Allen came in my classroom several times over the years he was president. It was not frequent enough to make adequate evaluation, but there was some effort in that regard. We did actually ... We had a very good man as Chairman of Basic Studies. Ed Martin was a resourceful man in terms of
teaching and so he really did help alot in alot of areas. I have great respect for the man.

Hewitt: When did that early emphasis on teaching, innovation, and experimentation start to decline?

Robinson: I think that probably the first reason for it starting to decline was as the size of the faculty grew. Dr. Allen, I think, did a very fine job as president as long as he knew the individuals. When it got so big that he really didn't know the individuals anymore, then I think he started making mistakes. You know, the newer ones and the ones that were a little different are the ones that he didn't really understand what they were doing. That was a problem. As soon as that thing started to happen then there was also, of course, a diversification of tasks within the University and so by, I would say, 1968 or 1969, that there was considerable value to things other than teaching in terms of evaluation. I think by the time ... Well, I'm not sure. Really from that point until the last few years, I think that there was, at least in the natural sciences areas, possibly some sort of balance. I think in Biology we did a fairly good job of balancing it up until very recently. It may have decreased markedly elsewhere, earlier. One thing that I find is that I think I know fewer faculty members now than I did in 1960. There were 105 faculty members and I think I knew probably 101 or 102 of them, and now I doubt that I know 100 faculty on campus at all.

Hewitt: Were there any kind of formal attempts to bring faculty together in those early days to get to know each other?
Robinson: Yes, lots of them. In the early days, actually, we had frequent college meetings and if you consider that Liberal Arts and Basic Studies were essentially one college and had three fourths of the people, maybe more, I don't know. Very high percentage of the faculty was on campus. We had lots of meetings. As a matter of fact, we started classes the 30th of September if my recollection is correct. We met from the 1st of September until then, essentially every week day.

Hewitt: That is a lot of meetings!

Robinson: This is a lot of meetings.

Hewitt: Were there any informal ways of getting to know faculty other than attending meetings?

Robinson: I don't think there were any set up. I don't recall any set up, but there were a lot of things that went on. For instance, something that I would never do now and I haven't done for many years. We had during the first year a play, a farce was put on by a student group over in Chemistry 100. It was an awful place for it. There were a sizeable number of faculty there to that. There were things like that. I think there was a higher percentage of faculty participation and therefore you have got to know those people in those kinds of situations. I don't recall any set up things. Of course there was no liquor allowed on campus at that time, at least officially. I don't recall that there was anything like that.

Hewitt: It was more that people were more likely to run into each other because it was a smaller place?
Robinson: Only three buildings!

Hewitt: And I guess only one lunchroom! What about the relationships between faculty and administrators in those early years? Was there also more accessibility? Did they seem like they were more familiar to you then they are now?

Robinson: They were certainly more familiar to us. Some of them I got along with very well. Some of them, I think, most faculty did not get along with very well at all. I could name you people, but I don't think that's really the purpose. I can remember even in the first two or three years where there were real wars between certain administrators and some groups of faculty. We in Biology had some real wars with higher administrators on certain things. Anyone from the early years that listens to this will know exactly what I mean.

Hewitt: So even though you knew them, that didn't necessarily mean it was more cordial. It was just that you saw them more frequently.

Robinson: I think we certainly, of course, knew John Allen better than we have known any president since then. He knew everybody on campus initially. He knew virtually everyone through at least the first seven years. So we did have more cordial and much more of a relationship where we understood what he was talking about, and he understood what we were talking about even before we got together. He already knew the kinds of things that were going on. Of course you can't do that with however many hundred faculty members we have now.
Hewitt: Were you involved in those early years with any university committees or student organizations other than the Team Learning Program or other than the developments within the Biology department?

Robinson: As far as committees, I was for three years, and I don't remember what the three years were in, in the '60s sometime at any rate, I was on the Academic Standards Committee. That is where we met to review people that had gotten in academic difficulty and who wanted out of the results of being in academic difficulty. That was interesting, but not necessarily very pleasant.

Hewitt: Was there a formal grievance procedure then like the one that is in place now?

Robinson: There was a formal grievance procedure from very early. It seems to me probably from 1961, where you could petition the Academic Standards Committee. By the time that I got on it, which I think was in '65, we had a formal petition procedure and there were instructions for the students as to what kinds of things they had to give in order to back up their petitions. There was not, at least initially, the kind of thing where there was a representative from the college that they had to see before they went in there. If I recall correctly we started that just about the time I got off the committee. So I avoided having to see all those people.

Hewitt: So the procedure had gotten more complex since you left no doubt.

Robinson: As I understand it now, not having been on it since that time. But as I understand it now, they must go to see the college representative prior to going to the committee and that was not true at that time.
Hewitt: At that point a student could actually go directly to this university committee. I suppose that is also a sign of being a smaller school?

Robinson: I think that they still have the ability to appear before it, but I don't think they take that very frequently now. They did quite often at that time.

Hewitt: You were a busy committee member?

Robinson: Every Tuesday afternoon. Quite often for three hours.

Hewitt: Did you have any positive interaction with student groups besides the Academic Standards Committee?

Robinson: Very early. It seems to me the first year, but it may have been the second year. My memory may be bad. I was advisor for what is now the Baptist Campus Ministry. It was called the Baptist Student Union at that time, but BSU now means Black Student Union. Then I was, a little later than that, I was the faculty advisor for what was really an intervarsity Christian fellowship-related chapter here on campus. I can't remember the name of it. I enjoyed that very much. I led discussions with that group, I sat in on other things that they did, and alot of people who were students at that time have become friends of mine that I still see and have really very good friendships from twenty years ago.

Hewitt: Was there more faculty involvement in student organizations then or was it encouraged in terms of feeling like you would get more positive evaluations if you were involved in those kinds of things?
Robinson: I don't recall that there was anything about more positive evaluations.

Every student organization had to have a faculty advisor. The faculty advisor, if my recollection is correct, really had more responsibility in making sure that students knew what the University regulations were and were in, at least, close to being in compliance with that. So we really had a lot more to do with it. That, of course, was still the time when the University had the idea of this in loco parentis. They were the parents in place of the real parents during the time the students were here. So there was less onus of responsibility on the students at that time. I think it was good in some ways and probably bad in others.

Hewitt: As the Biology department itself expanded over the years, was graduate education in biology something, or graduate program in biology, something that sort of naturally developed out of existing needs and desires of students or was it something that the Biology faculty sat down and said that we really need this graduate program and . . . ?

Robinson: There was really a push from the faculty to get permission to start this thing originally. It was not an easy time. I was not really not very much involved in that, but I can sure remember some of them. As so often happened we were given permission to start the graduate program, but we were not given any money with which to start the graduate program. I think that was in 1966 or 1967. We had originally departments of biological science left over from . . . it was officially apart of the College of Basic Studies. Then departments of botany, microbiology, and zoology in Liberal Arts. When we started the Ph.D. program in Biology . . . that was the only kind they would give us permission to start . . . we had to have a Department of Biology. Finally that came to be, then . . . that finally got all of the
departments together into one thing. I think that botany, microbiology, and zoology combined prior to the time biological sciences also combined with it. I think the thing on my door still says Biological Sciences.

Hewitt: I guess they haven't come up with money for new name plates in a while either. Was there an influx of faculty with the development of the Ph.D. program or had the Biology faculty basically already grown to what would be its . . . ?

Robinson: Well, we had grown considerably. My recollections to what our actual size was at that time had . . .

Hewitt: It sounds like there were people from lots of different . . .

Robinson: But, there were quite a number of additional faculty. We started with ten faculty in Biology in 1960. In the middle of 1961 or 1962, I guess January of 1962, we got another one and then we got several others in '63 and '64. So we were a considerable size in the department by '67. Now I can't tell you whether we have thirty some faculty members. I just don't remember. You would think that we probably didn't, but it must have been well into the twenties.

Hewitt: Did the entry of Ph.D. students into the Biology department have any effect in terms of shifting the emphasis more towards publication and research and shifting away from teaching since that was already going on in the University?

Robinson: Yes, it sure did. There were a couple kinds of things or reasons, I suppose, for that. One was . . . Well, of course the administration changed about that time. That was when Mackey came in.
Hewitt: So all of this was happening at once?

Robinson: Yes. And that certainly was an important aspect of it because when Riggs came in as Vice President of Academic Affairs or whatever his title was when he got here, that made a rather marked change also since his emphasis was primarily on graduate education. And of course, if you are going to have graduate students, especially Ph.D. students who are engaged in research, then you've got to spend the time to be doing it yourself as well as keeping track of them doing it and there was a large shift for that reason. And then still another reason, we then had more graduate students than we could reasonably support with teaching assistantships and that tended to pull faculty out of the laboratories. When I first taught animal physiology in 1963, I taught the laboratories, the lectures, and everything. I had no graduate assistants. We didn't have graduate students at that time and there was a considerable time then when we taught the laboratories ourselves or had a few undergraduate assistants who were helping us with various things, but that was mostly mechanical or very matter of fact type of things. Of course now, I just taught animal physiology the first half of the summer. I had three graduate students as TA's. They were excellent. One of them especially has taught animal physiology for I don't know how many times. He and I talked over things prior to the start. We had everything lined up to go and I would go down and visit the labs, wander through the labs and talk to the kids, check with him and the other TA's, but it's very different now.

Hewitt: Do you think that the students have changed very much over the years?
Robinson: Oh yes. I think we probably had our best students in the middle '60s and I think we have been going down hill since then. We had a number of excellent students. They would have been excellent students in any school they went to. They graduated at the top of their classes in med school or things of that sort. The undergraduate students that we get . . . I have been teaching sections of the freshman biology course, the first course for majors, since 1973 on a more or less regular basis. I have used multiple choice items, I write new ones every year, but I also use old ones and so I have a lot of years of data on those items. This last fall was the worst section I have ever had in that course. Over the years you can see a gradual decline from that time. But last fall was the worst.

Hewitt: Any speculations about why that kind of change would occur?

Robinson: I have some speculations. That is exactly the right word. One thing that I think that has happened is that Florida has put in the functional literacy test with a big emphasis on covering everything that they are going to have to have. They must be accountable for those kinds of things. So they teach the students to do it exactly this way and don't think. We get them in class and we tell them to put things together, to combine things, and they can't even turn the sentence around and go through it backwards and realize it is saying the same thing. I think they have no practice in thinking any longer. I know that our reputation, from talking to students, for quality instruction at the undergraduate level is not good. I think this is part of this business of "let's put this emphasis on making a name for the place for research" so that we tolerate things from faculty in terms of teaching that I don't think we should tolerate. Of course the area I know is this side of campus. I don't know much that goes on on the other side. Another thing,
of course, I think that the general tendency of SAT scores to go down in the
last twenty years probably is also going to automatically be reflected in
our students. There are a lot of things involved.

Hewitt: If you had to sum up your twenty-five years here at USF, what would you say
have been the most disillusioning things that have happened over that period
of time and what would you say have been the areas of the greatest improve-
ment over the twenty-five years?

Robinson: I think I would rather change your question, in terms of the kinds of things
that I have seen that I liked over the twenty-five years that I thought we
did well and are doing well. I think academic freedom in the classroom is
here reality. In other places it is talked about, but there are certain
things that you cannot do. I am an evangelical Christian. For these people
evolution versus the Bible is going to be a problem. In Minnesota you could
talk about evolution, but you could not talk about the Bible even when it is
related to this except to talk against it. You couldn't say I don't think
there is any problem. Here, unless you get out of line ... I don't know
of anybody who has done that, so I can't say where the line is ... you can
talk about both sides of the problem and there are some people on the
faculty here who think that in order to do a good job, you must talk about
the various sides. I think that is what a university education ought to be.
I guess the most disillusioning thing over the years had been the steady
decline in support for education. The state of Florida had set up all these
schools and so they want to do all these things, and then they don't provide
support for them. They do for the medical school. Everybody thinks they
know how to run a university, but not a medical school. That lack of
support ... And I think that accurately reflects a lack of public support
for higher education. I think that was true when I came here in 1960 and I think it is still true. That and the lack of emphasis on teaching which we now have gotten into. It really almost seems to be a lack of concern with what we do in terms of teaching that we have now gotten into. That and the marked decline in those years.

Hewitt: Do you think there are any signs that teaching will again be raised to a more significant part of our job and our evaluations?

Robinson: I think there are a couple of very recent things that showed that somebody around the University is recognizing that there is a problem with this. One is, I say maybe one month ago where there are certain scholarships which are now going to be available to top students from the area. That says that we have got some concern for quality students coming in. This business of providing funding for the economically disadvantaged students that we have had just completely erased that for awhile. But I saw that and I think that is somewhat encouraging. We have also had a little more emphasis on providing equipment for teaching in the laboratories. We have got to do that if we are going to do anything. So maybe that is another subject. As far as the state thing is concerned, I don't see any sign. I think that bit about the lottery is pure nonsense. It is the same thing where we get some people who want a good education system and nobody wants to pay for it.

Hewitt: I have been hearing that in my entire four years here. Are there any other thoughts you would like to leave with future scholars or personnel at USF who are going to look back at the first twenty-five years?

Robinson: It's a complicated thing to start a university from the ground up. I don't think that the people who were responsible for it initially realized how
many ways it was complicated. I think they made some pretty dumb errors. There were a lot of things that they did right, but I think they made some pretty dumb errors. It pays to get people who are specialists in the area to consult. I think if they had done that, we could have saved a lot of trouble over the years. You can't be a good university without money for a library and we've really never had it. I think we probably did pretty well up into the '70s. Of course the demands were not so high, but we sure had mistakes and you just... I go places and our library just isn't up to anywhere near anybody else. Every scholar from anytime knows that already.

Hewitt: Well I hope if anyone else starts a university from the ground up that they listen to these tapes from the Silver Anniversary Project and pick up some of the wisdom that we have gained. Thank you very much Dr. Robinson.