

LAWTON M. CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM, FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

Oral Interview With: Dr. Carroll Blake Gambrell, Jr.

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Place of Interview: Estates at Carpenters
Lakeland, Florida

Date of Interview: April 2, 2015

M = James M. Denham ("Mike")

C = C. B. Gambrell

M. April 2, 2015. I'm with Dr. C. B. Gambrell, and we are beginning our third day of taping at this point. Dr. Gambrell, how are you doing this morning?

C. This is going to be a great day.

M. Okay, wonderful! We left off last time with your interview with Dr. Millican with the incoming President of a new institution in Florida called Florida Technological University. He

M. Now, can you tell us what the status of your family at that time? How many children did you have?

C. We had two children; John and Jane. They were about two years apart. John was in the public school system, and Jane was a member of the teaching school on the campus at ASU.

M. Okay. How old were they at that time?

C. I guess ten and twelve.

M. What were some of the things that struck you when you went to your interview in Orlando?

C. I was not very favorably impressed with their facilities. It turns out that the Chamber of Commerce in Orlando wanted to help the new university get started, and they arranged to get two or three stories in a five story building that was vacant donated for rent purposes. It happened to be downtown Orlando on skid row. You had to be careful, I later accepted the position, and you had to be careful where you parked your car because derelicts were quite frequently found moping around the area. That is where we started and activity was already underway. Lynn Walker had been employed as the university librarian and he was collecting volumes from all directions. In fact, he was so successful in acquiring books and so forth, books are heavy, and we had to be careful where we stacked the books on the floor so that we didn't jeopardize the structure of the building. There was one event that took place there that I need to tell you about. My office, I think was on the third floor, I had sent a goodly number of boxes and books and other things ahead of my arrival and they were all packed up in my office. It wasn't a very pleasant scene to have twelve or fifteen boxes of books and things. There was an old building and it had an elevator. We seemed to always have a problem with the sewer system. Well, one day, down in the basement, the sewer line broke and all of the fumes you can imagine came from that and went right up the elevator shaft. And the elevator was acting like a piston and was pumping all of those fumes in and throughout the building. It was so bad that Charlie sent us all home until that got fixed.

M. Goodness; so that was 1968?

C. Yes.

M. You were in that storefront, well, not a storefront, but a building. . .

C. There was an active drug store on the first floor.

M. Oh, on the first floor. A drug store there too. How many people were in that structure?

C. We seemed to have new people coming in rather frequently. I guess we had about twenty

underway before I got there and Charlie was running this among some of his staff members he drew into his office under a temporary basis to address small projects. One of the projects which was pretty helpful, was a survey of 22,000 high school graduates to learn what academic programs they preferred. Well, it is interesting to note, not one single reply showed an interest in theatre arts. Not one. I don't know whether that was because of the name of the institution or what, but when we got a little farther along in the development tram, we had employed a Dean of the Arts and Sciences College. I had a session with the new Dean and I told him about this business and I just couldn't imagine any legitimate institution that didn't have something in the theater direction. I advised him in his faculty hiring practices that he hire at least one faculty member in theatre arts. Well, he did. He hired David Mayes, and David was a skilled operation experienced person. David came in and when we registered later on, we got fourteen majors in the theatre arts!

M. I'll be darned!

C. And one faculty member!

M. Just a second, so you have twenty people in the downtown, the university is being built on the east side of Orlando. How often did you go over there and look around and things like that?

C. Well, as you know, large construction projects, they were building the big library building, the administration building, and four one story dormitories. The utilities buildings were being built, the sewer plant and there was a huge boiler type facility for supplying hot water and compressed air and so forth.

M. Back then, that would seem to have been in the middle of nowhere. Were there hardly any roads even?

C. Correct. That is right. In fact east and west roads, other than Highway 50 were not very plentiful. In fact, if you took what is now FTU (UCF) Boulevard, that didn't go through. It went part way and then you had to jog south about a ha ha tt9 (6.4j) -0d of toutf () T(.2 (e) 0.2 -0] TJET 5 0 0 rt9 (

M. And you had not been in your hometown by that time for probably twenty years. Did you still have a lot of contacts and family there?

C. Well, yes, my wife Olive's family was there, and my family was there; although they were a good many miles apart in their residences. We had gone back a time or two for short visits and so forth, but after I had left Birmingham to go to Clemson University, our visits back to Birmingham were less frequent and perhaps not so long.

M. Also, 1965, 1966, 1967, you are in academia at Arizona State, and then you came to Orlando. Those were years where African-Americans for the first time really began to be accepted in colleges and universities, and particularly at UCF, how did that play out at FTU? Was that a matter of discussion in your world?

C. Well, in our planning discussions it only came up one time. And we took the position that we were not going to be choosy. The doors are open to any qualified student regardless of who or what they are. We never had a problem until we had been open, I'm not sure but I think

M. Now, all of that sounds funny now of course, but was it really funny then?

C. We were deathly afraid that the newspaper was going to make something out of it, but it turned out that they were not there.

M. Now, when FTU was originally conceived, obviously one of the prime reasons was the Cape – Cape Canaveral development – and the NASA program. How closely aligned or how closely did you interact with NASA other than just training?

C. Well, we got to know the people over there quite well, but we were not advanced enough in either turning out technologically prepared students that would be available for their employ,

down for an interview, and all of the deans had gone to the Cape for a visitation over there with the Cape people, and gee, Torchy was on base for the interview. Several of the deans, and the car was full, had participated in the interview, so I asked them, "Please, let's do some business here while we are driving back. How did the interview go?" We researched it and made a decision right then in that car that we were going to hire Torchy. We went back and offered him the job, and he accepted. He was just an outstanding person. He was short on resources, he got his family involved to help out. They were knowledgeable coming from his past job.

M. Of course his family being Bo Clark, too, right to play?

C. Yes, that is right.

M. So at that point, FTU was in the Sunshine State Conference which was smaller colleges, of course you are moving ahead growing by probably almost a thousand a year almost.

C. We grew, all the while that I was there, we grew at an average of about a thousand students a year except for two years. The legislature put a freeze on us for two years. We could not grow any. Just as soon as that two years was up, we caught up the lost number of students.

M. Of course Orlando was exploding at that time.

C. Yes.

M. So, where did you draw most of your students from demographically in the beginning and then later years?

C. In the beginning, they were, for the most part, local people. They were our base for a good while, until we got dormitories, it just almost had to be that way.

M. Right, now are there any stories or memories that you have specifically about some of the things that happened at FTU that you'd like to talk about?

C. Yes, when the first graduation came up, I sponsored the approach that we would graduate every, we had the quarter system in those days, and that we graduate at the end of every quarter. We kept the load down for the big commencement in June each year. That way we could perform what we thought was appropriate and if we didn't, we could correct it rather quickly. That was one thing that Charlie was awfully good about, he would call a meeting a week, maybe even ten days, after each commencement of all of the commencement staff people -- we did it this way, was that the right way? If not, what should we do? That just worked beautifully, I'll tell you, it was a great thing to have happen. But we didn't have a place to conduct graduation! We didn't have a building big enough to hold everybody. I'm not sure where the first one was held, but used the downtown facilities. There was an auditorium downtown, we used that. But

a judge somewhere to be the commencement speaker. Well, we got all seated in that arena, and there were no windows or anything, just open sides. Fortunately, the breeze was blowing, but that was just a bad decision on our part because it was hot and sweaty and the accustics weren't very good. Here the judge was up there, the commencement speaker, and he didn't know when to quit. He kept going and going and finally he quit. We lived through that. Then here comes Charlie's meeting. Boy, that crowd of people – there must have been twenty of us – they were so opposed to ever doing that again, you wouldn't believe it! Charlie said in that meeting that every commencement speaker that I invite in the future, I'm going to tell them they have twenty minutes, and no more, and if they go over twenty minutes I'm going to interrupting them. He came close one time to doing that! But from then on, the commencement speakers were no longer than twenty minutes. We looked for another place.

M. What about President Nixon? Were they going to cut him short?

C. When President Nixon came . . .

M. That was what, 1972?

C. I think it was, yes. There were advanced parties that we had to deal with. They came down and looked things over and this and that. At that time, we had that reflection pool. They said we recommend you drain the reflection pool and seat the students in the empty pool. We did that. The staff people also said he will be coming in by helicopter, you need to vacate this parking area over here so he will have a place to land. Well, the staff, we gave them a big room to operate in, and they came in and took our secretary. I didn't have secretary for over two weeks. That was a good thing to do because Dorothy was very capable at things like that, and

I might mention that along with that theatre program thing, we were successful in registering fourteen students. We didn't have a place

C. Pete was in my area, academic . . . Mathematics Department. I worked with him often to find out what was taking place, and how far along they were in the preparation of necessary

permission from Charlie to bring a faculty member into my office for a year and se

M. Five years. That was one leave of absence!

C. Well, eventually, it turned out that they said, well, you have to resign this time. So get the fifth year, I resigned.

M. What was going on at UCF during those years, or FTU?

C. Well, Trevor Colburn was the president, and he got them involved in lots of things, an ill-funded athletic department was one of the problems. They lost quite a lot of money in the

and a lot of people were out of work. I took a committee over there of about three people, and Bob Kirsten was one of them, the Dean of our Engineering College, and seemed like there was somebody else. We formulated a request to go to Washington to help us financially to get employment reestablished at the Cape. We called it "Project RETRO." That was an acronym for something, I've forgotten. Max housed the operation at his campus. Along with that, we learned that the Cape had some buildings that they wanted to get rid of, so we made application. Max said he'd like to have one and we opened a teaching center on his campus so we needed a building. We got two buildings. We got them moved from the Cape to his campus and installed and then had additional teaching room space for whatever the needs were. That was an accomplishment that I think was pretty good. And along with that, Lesley Ellis who was our Assistant Dean for Research at that time, he came in one day and said, "Well, in this association we've had with Max and the Cape, I've learned they have a cherry picker over there that could be available if we are interested." I said, "Boy, we are interested!" Lesley took that and went back and we got a cherry picker out of it. Also, that probably was one of our better moves, and then, one day I got a call from Allen Tucker in the regents' office, and he said, "C. B., we've got a problem with the Genesis Program." That was a teaching program in remote locations from the University of Florida's College of Engineering. I said, "Gee, Allen, what's wrong with that?" He said they had some government property, they had five installations, and the University of Florida just didn't want to run it anymore. He wanted to know if I was interested. I told him "Absolutely!" That was right in the palm of our hands. One of the satellites where teaching took place was down on the campus at Boca Raton. We quickly formed a committee, an advisory committee, and to learn what all it amounted to. It turned out that the regents' allocated the whole Genesis teaching program, TV teaching program to us and we, in turn, gave the teaching campus at Boca Raton to Florida Atlantic. I had four teaching campuses and we staffed those and had a teaching faculty for the former Genesis program. That way we acquired some real estate and we also were able to spread our program.

M. We are concluding our third day, and this is April 2nd.