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Ray Cooper oral history interview by Andrew Huse, June 24, 2004

Ray Cooper (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Cooper came to USF as a student in 1964.

Background

Mr. Cooper came to USF in 1964 after completing his studies at St. Petersburg Junior College. Because of convenience and economic feasibility, he chose to attend USF in Tampa while continuing to reside in Pinellas County. He worked as a student assistant during his time at USF in order to supplement the financial assistance he was receiving from his parents. During the summers, he would take off classes and “work wherever you could get a job to keep all the ends meeting – at least, date money, beer money, and gas money.”

Undergraduate assistant

He worked as an undergraduate assistant in the Division of Education Resources, housed in the basement of the current Student Services building.

Student protests

Cooper remembers that there, “were not a lot of protests against the Vietnam War in the early sixties” at USF. “Male students lived in fear of the draft ... the protests, I think, began to materialize after the Tet Offensive in early 1968.”

Military enlistment

Despite his confessed pledge as a “devout coward,” Mr. Cooper was enlisted in the United States military. After some negotiations with the recruiter, he settled on joining a signal corps division with the army. Following his training, he wound up as a signal lieutenant in an artillery battalion in Vietnam just in time for the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Student unrest

He returned from Vietnam in early January 1969. When he got back to the USF campus, he noticed that the atmosphere had become increasingly socially and politically charged. “It had started to hit the fan in terms of student unrest ... there were gatherings ... there were all kinds of concerns ... [about] students in a state of political unrest.”

Academics

Academically, Cooper followed a fine arts curriculum with youthful optimism. “At that age, you’re out to save the world and do meaningful things and make your mark ... I always had a commercial bent, and this was a route to take ... it was a lot of fun.”

Graphic Arts

Ken Stanton, the only staff member in the graphics department in 1964, hired Mr. Cooper on as a student assistant. At that time, they had to do all the work by hand because the computer technology had not yet been developed. As an assistant in the fine arts program, he was primarily involved in printmaking.

USF Television

Mr. Cooper was also involved in putting the USF television station on the air in the summer of 1966, just as he was heading off to serve in the military. In the 1970s, they produced a number of open-university courses, a fairly progressive project for the time. “Tom Wilson ... was ... primarily instrumental in bringing that concept to fruition here on campus.” As a result of this program, Mr. Cooper had the opportunity to work with a variety of people from departments throughout the University.

Interesting personalities

He also met a lot of “interesting folks who drifted through [when] the dinner theatre craze was going.” The shows were weekly events organized by a British woman at the University named Sheila Stewart.

Dean Kopp of the Engineering college was an “awfully nice guy,” Cooper recalls. “In many instances, you had very one-on-one contact with a lot of people.” He also had the opportunity to work under Elliot Hardaway for some time.

Another notable personality Mr. Cooper remembers was Provost Gregory St. Lawrence O’Brien, who drove a Rolls Royce. “At one point I guess he thought that would be nifty to drive onto campus ... People noticed it and said, ‘That’s out of place.’”

“[USF President] Jack Brown was just a genuinely nice guy ... you could trust pretty much everything he said. He was ... easy-going [and] congenial.” Chester Ferguson was “a consummate southern gentleman.” President Frank Borkowski, Cooper recalls, was “a very nice guy – from my dealings with him.” Cooper believes that Borkowski was the scapegoat for a controversy in the athletics department that eventually facilitated his departure from the University.

Mr. Cooper also had the opportunity to work alongside USF Professor John “Knocky” Parker in the University’s television station. “He was a character – you can’t state it any more clearly ... and a charming guy when he wanted to be.

Campus development

While the fine arts department underwent a great number of technological advancements, the campus itself too was evolving over the years. “Well needless to say there was a lot of construction ... There wasn’t a lot of trees either ... Nobody worried about parking ... nobody paid for [it].”

Registration

Registering for classes, Mr. Cooper recalls sarcastically, was a lot of fun. “You wound up over there in the gym, going from table to table picking up IBM cards, praying to God it all meshed together ... that was fun!”

President John Allen

Mr. Cooper remembers one particular occasion as a student assistant in the fall of 1965 when he met President Allen. “I was the only one in the office [at] about lunchtime ... and in comes John Allen. He pulls up a stool next to mine, and tells me about how he wants his Christmas card done. What he want[ed] [was] pictures of the [University] buildings ... That was fascinating ... [it] came out alright.”

Cecil Mackey

The 1970s, he recalls, were the Cecil Mackey years at the University of South Florida. “He expanded the operation ... He took what was ... a quaint little liberal arts college and turned it into a university, or at least laid all the groundwork.” During that period, Cooper and other staff members were put on a project to create a logo for the University. “We came up with a design, [Mackey] in fact approved it. He put it in writing, and then he left ... and ... [it] didn’t happen.”

USF logo

The logo that USF eventually adopted, Cooper explains, came largely at the impetus of university athletics. In its original form, it “didn’t work” for a number of aesthetic reasons. After some modifications, Cooper and his colleagues were able to develop a fitting logo for the University.

Picasso statue

During the 1970s, Cooper remembers, there was talk about obtaining a giant Picasso sculpture at USF. On one occasion, Jim Vickery, a member of the planning committee, “made the unfortunate mistake of saying to [a] reporter ... that they were really in the fundraising drive looking for the big money,” largely dismissing the value of smaller donations. “That turned off a lot of people who were the movers and shakers in the city of Tampa. That’s probably one of the main reasons why the thing never came to pass. That and the fact that there was certainly a majority that thought the thing was a hideous piece of God-knows-what anyway.”

President Betty Castor

Cooper believes that Betty Castor was “one of the best presidents [USF] has seen.” After a distinguished tenure in state politics, Castor was appointed to the highest office at the University of South Florida. “She had a lot of political acumen ... of course, she was in

the wrong [political] party to continue as president, and I think she understood that, and that's why she left."

Closing remarks

In closing, Mr. Cooper remarked, "I'm glad to see there's more shade on campus – particularly during the summer."

End of Interview